People don’t do bad things because they believe they’re wrong. They do them because they think they’re right. And Jacob Black believes that Bella loves him, far more than she’ll ever admit. His attempt to prove it doesn’t end with a kiss, and leaves far more than just Bella’s hand broken. Cross-posted to FanFiction.net
“Wisdom consists of knowing how to distinguish the nature of trouble, and in choosing the lesser evil.”

— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

“But I don’t,” Jacob said, “and neither do you.”

He was looking at Bella, eyes focused to pinpoints. All his energy directed at her.

It felt like a challenge.

“No,” she said, “you wouldn’t. I’m going to attribute it to the extra thick werewolf skull.” She was trying to lift the mood out of the uncomfortable place it was in. She shifted in her seat, not able to hide the unease she felt prickling.

Jacob only looked at her, rolling his eyes.

It helped, but only slightly.

He needed to understand.

“I love him Jacob. It isn’t something that will change.” Her voice was soft, serious.

Jacob only nodded, processing this familiar, and grating fact. He was toying with the socket wrench he’d left out. Flipping it over, and over, and over. He was trying to distract himself all the things he didn’t want to think about.

“When?” he asked, finally not able to help himself.

“When what?” Bella responded, eyebrows curved downwards.

“When?” he growled back, very softly.

Ah. Bella understood.

“In a few weeks,” she said. Almost a whisper.

He took a sharp breath in.

Weeks.

He had weeks.

The image of her, cold and stone-like, came to him, laying in a coffin, pretending to be dead. Other images of her, these much more lively, livid, flushed, of her in their time together span off into his fantasies of what he’d hoped for.

He must have sat for a while, because when he heard her clear her throat, he looked at her.

“Is there a date?” he managed, “Or—?”

“No,” she said softly, “in a few weeks.”
Something was rattling.

He looked down. It was the socket wrench. He put it on the toolbox beside them with a loud smack.

She jumped beside him on the bench.

She’d been nervous to tell him, he realized.

He still mattered to her. In a way she was cognizant of.

That way needed to matter more.

Much more.

“Bella,” he said softly, blowing out a breath. His hands still trembling with anxiety. “I’d really hoped to be able to do this slower—smoother. But I think I’m out of time.”

“Do what?” she asked.

“Make you see what you feel,” he said. He brought his eyes to meet hers again. They were filled with confusion. “You love me,” he said simply. “You just don’t see it clearly.”

The consternation on her face was clear. Anger, too. “Jacob,” she said, “my feelings—”

He didn’t let her finish.

Instead, he pulled her to him, one hand cupping the back of her head, the other at her back, and his lips pressed to hers.

Her entire body tensed, stiff fingers dug into his shoulders, trying to shove him away.

It was, of course, pointless.

He felt her resistance, and wedged her lips open with his tongue.

Bella moved her head side-to-side, trying to dislodge him, an attempted ‘no’ coming out as a mangled “nrng!”

He’d opened the floodgates of feeling, and the full scope of them surprised even him.

He didn’t want to stop with simply kissing.

He didn’t want to stop at all.

But Bella had managed to kick him hard enough, her foot angling back to snap the toe of her shoe into his shin.

It didn’t hurt him at all, but he felt it.

When he pulled back, breathing heavily, body enervated, he felt her fist at his jaw, and the loud crunching of her bones, buckling under his denser ones.

It shocked him enough to let go.

She curled over herself, a series of guttural sounds spluttering out of her as she tried to grip her injured hand. When she could, she stood, facing him, “what the hell Jacob? What is wrong with you?”
“Nothing,” he said, “I love you. And you feel the same way about me. You just don’t see it yet.”

A derisive noise burred in her throat, her face cheeks an angry red. She was wordless with rage.

“Let me see,” Jacob said softly, gesturing towards her hand.

“No,” she muttered, and went to walk out of the shed. Jacob blocked her though, putting himself between her and the exit.

“Let me see it, please,” he said, this time more softly.

She shook her head. She was more than worked up. She just wanted to go home. “Quit it, Jake,” she said, and went to push past him.

His hand gripped her arm, just below the shoulder. “Let me see,” he growled. His tone, and the bite of his fingers made fear flare up inside. She stopped, alarmed by his angry hold.

Standing stiffly, she let him take her injured hand, and very gently examine it. “Nothing looks broken, but you might have fractured something.”

Bella didn’t say anything, her anger well hidden by her nerves. This was so unlike him. She wasn’t sure what to expect next.

“Let’s get you some ice,” he muttered, and, letting go of her hand, put his arm around her to guide her back to the house. It felt too hot against her back.

When they walked into the kitchen, Jacob grabbed an old bag of frozen vegetables from the freezer, and gently laid it on top of her hand. He hadn’t let their contact break yet, and guided her still with his other hand, towards the couch.

She was shaking now, the pain and shock of her hand asserting themselves. Underneath it, nausea threatened.

“I should go get this looked at,” she said, voice not quite level yet. “Can you take me home?”

*Home*, Jacob thought. *As if. She’s going straight to them.*

An unwelcome thought stabbed itself into his gut. What if they didn’t let her come back again? What if this was the last chance he had to convince her?

“Bella—,” he started.

“Jake, I just want to go home. I’m kinda done talking for today.” Her cheeks had flushed again. She was angry with him.

Good.

Anger was a strong emotion. It meant she was afraid of the other feelings she had for him too.

“I get it,” he said, “you’re afraid to admit what you feel. But…” he struggled for words, “the decision you’re making,” he blew out a breath, “is permanent. And if—”

“I’m sure, Jacob,” she said, this time through clenched teeth.

He put it in words that were plain. “He’s going to kill you, Bella.”
She shook her head at his stubbornness. “He’s not, he—”

“They’re dead, Bella. What the hell do you think being changed is?”

“It’s not—”

He was beyond frustrated with her blindness to this creature. “You’re so freaking stubborn! God!”
His hands clenched at his hair, as he turned and walked in circles in the small kitchen. “You don’t see anything clearly, when it comes to him.”

Bella thought the feeling was pretty mutual.

Finally, done huffing and pacing, Jacob said, this more calmly, “If you can’t be honest with yourself, how can you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

She refused to speak anymore. She was done.

So, she stared straight ahead in stony silence, arms folded, as much as she could, the icy bag dripping condensation onto her shorts.

Jacob pulled her good hand away, taking it in his. The coldness of it made him swallow, thinking of what she would become if he didn’t intervene. A swell of panic rose up in this throat. He had to make her understand this. Her life literally depended on it.

He met her eyes, “you’re a horrible liar, Bella, except when it comes to yourself.”

She twisted away in frustration, wrenching her hand from his. “I’m not lying, Jacob.” She stood up, moving towards the door.

He stood too, but then pulled back hard on her arm. “You are, and if you think that you can convince me that I don’t see what I do, or hear what I do, or smell, you’re only fooling yourself.”

The disgust on her face must have shown, because a flash of anger rode up over his, and he picked her up with one arm, sweeping it under her, kissing her, and then carrying him towards his bedroom.

There was more alarm rising in her body than Bella cared to quantify.

“Jake,” she said to his lips, her voice trying to be steady, shaky and steely all at once. “Put me down.”

“I will,” he said.

Then he laid her on his bed.

“No!” she said through her teeth, and went to kick him away. He evaded it neatly, pinning her good arm above her head, and her active leg with his own. He was trying to be gentle, but his knee pushed painfully into the softness of her inner thigh.

“Do you think I would hurt you?” He asked, waiting for her angry and heavy breaths to lessen.

After a moment, she said, “not deliberately, no.” She squirmed, hoping he’d see from the tenseness in her face, that he was.

“Or make you do anything you really don’t want to?”

The hackles on the back of her neck rose. She wanted the answer to be no, but she was frightened by
the conviction she saw in his eyes.

“Let go,” she said quietly, the shake in her voice now rooted in fear.

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “you’re lying to yourself so much, I can see your nose growing.”

Bella said nothing, trying to flex her good hand, nervous about trying to pull it away. Her injured one throbbed.

He was hovering over her, watching her face intently.

“Why do you think he doesn’t want you here?”

She snorted, letting her anger speak, “Well, I thought he had unreasonable opinions about you being an idiot.”

“He knows how you feel, Bella,” Jacob answered, “about me.”

He smirked at the glottal sound that escaped her throat.

“He sees how you respond to me. It’s why he’s so possessive every time he drops you off.”

She couldn’t disagree with Edward’s possessiveness. And right now, she didn’t blame him for it. She let her wrist squirm again under Jacob’s grip.

“Tell me,” he said, “that this doesn’t do anything for you. I’ll stop if you’re right, Bella.” Then he kissed her again. She turned her head away in disgust.

“Fine,” he said, as if this was a challenge.

He moved his attention to her neck.

When he felt her stiffen in surprise, he knew he’d had his desired effect.

Bella was running a rapid-fire list of assurances through her head. He wouldn’t let this go much further. Edward would kill him. No, she told herself, he wouldn’t kill him, he’d destroy him.

Slowly.

And she’d be happy to watch, the angry side of her mind yelled.

But Jacob’s free hand was roving, freely discovering the span of her ribs, and brushing his thumb up the underside of her breast. She twitched at that, the tone of her inner commentary shifting dramatically.

Not happening. This is not happening.

Jacob interpreted all her movements to his own advantage.

“That’s it,” he murmured, hand finding the hardening nipple there.

“Jake, stop,” she said, “fine, you’ve made your point, get off of me!”

“No,” he said, and brought his lips to hers again, “you’re still lying to yourself.”

Frustrated, angry, and frightened, Bella moved her right hand to push him away, hissing at the sensation that rippled up her arm.
“Stop fighting this,” he murmured.

Then his free hand switched its upward movement, turning the other way, slipping under the loose band of her shorts. With a familiarity that startled her even more, it found its way to the small nub of nerves buried beneath her soft folds.

She gasped at the unwanted intimacy. Her face would have been flaming if it wasn’t so blanched in shock.

She went to open her mouth, but Jacob’s lips stole her opportunity to protest vocally.

He was moving his fingers, swirling them softly around. She had never been touched this way, not by anyone, and the unfamiliarity of it was shocking enough, making her breath come faster. She just wanted him to stop.

Then he slipped one of his fingers inside, his thumb continuing its motions.

A sob lurched up from her throat.

“It’s OK,” he said, “it’s OK to enjoy it, Bella, I can feel that you want to.”

Bella wanted to cry.

She just wanted him to stop.

Not happening, the voice in her head repeated, as Jacob slipped another finger inside. The pressure bordered on the painful, and a small noise bubbled in her throat.

Jacob’s lips were pressed against her own, his tongue making free explorations of her mouth.

She stopped resisting him, going slack, hoping he understood her utter non-participation.

When he moved his lips to her neck again, her voice was quiet with grief. “Please stop. I don’t want this.”

But Jacob was only listening to the talk of her flesh, and it was responding as all flesh did to touch. The slow swelling there was all he wanted to hear.

“Lying,” he said. “I can feel that you want me,” he murmured to her ear, shifting his position, the press of his hand on her wrist increasing as it took more of his weight.

The strangled breath that she let out stopped, as he released her hand suddenly.

She took several short breaths in, feeling him move away. She’d closed her eyes, trying to cope with the deprivation of one sense.

Thank God, she thought.

Then she felt him pull her shorts off.

This action had only registered, when she felt him over her again, his hand stopping her good hand from pushing him away. “It’s OK,” he said.

His heat, diffuse from his clothes, was direct now, and the horrifying realization that he was naked made her tense, body panicking, trying to shove him away. Her contained limbs offered no leverage, and when the panic was spent, she realized that it wasn’t his hand she was feeling pressed between
her thighs.

“That’s it,” he crooned, taking her horrified stillness for compliance. He let go of her good hand, caressing her face, “just relax.”

She was anything but relaxed. She had her good hand at his face, fingers crooked for his eyes, but he palmed it back down above her head, his other sliding under her shirt.

All her straining was useless, pinned by his weight.

The sensation of heat, poised to enter her, made her stiffen in fear.

Not happening. Definitely not happening.

His shove was rough, and she felt the catching pinch in her own tissues, unprepared, strained by his movement. This uncomfortable stretch grew, a balloon of pain swollen beyond its limits. The final give was sharp, rippling upward through her, bubbling into tears that clouded her vision.

Jacob’s body had found its rhythm, his steady tempo yanking her into new brackets of pain. His hardness was relentless against the resistance of her flesh.

When he let his lips move away from hers, her voice was small with pain, her breath spent in enduring. “Jake, it hurts. Please stop!”

“‘S’OK,” he murmured, kissing her again, “it hurts the first time. It’s OK.”

The breath she could spare was gone, and she closed her eyes, just trying to breathe through wanted to pretend was not happening.

Her hand, under his, clenched and strained. He released it, and when she brought it up to shove at him, Jacob took it for more of her pretentious anger. Fine, he thought, keep pretending you don’t want to.

Because he could feel exactly how much she wanted to.

The sensations shivering over his body, and hers, became the forefront of his thoughts. Her, and him. That was all there was, and oh, if this wasn’t the most exhilarating thing ever. He felt her, soft and tightly pliant over himself. He attributed her squirming to being the product of a pleasure he sought for himself.

It didn’t take long. As the sensations built, a consuming wave took all sense and understanding from him. His hands found the soft curves of her breasts through her shirt, and then satisfying purchase around her ribs.

She could barely breathe.

The powerful forces of her mind shut down the places that let memory form. She told herself this simply wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be happening.

It wasn’t happening.

When the last spasms left him, he took her continued shiver as the reciprocal after effects to what he’d felt.

He kissed her again, moving himself to her side. He was dimly aware of a wetness than seemed too much to just have been the product of his own release, and when he stole a glance, muttered, “sorry,”
to her, leaving the room quickly, and returning.

“Here,” he said softly.

Bella stared at him, still trying to breathe in a way that didn’t hurt. Trying to understand what the large, flat, and white square was that he was offering her. She pulled at the blanket on the bed, covering her legs. Trying to cover the rest of her.

“You’re bleeding,” he said gently.

Still she said nothing, swallowing instead, staring at him.

The sensation of him softly wiping between her legs brought her to herself.

“I’ll do it,” she said, then remembered, too late, her right hand, as she reflexively went to move it.

The pained hiss was not lost on Jacob.

“Sorry,” he said, “we need to get you to a doctor, have that looked at.”

Her thoughts were so fuzzy with shock, she could only nod.

She felt like she was hovering above herself, lost in trying to process what was happening.

What could not possibly have happened.

“OK,” she mumbled.

Jacob was looking at her, frowning. “Do you want to take a shower or something first?” He was watching her try to clean herself up. She wasn’t doing very well.

A shower seemed like a very normal thing to do. Maybe she would feel better after a shower, she told herself. “OK,” she whispered.

Standing under the spray, she tried to keep her right hand out of the water. It was difficult, and awkward, and she was alarmed by the sensations that her own touch elicited. Her mind refused to connect the pieces of what had happened, and she finished quickly, dressing slowly, hindered by the use of only one working hand.

No, she told herself, nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

That definitely did not happen.

“You ready?” Jacob asked, rapping softly at the door.

“Yes,” she said quietly, pulling it open, cringing back when he reached for her.

He was oblivious to her body language. “Good,” he said, and then pulled her into a hug, this loosening as he kissed her.

She tensed again immediately.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “I know this is a shock. It’ll be OK.”

What was a shock? She thought.
Nothing, and everything registered. The details of everything she could see, touch, hear, and smell swirled into her memory, unfiltered, untouched by the processing of her mind. They were then neatly buried by a safe layer of denial.

Nothing had happened.

She had just hurt her hand. That was all.

“You don’t need to tell him right away. It can wait a bit. Give yourself time.”

It wasn’t so much a thought, as an instinctual reaction when her mind yelled NO as loudly as possible. To what, she didn’t want to pinpoint.

“Let’s go,” she said shakily, wanting to be gone.

She knew Carlisle wouldn't be at the hospital, and she allowed herself to experience this small relief. Then she shut down that part of her mind. Jacob stayed with her, letting her explain to the triage nurse how she’d fallen, and hurt her hand.

“Mmm,” the woman said, studying her shaky demeanor shrewdly. “That happen a lot?”

“Falling?” Bella asked. “Yeah, fair bit.” Her intonation was flat. All wrong, she knew. She couldn't quite tweak it to sound right.

She told herself that nothing was wrong. She just needed to get her hand looked at, and then she could go home. Everything would be fine.

Everything would be fine.

She was already dampening down the memories that were muddily trying to form themselves, smothering them in denial.

Her breathing, and the smarting stings in her arms and ribs were unhelpful reminders, as was the deeper pain that lurched with every wrong movement.

When Bella was called in to see the doctor, the nurse stood between her and Jacob. “You family?” she asked politely.

“No,” he said, watching Bella begin to walk away, frowning, angry at being blocked.

“Just wait here until she’s done. I’ll call you.”

“OK,” he grumbled to the nurse, and to Bella, “See you in a bit.”

She shied away from his kiss.

This was not lost on the nurse, who was already suspicious of Bella’s demeanor, and that a fall would hurt the back of her hand.

The doctor who saw her was young and new, and mercifully efficient. “Fractured knuckles,” he said. “Good news is you only need a brace to keep them steady, but you do need to keep it on. No cheating.” He wagged a finger at her, smiling.

She nodded solemnly, the shaking lessened by the normalcy of this interaction.

Outside, she could hear a whispered conversation between the nurse and the doctor. He didn’t bother
to keep his voice low after the first few exchanges. “She seems fine to me. If you want to follow up, its all yours.”

Bella was left alone for a bit, but then heard the tell-tale squeak of approaching shoes. The nurse slipped into the room, setting a cup in front of her. Juice. “Here,” she said, “you look a bit shaken. That might help.”

“Thanks,” Bella said softly, taking it, sipping slowly, carefully.

“So,” the nurse said, “just filling in the insurance paperwork. Where were you when you fell?”

“At my friend’s house,” she said.

“Oh yes, where in the house?”

Bella tried to stick to the truth as much as possible. She knew what would happen if she told the whole truth. Charlie would be called. It was the last thing she wanted, his shrewd senses heightened by her injury. “In his workshop.”

“What caused you to fall?” she asked.

“I tripped over a bit of uneven flooring,” she supplied. The shed did have uneven flooring. This was safely true.

“And how did you fall? Can you show me?”

Bella stood, trying to think quickly how she would have fallen, that would produce this injury. She faked it as best she could, and the nurse looked begrudgingly satisfied.

“OK, thanks,” she said, “you’re ready to go. Your boyfriend is still waiting for you.” She filled in the notes for the suspected domestic abuse form, and tucked it away, reminding herself to file with the local authorities later.

Bella didn't correct her. Didn’t want to explain. It seemed like too much of a can of worms to open.

Jacob didn’t let her go at the front steps, but took hold of her good hand. He didn’t want to kiss her there, out what had happened. He would let her take her own time on this. “I love you,” he said, “you’ve always known that, but you know how you feel now. Don’t forget that.”

The shivering returned, and she couldn’t find words to end the interaction. She pulled away and tripped up the stairs, stumbling inside the front door.

“Hey kiddo,” Charlie called. “Was wondering if you were ever coming home. ‘Bout to start sending out a search party.” His tone was light, but she knew she’d worried him on some level.

“Sorry Dad,” she said, swallowing nervously, coming into view of the living room, holding up her injured hand, “had to make a stop on the way.”

“Oh crud, what happened?” He stood, coming to her, looking at her raised arm.

“Tripped, you know,” she shrugged. “Jake took me to the hospital. Fractured knuckles.”

Charlie frowned in sympathy. “Why don’t I handle dinner then?”

Despite everything that had happened, Bella didn’t think she was ready for Charlie’s cooking. She snorted, more good naturedly than she felt.
“I was thinking pizza,” he said gently, “wouldn’t want to inflict my culinary charms on an invalid.”

“Thanks Dad, that’d be great.” She got the words out, just. The feelings she’d held at bay were threatening, rising up her throat, ready to choke it off. “I’m kinda beat, though. Gonna go lay down for a bit, maybe take some tylenol.”

“Sure,” Charlie said, already sitting back down, “dinner in a hour or so?” he asked.

She nodded, and then fled to her room, back against the door, sliding down to the welcome neutrality of the floor.

She put her hand to her mouth, grabbing something soft from the floor—a shirt she’d worn yesterday—and stuffing it to her teeth, stifling the sobs that erupted from her mouth.

A/N: Have about a third of this story plotted out so far. If you'd like it to continue, please leave me a word, or a question, or a suggestion or a critique in the comments - it is most motivating to read these (consider such things food for your local, friendly, neighbourhood writer). I respond to all questions, so please make sure you're logged in when you comment.
Author's note: So, I'm new to A03. Been here all of two weeks. My writerly friends assured me that this was THE place to get sophisticated commentary on stories. You know, avoid the juvenile flaming you sometimes get on Fanfiction.net. Perhaps they meant that readers just...don't comment? I'm hearing crickets here, people. If you're enjoying this tale, throw this writer a few of your mental table-scrap in letterish form.

Happy reading. This chapter gives me the chills.

Bella woke, shaky and twisted up inside, momentarily confused as to the feeling. Then she remembered. Yesterday. And tomorrow. Horrors to bookend each other.

Then she remembered today.

Edward would take her to meet Jacob. And he would carry her up the mountain.

She brought her head down to her knees, breathing in slowly and surely. Her ribs ached with it, but she made herself continue.

He couldn't know. Not today.

Possibly never.

She closed her eyes, the breathing becoming shaky.

He would kill Jacob if he knew. And that would unravel their alliance, and the treaty. She didn’t let herself imagine what that would look like. Or sound like.

No, she needed to keep this secret. Too many lives depended on it. Today. And tomorrow.

“You ready?” Charlie called, making Bella jump, rapping on her door. “Alice just called, said she’s on her way.”

No, she wasn't ready. At all. “Almost,” she mumbled, standing, wincing as dormant pains woke, angry and fresh.

Charlie, always vocally recalcitrant in the morning, spared her the weight of any conversation. He was ready to go himself, only waiting to see Bella off. If she hadn’t been so preoccupied, she would have felt like an imposition.

Alice was chipper and prompt, playing her part of the ruse with alacrity.

“Have fun fishing Charlie!” she called, as she skipped down the steps, Bella following her more slowly. It had become easier to move, but things smarted with any sudden shifts in gait.

Edward was waiting for her, arms slipping around her as soon as she opened the car door in the garage.

Her startled jump was a novelty. “Sorry,” he said softly, hearing her heartbeat skip several planned beats. He kissed her gently, happy to have this wordless greeting between them. “Ready to go
“Camping?”

“Sure,” she smiled nervously.

“Everything will be fine,” he said. “We’ll be together. Nothing to worry about.”

She didn’t let herself think of all the things that could so very easily be worried about, but nodded, taking his hand, feeling the relief at its familiarity. Her good hand smarted at the wrist, the torque of his slight movement aggravating the bruising there. She was carefully covered, the long-sleeved shirt buttoned tightly.

“What happened here?” he asked, seeing the brace on her other hand. His frown was deep, looking between it and her face.


“Precious, more like,” he said, picking it up, looking at it. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Really?”

He refused to acknowledge her incredulousness. “Carlisle,” he called softly.

“That’s why,” Bella said softly, a note of warning in her voice.

Carlisle was suddenly there, not bothering to hide his speed. “You tripped?” he asked, frowning slightly. Such an odd injury for tripping.

Bella nodded, face paling as Carlisle took her hand, removing the brace.

“Who saw you?” he asked, studying her fingers without moving them.

Bella answered woodenly.

“Did he prescribe anything for the pain?” he asked.

She shook her head.

Edward knew better. “Or did you just refuse?” he asked, letting a note of amusement colour this knowing accusation.

The doctor hadn’t asked, and neither had she. She shrugged by way of response.

“That must be painful,” Carlisle said, slipping the brace back on. “Why don’t I send you with something for tonight? You aren’t exactly going to be in the lap of luxury.”

He was back and gone instantly, handing Edward a small container of pills. Bella supposed he knew better than to try to convince her to pack them. With a parting smile, he disappeared again, leaving just the two of them.

She rolled her eyes, leaning back against the storage cupboards in the garage. Edward was gathering supplies, stuffing them into a large backpack.

From across the space, Alice’s long, and dramatically hissed in breath made Edward pause. She was standing at the doorway that led from the garage to the kitchen.

“No!” she said, gasping.
Bella went stock still.

Edward did too.

But these reactions were for very different reasons.

“Edward,” Alice said curtly, “would you care to explain to me why I see you two eloping? In Los Vegas?”

Edward looked at her with a steely gaze. “No,” he said, “I wouldn’t. And you will not pester Bella with asking, either.”

Bella was so relieved that Alice hadn’t seen anything else, that she found herself slumping back against the cupboard door, not realizing how tense she’d become. “It’s fine,” she murmured, surprising herself, she hadn’t intended to speak aloud.

Edward could sense Bella’s body slipping through various stages of bodily distress, and was alarmed by what he thought was the effect of Alice’s intended interference. It was becoming clearer and clearer the longer his sister mentally plotted.

“No,” he said to Bella, “that’s not what we talked about, and I will not subject you to Alice’s plans.” He looked at Alice, a challenge in his eyes.

“Bella?” Alice wheedled, “please? You love me—right?” here she returned Edward’s hard gaze, as if to say, unlike my brother, “I know you trust me to do this perfectly.”

Bella looked at Edward, and his resistance melted. “Is this what you want?” he asked.

“I think,” she said softly, wishing only he would hear, “that you want a real wedding, and so will the rest of our family.”

He frowned, hearing her deference to his wants. “Is it what you want, though?”

She smiled, most convincingly, “I love you. I’m kinda invested in what you want, too.” To Alice, she added, without moving her gaze from Edward’s, “but we get veto power.”

“Thank you!” Alice squealed, “this will be the best wedding ever!” Then she disappeared, leaving Bella and Edward the pretense of privacy, and at least, some quiet.

He looked at her conspiratorially, whispering dramatically, murmuring into her lips, “all I need is a word, and we’re off to Vegas. I can keep her from seeing it coming.”

“No you can’t!” Alice called from somewhere in the house, audible even to Bella.

They both chuckled, and she took advantage of the moment to lean into him, pressing her face against the coolness of his shirt. Her lips felt sore, and the chill of his body was soothing.

“Come on,” he said, “we need to get going soon if we’re going to meet Jacob on time.”

Edward was momentarily confused by Bella’s sudden bodily rigidity.

“You’re still so worked up about this, aren’t you?” he asked. “I promise,” he said, “everything will be fine. Now that the wolves are helping,” his hand gestured expansively, “really, just fine.” He kissed her forehead.

Bella’s nod was mechanical. She could feel things starting to bubble in her mind, images and
sensations that were dangerous to combine. Memories she could not afford.

Expensive consequences whose very suggestion terrified her.

She clamped down on the bubbling stew, and forced herself to only think of the next minute, and
then the next one, staying solely in the present, and near future.

She was with Edward, she reminded herself, and her body relaxed instinctively. She was safe with
him.

It was easy to detach her anxiety, with him, at least momentarily.

He’d moved on from the basic camping gear, and was now grabbing dehydrated food packs.

“Ew,” Bella said, making a face at them.

“Want to eat here?” he asked. She knew he would make her a four course meal if she even suggested
she did.

“No, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Not really hungry.”

With a soft squeeze on her supposedly good hand, his touch sent angry sparks up her arm.

*Don’t react*, she told herself. *Nothing happened, so nothing can hurt.*

He carried her, his arms familiarly cold around her, the time gliding past them unnoticed. This ended
abruptly, when Edward said, almost to himself, “Jacob should be—” and then a few minutes later,
she could see him, standing ahead of them.

*Nothing happened*, she told herself. *Nothing will happen. Everything will be fine.*

*Everything will be fine.*

She didn’t even hear their hostile conversation, she was so occupied with her own mantra, and
Edward’s kiss and murmured words were just feelings and sounds. Then he was gone.

“Hey Bella,” Jacob said cheerily. “How’re things goin’?”

She blinked.

She was beginning to wonder if she’d imagined everything that she wasn’t letting herself remember.

Then Jacob picked her up, and began to run, still talking to her as if this was just one of their normal
conversations.

She made appropriate sounds, she thought, at appropriate intervals. Her heart was thudding,
breathing shallow.

When he put her down in a small scramble of trees, she blinked at him, not understanding. “Is this
it?”

“No,” he chuckled, “but we’re alone. I wanted to have a chance to talk.”

Then he kissed her, hands on either side of her face, gentle, but hot against the cold air.

She pulled away, too frightened to speak. He wouldn’t. Not here. Not now.
“You haven’t told him,” Jacob said, arms akimbo, one knee partly bent as he rested his weight. Then he moved towards her again.

Bella backed up into a tree, panic making her stumble into her sore hand.

“We should go,” Bella said, voice uneven, “he’s expecting us.”

“We will,” Jacob said gently. He waited a moment, watching her, concern growing on his face. “You have choices, Bella. You don’t have to. You know how I feel. And you know how you feel, now,” he added, running his fingers down her cheek.

The wedge in his forehead deepened, “I’m sorry...I’m sorry it hurt,” he said, “I should have said that yesterday. I was just—”

Bella was having trouble focusing. Breathing. He was sorry? That it hurt? That he—

Nothing happened, she told herself. Nothing happened. It was like stuffing too many clothes into suitcase, if you sat on it long enough, sweating with the strain of forcing it all down, you could just—just—close the zipper on it.

That was what it felt like now.

Don’t open it, she told herself.

“I shouldn’t have rushed it,” Jacob said, fingers still too intimate with her face.

He attributed her nerves to the same feelings he was battling. The want. The frisson of it made his skin flame even more.

Bella had closed her eyes, and this only convinced him more.

Then his lips were at hers again, his tongue forcing itself inward, an imitation of the act he’d performed the day before.

The urge to vomit would have won out if he hadn’t pulled back suddenly.

“But you’re right. We should go. I don’t want him to be suspicious. Not today.” Then he grinned. “Or tomorrow, I suppose.”

Bella let a shiver run up her back, clamping down on the other things that wanted feeling.

“Come on,” Jacob said, reaching out to pick her up again. She didn’t move, and he stepped forward more, his movement swift, making her startle as he lifted her.

“You need to relax,” Jacob said, starting to jog, “some of us might think you didn’t have confidence in our abilities. Hmm?” He grinned, not needing an answer, but not liking her tight lips, or pale skin.

There was little more conversation, as Bella tried to shrink inwards, imagining the flesh of her body numb, unable to feel Jacob’s heat permeating her clothing.

Part of this was simply an awareness of the dropping temperature. The clouds sweeping in from the south were purple, and menacing.

Part of was just necessary.
Utterly necessary.

When they arrived at the camp, Jacob put her down, and she had to find her feet first, before she could walk unsteadily towards Edward.

They were talking, but she wasn’t paying attention. All that mattered to her was that Edward’s arms found her, she leaning into him.

“Let’s get inside the tent,” he said softly. When she didn’t respond, he repeated himself. “Bella?” he finally asked. “It’s getting cold.” He felt a twist of anxiety, seeing her own.

The temperature did nothing but drop, the only heat coming from the continued, and fiery verbal exchange between Edward and Jacob.

As the night came on, Bella climbed into the sleeping bag, beginning to shiver and shake almost as soon as the sun went down. The wind, snapping at the edges of the tent, was the only sound that surpassed the chatter of her teeth.

By early morning, Edward was crouched as far away from her as possible, terrified to chill her further by so much as breathing. He’d tried to convince her to leave several times, but she knew it would mean returning with Jacob.

She couldn’t do that again.

No.

In her dim awareness of the noises around her, she heard the tent flap unzip.

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Edward growled, as Jacob entered.

As soon as he rezipped the flap, Jacob leaned back lightly against one of the tent poles, dropping the jacket he’d carried in on the floor. “If you have a better idea, feel free to share.”

Edward’s growl was wordless this time.

“Bella?” Jacob asked.

“W-h-a-a-a-a—a—?” She started, choking on the single syllable, almost biting on her tongue.

“I can warm you up,” he said softly.

She made another chattered sound. This one interpreted disparately by the two other creatures near her.

“No!” Edward hissed, feral and possessive.

“Wasn’t asking you,” Jacob said, still standing nonchalantly.

The growl grew again.

“Sure she won’t need toes,” Jacob muttered. “But if she gets sick—that’s on you.” He turned, as if to go.

This was too much for Edward. She couldn’t be sick. Not for the sake of anything. Not his vanity. Or his jealousy.
“Bella,” he asked softly, risking coming closer. “What do you want to do?”

“S-t-a-a-a-y,” she rasped, teeth clicking together.

“Scoot over,” Jacob said, tone still even and dry.

The shivers continued, but her jaw clamped shut, feeling him slide in behind her.


But Jacob’s arms tightened around her, one at her stomach, and the other sliding downwards, finding its resting spot beneath the waistband of her jeans.

Edward looked up sharply, lip curling, “control. Your. Thoughts,” he said, voice low and clipped.

“Jealous much?” Jacob grinned.

Edward didn’t rise to the bait, but watched him through narrowed eyes.

“D-o-n-n-n’t” Bella said, terrified of the fight that could erupt so easily.

Edward didn’t move at all, only speaking when another howl announced the arrival of another wolf. “Seth’s here,” he said, more for Bella’s benefit than Jacob’s.

“Great,” Jacob said, “you head on out, and I’ll keep your girlfriend warm for you.”

A low purr of a growl was the only answer.

Jacob’s few other quips were met with similar responses, and he finally gave up, enjoying the feel of Bella’s body under his hands.

Edward frowned when Bella’s shivers didn’t completely abate, rattling on and off as the night wore on.

By the morning, Jacob had released his grip, but she sweltered in the newly warmed air. Her attempts to dislodge Jacob’s grip were useless, and she made herself look at Edward, fighting the too easy panic that wanted to pick her up and shake her.

“Help,” she said, reprimanding herself at the feeling that found its way into the word.

Edward was there instantly, ripping the sleeping bag off of them, picking up Bella, and dumping Jacob onto the cold ground in one smooth motion.

“Hey!” Jacob yelled, on his feet instantly.

Edward pushed Bella behind him, a snarl at his teeth. He had no patience for this creature, despite how he’d kept her warm.

Bella was horrified, and transfixed.

She couldn’t move, or speak, seeing the chasm opening up in front of her. If they fought—now, if they began this, then all the work, all the hope for safety—

“NO!” she managed, the word blurted out with a choked cry, tears flooding her eyes, her throat constricting in a sob.
Both of them froze, turning to her, so acutely attuned to her distress.

Edward took her hand, “everything’s fine,” he said gently, “I’m sorry this upset you.”

She shook her head, trying to press everything back down. She twitched when his hand met hers at first, but then forced herself to relax her muscles. *He mustn’t suspect*, she intoned silently.

“Later,” Jacob muttered, sickened by the sight of his hands on her. Grabbing the sleeping bag, he went outside.

Edward breathed out a sigh, holding her hands. “Tonight,” he said softly, “you will not have anything to worry about. Just remember that.”

Bella nodded, making the muscles contract and relax at will.

Edward spoke again, but the words were soft and undemanding, swimming over her. She caught few of them. Three, though, were distinct enough to snag on the cracked edges of her mind.

“...future Mrs. Cullen.”

Then there was an ear-splitting, and broken howl that ripped through the small clearing.

Bella went white, hands clenching at Edward’s. “Jacob—?” she asked, looking at him.

Edward nodded, but his brow furrowed, seeing the distress on her face. “He needs to know, Bella,” he admonished her.

“Now?” Bella asked, imaging what this would drive him to. What if he—oh God, what if he showed Edward what had happened? Or turned on the Cullens mid battle? What if—and then she realized that she couldn’t wait to find out.

“JACOB!” she called, running from the tent, imagining the worst. Imagining all of them dead.

Her rationality had been left, well battered, somewhere on Jacob’s bed, and fear was now the primary operator of her mind.

“Bella,” Edward said, following close behind, “he’s left.”

She crouched, hands in her hair, pulling at it.

“He needed to know,” Edward said again, feeling a guilty twist, seeing the effect this had on her.

“I need to see him,” she said, “he can’t leave, not like this—what if, what—?” she couldn’t finish it, but started towards the edge of the woods, intending to find him herself.

“Stop,” Edward said, and then again, more loudly, finally putting his hands at her shoulders. “Do you want me to go get him?”

The way he said it, Bella knew this pained him, far beyond what she could see.

A clenching guilt squeezed her insides. She didn’t deserve him. Not in the slightest.

“Yes,” she said, feeling the memories starting to rattle in their cage.

She squatted again, counting breaths while he was gone. She was almost at two-hundred by the time she heard Jacob’s footsteps.
When she stood, Edward came close, but didn’t touch her. “Seth and I,” he started, voice full of a feeling she didn’t recognize, “we’ll leave. Give you some privacy.”

Didn’t deserve him. No.

When he was sure they were alone, Jacob stepped forward, inches from her. “What?” he asked. “What more could you possibly have to tell me? Say to me?”

What indeed?

“Please,” she said, feeling the tremble that seemed to be the new, and natural accompaniment to being with Jacob, “don’t do anything reckless.”

He laughed. “Reckless? Like what, tell him?” he asked. “‘Fraid it might ruin your wedding plans?”

She blanched, the pain at the thought of losing Edward, again, pulling apart that tenuous stitching that held that emptiness at bay.

“Not today, no,” she whispered.

Jacob looked up at her, hope blossoming in his eyes. “You’re not going through with the wedding?”

“I don’t think so, no,” she whispered, holding down the tears.

Then he pulled her into an embrace that made all the hurts he’d given her sing, their keening whine a dull throbbing in her ears.

“Please,” she said, air scarce under his pressure, “I don’t want anyone hurt.”

“Of course not,” he said, lessening his grip.

She took a deep breath in, and then immediately regretted it. Her ribs felt like they’d been stabbed.

“But give me something to come back for,” he said, voice deep and wanting.

She looked at him, not understanding.

“Give me something to come back for,” he said again.

She didn’t want to entertain what he was suggesting.

“Ask me to kiss you,” he said. “And mean it.”

She felt stupid, staring at him. “You want me—”

“To ask me to kiss you, yes,” he said, brushing her hair from her face. “I’ll be good as gold, if you do.”

She swallowed. “Then kiss me, please,” feeling the shudder in her stomach.

He put his hands at her back and head, pulling her to a kiss she didn’t want. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping this was the last time she would feel him this way.

The thought, that his death would be the only one she could tolerate danced, horrific, and ugly, across her mind.

He let her go, just as suddenly as he’d gripped her.
She watched him step back, transform, and bound away, his movements lithe and energetic. Then she stumbled back to the tent, finding the sleeping bag Jacob had discarded.

Burying herself in it, she curled into the smallest shape she could manage, wanting to give free reign to the numbness that was just as eager to take her.

“Bella?” Edward asked softly, kneeling in front of her.

She didn’t respond, beyond swallowing. She could barely stomach herself, let alone him her.

“And I thought I played dirty,” he mumbled, almost a throaty chuckle.

This made no sense.

“What?” she asked.

“His thoughts were...loud,” he said.

Bella’s back became rigid, imagining the worst.

“He was very smug,” he said, “that he’d suggested he might do something reckless, if you didn’t, and that you’d believed him.”

“Oh,” Bella said. It seemed sufficiently noncommittal. Safe.

Edward had picked her up, keeping her curled shape, but in his arms, “you have no artifice, Bella, you’re quick to believe anyone with the least skill there.”

He didn’t know.

Thank God.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He shook his head. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I love you.”

She shivered in relief.

And then suddenly, they were flying, the tent disappearing. From behind him, because she realized now he was crouched defensively, she could see, just emerging from the shadows of the woods, a shimmer of bright red curls.

Victoria.

Author's post-script: What happens next? The battle that Meyer does a really great job of writing...and Jacob getting horrifically wounded...and that bit with the Volturi. Next time we see each other, we're going to be back at the Cullen's place, right before Bella heads home. See you then.
Between

She was staring at the collection of bottles on the edge of the bath. She realized, in her murky state, that they were likely all for her.

Normally, this would bother Bella, but this afternoon, everything seemed to slide by unnoticed. Untouched.

She was too lost in her slideshow of these last days’ events, playing on repeat in her mind: betrayal, death, and injury.

Edward had kept himself calm, she could tell, for her sake. Or, perhaps the destruction of so many lives, or the mangling of them, didn’t bother him.

She wouldn’t expect him to be concerned for Jacob or his injuries. Carlisle wasn’t. And she wasn’t, after all.

She was relieved.

It had been a difficult conversation to navigate her way through, assuring him she didn’t want to see him. That she wasn’t trying to protect his feelings. That she was trying to protect Jacob’s.

Here her gorge rose again, and she forced herself to release the tension her body held.

It wasn’t safe yet. She needed to hold on just a little bit longer.

*When though,* a small voice insisted. *When?*

She silenced it with denial.

The water was growing increasingly tepid. She’d added cold water as soon as Alice had left. The heat of the bath had been too much. Too intimately pressed against her.

He would be fine. That’s what Carlisle had said, when he returned.

Good. He could be fine. As long as she didn’t have to see him again.

“Bella?” Alice called. “You must be a prune by now. Why don’t you come out?”

*Did it matter?* Bella wondered.

The sound of the girl in the clearing, her life ending in that horrific screech and sound took residence in Bella’s mind, and she shivered.

“And you’re getting cold,” Alice said.

*Keep it together,* she told herself.

“Sure,” Bella said, “just a minute.”

Then she realized she had no clothes in the bathroom. Just a towel.

“Um,” she started, “could you leave me my clothes?”

Alice sighed from behind the door, loud enough for Bella to catch it.
She couldn’t help but smile. At least she could still exasperate Alice.

The sound stopped, abruptly, though.

“Bella,” Alice’s voice came again, this time entirely different, “what’s wrong?”

*Don’t panic*, the voice told her, *just take a deep breath in.*

It seemed like good advice, so she did.

“I’m fine,” Bella said.

There was a pause. Clearly, Alice had seen something with her gift. “If you say so.” The door slipped open a crack, and a neat pile of clothes appeared on the counter. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Bella replied, sure to speak clearly, and levelly.

“You can tell me what’s bothering you, Bella,” Alice’s voice called, very quiet, very soft.

*Like Hell I can*, Bella thought, a shiver running over her as she stood, towelling off gingerly.

She didn’t reply, dressing quietly, opening the door when she was decent, allowing Alice to fuss with her hair. She drew the line at make-up.

“Believable, Alice. Charlie will smell a rat if I come home looking like this, without signs of a struggle.”

Alice smirked, but rolled her eyes good naturedly.

When she dropped Bella off at Charlie’s, they had the obligatory small talk, in which Bella was sure she participated, but not to the point where the particulars were memorable.

She made dinner mechanically, eating it the same way too, and Charlie, tired after talking so much, to fill the void of her silence, was happy enough to turn on the TV, and sink into a nap.

Her bed was a welcome refuge after the largely sleepless night. She kept starting awake, thinking she felt hands where none were, and when the hands were real, they were cold, and velvet, only brushing the hair out of her face.

“Go back to sleep,” Edward said, “sorry I woke you.”

She shook her head, to his request, or his apology, he wasn’t sure.

“Just...nightmares,” she said.

He could understand that well enough, and swallowed his nerves.

She’d been so calm. Too calm. He was waiting for her to fall apart.

He’d thought, when she’d passed out, that it might have come to a head then, but her restraint, her carefully controlled motions through the rest of the day, her speech even, had been so precisely modulated, he knew that he had yet to see the worst of it.

Or perhaps, it would be nothing. She’d surprised him before. It shouldn’t surprise him now, that her reactions were so different from what was expected.
“Do you want me to hold you?” he asked. He said it with a twinge of guilt. He had his own motivations. Not all of them were altruistic. Watching Jacob Black do so had left a gaping hole, full of jealousy to roil around, that wanted closing. But mostly, he wanted her to sleep. To be well.

She didn’t answer right away. This alarmed him, but only briefly.

Then it made perfect sense.

She was afraid of him. Perhaps not in a way that she was cognizant of, but after what she’d seen, what human could not be?

“Only if it helps you,” he murmured softly, kissing her hand, and releasing it. He leaned back in the rocking chair, showing he was comfortable there. Making no imposition.

“That’d be nice,” she said softly.

He let his shape match her own, her back to his, head on his arm. In the warmth of her room, his temperature was welcome. The rigidity of his flesh, less so. As careful as he was, the stony texture bit into her bruises, and weighed heavily on her fatigued ribs.

She shifted as little as she could, but he could tell she was uncomfortable.

“Sore?” he asked.

She only froze momentarily, but he noticed, wondering why this would bother her.

She cleared her throat. “No.”

“I’ll cross camping off the list of possible honeymoon destinations,” he chuckled.

Bella made herself smile, suddenly grateful he couldn’t see her face, and how forced that expression was.

She didn’t try to continue the conversation, and he didn’t push for it either.

Instead, she waited for sleep, and hoped her dreams wouldn’t reveal more of her to him than her mind did.

Exhaustion was her friend, and her sleep deep, and dreamless.
“Deal’s off,” Edward said, shaking his head. “No crazy, Alice-inspired wedding plans. Not happening.”

“But—” Bella started.

“No,” he said firmly, “you’ve given up too much to make other people happy. And I’m sorry I even convinced you to get into this mess—”

“Edward,” Bella said firmly, “this matters to you—”

“You matter to me,” he answered her, taking her chin gently with his fingers. “And only you.”

“But—” she started.

His “no,” was soft, and whispered into her lips as he kissed her. “But don’t worry love, I haven’t forgotten what I promised you.”

He was laying her down in the grass, one hand at her back, leaning over her, kissing her.

It felt marvelous.

Then his hand slid under her shirt.

“No,” Bella said to his lips, pushing him away with a hand. “We can’t. You wanted to wait—”

“Yes,” Edward said, placing his lips in that particular spot on her neck, “we can.” Then he very carefully rolled over top of her, and she felt, for the first time with him, his very clear capacity to desire her, just as any human man would.

It was like something cracked. Like she was a jar, broken, so many small pieces falling away and her control oozing out of her.

She was suddenly, and utterly terrified.

*Stay calm*, some part of her brain mouthed to the rest of her. *He’ll think this is just excitement. Just keep it together.*

Her heart was thudding, pounding out of her chest, and he took it as her mind assured her he would: as license to continue.

His kisses were gentle, so unlike—*no*, she told herself, *don’t even think about it*. But the hardness pressed against her left no room to not remember what Jacob had done.

Edward didn’t miss her shaky stillness, and drew back. “Bella?” he asked, suddenly uncertain. His face was silhouetted against the sun, features black in shadow.
She was trying to control her breathing, now shallow and panicked. She closed her eyes, taking in
the smell of the meadow, of Edward, of his hand, cold and velvety over hers.

“Bella,” he said again, this time with greater concern.

“Sorry,” she said, “that was very...unexpected.” She was still trembling. The paleness in her face
betrayed all sense of calm.

She was afraid, Edward realized. Terrified.

“I frightened you,” he said. A tightness gripped his chest.

Of course, he thought. This was a delayed reaction to what she’d seen with Victoria. His worry
made him bring his fingers to rest on the wrist of her good hand, quietly confirming her pulse.

She jerked it away, like he’d hurt her, scrambling back in an awkward crab walk.

Despite what he suspected, it still shocked him.

“You’re safe, Bella,” he said, trying to soothe her, “I’m not going to touch you. Nothing is going to
hurt you.”

Bella stopped breathing. How—? He couldn’t—couldn’t know. He would have said something, or
maybe she had, and not realized?

“I’m fine,” she said, still shaking, arms giving as she sank onto her elbows, and then sat, scrambling
to stand.

Clearly, she could tell, he wanted to come to her. He was holding himself back, the pinch at the
centre of his forehead telling her as much.

“Are you feeling dizzy?” he asked, worried she was going into shock.

“No,” she said. Her voice warbled over the syllable. She felt like she was going to vomit.

“This is perfectly normal, Bella,” he said gently. “You’re having a delayed reaction to the shock of it,
that’s all.”

Oh my god, she thought. He knows. He knows. How—?

Jacob. She realized. When he was sick. He must have been out of his mind. Maybe he said
something to Carlisle? Or Edward heard when he was there?

Then she turned and crouched on the ground, vomiting.

He couldn’t stay away, and was there, brushing her hair out of her face, an arm bracing her
shoulders.

“No!” she managed, “don’t.” Everything had been so carefully tucked away in denial. The thought
of his touch, mixing with the memory of what had happened made her stomach convulse again.

“I can’t,” she said, pushing his hand away, tears clouding her vision. She was stumbling away from
him, trying to get air, trying to find that place again where she’d shoved everything. Trying to put the
cage of control back together again.

Edward was almost as equally distraught.
It made perfect sense. All of it.

She was finally reacting the way a human should to his kind.

With terror and revulsion.

Was this it? Now that all the mortal dangers that he had drawn into her life had passed, was she finally able to allow her instincts to manifest? To repudiate him as she should have a year ago?

The pain gripping him was only second to the one he’d felt when he thought her dead.

*I need to put this aside*, he told himself, *for her. I need to take care of her now. See her safe.* The thought of her distress, being caused by him raked itself across his heart.

Bella was having her own realization.

He hadn’t said anything.

Her rational mind had reasserted itself. Surely he would have confronted her with the whole ugliness by now?

No, she determined, he didn’t know.

“Bella,” he said gently, “let me take you home, and then, if you want, I’ll go. I don’t want to frighten you.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said, as if this was obvious, “I just can’t—I can’t have you touch me, not now, not—” she couldn’t finish, a sob taking her.

They waited, she half-crouched, he standing as non threateningly as possible.

He’d counted two hundred of her heart-beats, still too rapid for his liking, when she spoke again.

“Can you take me home?” It was whispered, and shaky.

“Of course.”

He approached slowly, cautiously.

As if he was afraid of what I might do, Bella thought.

This struck her as hilarious, suddenly, and she laughed.

It wasn’t her normal laugh, though. It was high and uncertain.

Edward stopped, mid-stride, hearing it.

“Bella?” he asked.

She was half-crying, half-laughing, “you look like...you look like you’re afraid of me.”

She couldn’t name the expression on his face. Pained was far too simple a word.

“I don’t want to frighten you,” he said softly, and then half-turning, “why don’t you come here, and I’ll take you home.” He put his arms out to his back, where he normally carried her, and she approached as steadily as she could, climbing on.

This was safe, and she felt herself relax over his back, closing her eyes against the movement she
couldn’t stomach.

They were at her truck in just a moment. Edward didn’t ask if she minded him driving.

When they pulled up in front of her house, he was at her door before the engine was fully off, taking her hand.

“I’m fine,” she said, “I don’t know what got into me.”

Don’t, the voice in her head said. *Make a plausible excuse.*

“It must have been yesterday. Everything—” she started.

“You don’t need to explain to me,” he said, squeezing her hand. “I’ve put you through enough. I’m sorry.”

She nodded, hoping this was the end of it.

But it wasn’t. He insisted on making dinner, letting her give direction from a chair in the kitchen. When he could hear the particular hum of Charlie’s cruiser, he said, “Charlie’s almost home. Do you want me here, or gone?” He’d knelt in front of her, kissing the backs of her hands, as she smiled over him.

“Why don’t I see you later,” she said. “Just in case Charlie’s crabby.”

“Mm,” he said, allowing the corners of his mouth to tug upward. “Alright. I’ll come back later tonight.” He would barely disappear. The snarling mass of fear that had snaked up his gut in the meadow was on a low simmer, and he couldn’t bear the thought of being further than necessary from her.

He retreated to the cover of the woods, pulling out his phone.

“The only thing I see amiss is Bella not wanting to try on her wedding dress,” Alice said, sighing, “and that seems perfectly in character for her.”

“Nothing else?” Edward asked, again.

“Nuh-thing. Relax. I even see telling Charlie going fairly well,” she replied.

This made Edward smile in relief. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re not welcome. Stop worrying. We’ve earned the right to that,” Alice snapped, and then hung up on him.

Everything seemed, in fact, perfectly normal. Bella and Charlie’s evening progressed as usual, and when Bella went upstairs to have a shower before bed, Edward thought nothing beyond pleasantly anticipatory thoughts.

It was Charlie, who’d enjoyed dinner, but whose stomach was objecting to the dubious sandwich he’d bought at lunch, who found himself hurrying a bit too fast up the stairs.

Bella hadn’t locked the bathroom door. Distracted by the day’s events, she’d closed it, showered, and was standing, brushing her teeth when Charlie pushed the door open.

They both startled.
She was just glad she hadn’t dropped the towel.

But Charlie was staring, queasy stomach forgotten. If anything, it felt like it had fallen out of him.

He was focused on her arm, where a sturdy bruise rested just below her shoulder, and a matching one on her good wrist. They were dark, and precisely shaped against the fresh pink of her flesh.

The brace on her arm took on a whole new meaning.

He’d seen the report on his desk, along with all the others the ER sent over. Routine. He’d given it to his deputy to evaluate, telling him to treat it like any other case.

Things fell into place. The overprotectiveness. Her running to him months ago after he’d abandoned her.

Nearly destroyed her.

He’d been abusing her.

He was sure of it.

So he said nothing.

He knew what happened in these cases when victims were confronted. And he damn well wouldn’t be one of those.

“Sorry,” he muttered instead, “are you done? I need to um…” and he let his face flush convincingly. She’d think he was embarrassed.

“Oh, yeah,” she said, breathing too fast. Had he seen? No, he would have said something. She sidled past him, and without her seeing, Charlie held up his hand to her shoulder, measuring the span of the hand that would be needed to make the bruise there.

A man’s hand, certainly.

Then he locked the bathroom door, using it for the purpose he’d intended, lost in thought. And worry.

Bella thought she’d escaped all notice, but Edward had registered every nuance of Charlie’s alarm, and the source to which he attributed it.

He’d seen, and he knew that someone had hurt Bella.

Now his phone was ringing.

“What the hell is happening?” Alice said, “Why do I see your wedding cancelled?”

“I don’t know,” he said, the breath catching in his throat. He would find out, though. And soon.
Bruises of all kinds

A/N for 26/05/2018: Thanks for reading and commenting all. This story has kinda taken over my life this week. Grateful that you tell me all your big feelings about this tale :-) 

“Night Dad,” Bella called from upstairs, closing her door. The light was finally fading, and she welcomed the dark, knowing Edward would arrive with it.

She wasn’t disappointed.

“Hi,” she said, when he appeared, his suddenness always mildly startling, but more so now. She’d been sitting, unusually, at her desk, and he took her hand softly.

“Feeling more yourself?” he asked quietly. He’d know if Charlie heard his voice, but he kept it low, not wanting this conversation to be interrupted for anything.

“Yeah,” she said.

He nodded, as if taking this in. It was pure artifice. He’d spent the last hours plotting the nuanced paths of this conversation.

“I frightened you,” he said, “earlier. In the meadow.”

“It was nothing,” she replied hurriedly, shaking her head. She didn’t want to dwell on it. Too dangerous.

“Mmm,” Edward said, allowing her to think he accepted this dismissal.

He pulled her hand, sitting on the bed, inviting her to join him, but she didn’t move. She didn’t trust herself to not panic, in such proximity, not after this afternoon.

This was completely out of character for her. “Doesn’t seem like nothing,” he said, eyeing the empty place beside him.

“Don’t want to fall asleep just yet,” she said, reaching for her lamest excuse yet.

The bed was close enough to her desk that he could reach across and touch her hand. He did so, hooking his thumb under the soft cuff, and pushing it upward, revealing the bruise on her wrist.

He could hear her heart, resembling the rotors on a helicopter, fluttering in uncertainty.

She felt the panic starting to threaten in the blood pooled at her feet.

Edward was glad she was sitting. He was certain she’d have fallen over if she hadn’t been.

“How’d this happen?” he asked gently, holding her gaze.

Watching her blush, while the blood was draining away was something he hoped he didn’t have to see again.

She was trying to breathe regularly.
“I’m not sure,” she mumbled, tongue stumbling over the letters.

Edward held her hand up, turning it gently to one side, and then the other. The bruise ran the circumference of her wrist and lower forearm.

“Someone would have had to put their hand around you here,” he said, showing her, just brushing her skin, “with considerable force.” He paused, to let her absorb this. “I don’t think you’d forget, Bella.” He kept his eyes on hers, which were scattering over the floor, as if looking for answers.

“I think,” he said softly, “that someone hurt you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Bella said, ”who would want to hurt me?” She looked at him, daring accusation. Her heart rate underode every word, though, and he gave a smile that was small, and weary.

“I don’t want to think anyone would, love,” he said, “but clearly they have.”

She had begun to shiver.

“I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do, Bella,” Edward continued, speaking softly, rubbing his thumb over her hand, again and again, and again.

Her fractured gaze traced the patterns in the floorboards.

“I know you have another bruise on your upper arm. It’s dark, and it too shows that someone grabbed you hard enough there to hurt you.”

She said nothing, her breaths now short and uncertain.

“Are you afraid of me now?” he asked, hoping for the truth.

Hoping for a lie.

“No,” Bella said softly. She wasn’t afraid of him right now.

She was afraid for him.

What would he do if she did tell him someone had hurt her? Just in this small way? And how much more it would be, if he knew further?

“How?” She asked, grasping an evasion, trying to think. “How did you know?”

“Charlie,” he said simply, that uncertain expression still on his face. “He was...surprised.” Then he pressed his question again. “Who?” he asked, and then with greater concern. “You know that I will always protect you. No matter what.”

Bella said nothing.

“Charlie thinks I hurt you,” he said. “He didn’t want to say anything, because he thought you would protect your abuser.”

Bella stared at him, utterly flummoxed.

“And you are,” he murmured.
“Don’t,” she said, “please,” and closed her eyes.

“Don’t what?” he asked.

He slid down to his knees so he could be closer.

“Who?” he asked.

Oh God. She would have to tell him.

There were no other plausible evasions, and she wouldn’t risk an innocent name for fear of what might do.

Flickering images of Mike Newton, or Taylor Cowlie, broken, or well blooded, or effectively disappeared, occupied her mind.

The very ugly truth was that she was afraid. Of Edward. Of what he might do.

Jacob had made certain she would fear most men, and especially the ones she loved.

You just never really knew what they would do.

She couldn’t lie.

“Jacob,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

“He hurt you?” Edward asked.

She nodded.

A slithering chill, that went up his spine, and then down it again, flared out over his limbs.

“When?” His tone was cool now, too.

“The last time I went to see him,” she answered, swallowing. Hoping.

“And your other hand?” he asked in a quiet voice, touching it lightly. “You didn’t fall, did you?”

She shook her head, standing, backing away from his touch.

He frowned to her turned back. “How’d you hurt it?” he asked.

“I punched him.” Her voice sounded so small. She leaned her hand and forehead against the window.

“Why?”

Her breath fogged the glass.

She swallowed before answering, voice shaking. “Because he kissed me. He wouldn’t stop.”

The pit of Edward’s stomach disappeared.

The cavity left by it was boiling with rage. Jacob hadn’t just hurt her. He’d frightened her. Badly.

“What happened?” His voice betrayed none of his feelings.
The breathing was shifting into muffled sobbing, and he turned her towards him into his arms. He was holding off the worst possibilities that threatened active imagination, but just.

“He told me he loved me. He told me that I loved him. And that I was lying. That he needed to show me—what I wanted. He—”

She stopped there, hoping she didn’t need to say the words.

Edward had heard her, and forced himself to be calm, to remember what was between his hands. “Did he hurt you anywhere else?” he asked, afraid, oh so afraid of what the answer would be.

“Yes,” she said, shaky but sure.

He prepared himself with a mixture of hope, and fear, to ask, “where?”

She touched her ribs on both sides, and he nodded.

Then she gestured briefly to between her legs.

He made himself nod again, keeping his hands light, their touch lighter.

“When?” He asked again.

Bella didn’t see why it would matter. “The same day.”

Edward made his head move up and down, forcing himself to focus on the smallest minutiae, so he wouldn’t lose complete control.

“Is that why you’re bleeding?” He asked.

He expected her silent, and affirmative response. He’d so easily rationalized the evidence his nose and throat had presented him with over the last days. The reality was numbing.

She’d been suffering, and he hadn’t known. She’d been utterly alone in this.

He had failed her. Given her over to a creature whose control he doubted, and whose feelings he knew to be suspect.

He held her, saying nothing, letting her tears exhaust themselves. Stewing in his own guilt. When she’d calmed somewhat, he tucked his thoughts and feelings under more practical concerns.

“You haven’t seen a doctor.” It was a statement, not a question.

She shook her head.

The buzz of his phone could not have been more inopportune.

“It’s Alice,” he said apologetically, bringing it to his ears. His “Yes?” was curt.

“Don’t leave her alone,” Alice said. “Not tonight.”

He didn’t need to be told why, and he didn’t ask if she knew.

“Thank you,” he murmured, and hung up.

“Come spend the night with me,” he whispered to Bella, who was still grappling with what she’d said, let alone what had happened.
There were responses she expected from Edward. This was not one of them.

“What?” She asked dumbly.

“Come spend the night with me, at our house,” he elaborated.

“But Charlie—“

“Just come with me. Alice can come get your truck, and leave a note for Charlie from you. I’m sure she can invent some sort of plausible emergency.” This practicality was the least of his concerns.

She was still trying to understand that he was still there. He hadn’t run in rage, or out the excess of any other feeling.

He had stayed.

“OK,” she said, holding tenuously to this unbelievable hope.

Then he picked her up, and they were flying, she with her hands clutched to the fabric of his shirt, eyes squeezed shut against the terror of their movement. Too fast. Always too fast with him.

Edward did not stop to greet his family, or even use the door. He entered through the window he’d left open in his room, slowing himself only to walk, still carrying Bella into Carlisle’s office.

She looked at Edward, stricken and panicked.

He hadn’t said anything about involving Carlisle.

Nothing.

Then she saw that Edward’s lips were moving, but she couldn’t hear what he was saying. This only alarmed her further.

Edward had set her down on an exam table. She slid off of it, moving towards the door, fresh tears warring for space on her already briny cheeks.

She jumped back when Carlisle stood near her, almost in her path. “Bella, Edward tells me your ribs might be bruised?”

She looked at Edward, confused, and, she realized, angry.

“That’s all I’ve told him,” he said, face twisted in worry.

She said nothing, not quite certain which one to speak with.

“Do you want me to look at them?” He was looking at Bella, but she could tell there was a silent conversation with Edward unfolding behind his focused gaze.

“No,” she said, deciding on a course of action, and began to walk out of the room.


Her cheeks were flaming. Uncomfortably hot. She found herself not just discomforted by the sensation, but unnerved too. Jittery.

“I didn’t come with you for this, Edward,” she said quietly, trying to make her voice inaudible to
Carlisle. The rational part of her brain knew it was pointless, but if there was ever a time that she craved privacy, it was now. “I’d know if my ribs were bothering me.”

“And the bruises on your arms?” Edward asked.

“They’re just bruises,” she said, the tears free now, moving to push past him.

Then, distraught beyond where reason would reach him, he reached to take her arm. The sudden grip, gentle as it was, made her gasp and start, pulling back.

The panic was written in the tight pull of her lips, her eyes, already large, wide, and the flare of her nostrils.

Edward let go immediately.

She stood, several paces back from him, now visibly shaking.

Jasper’s sudden appearance on inflamed the feeling.

“Bella,” Jasper said calmly in greeting, evaluating her rapidly changing emotional state. He eyed Edward, whose distress had been evident from the minute he came in the house. The distinct flavour of Carlisle’s confusion and curiosity were growing, insinuating themselves into the already heady mix around him.

Bella wanted to leave, but was now blocked by three vampires, and she backed herself up to the wall, hands feeling for purchase. Or a weapon.

“We’ll be outside if you need us, Bella,” Jasper said, looking meaningfully at Carlisle, who nodded, and then Edward, who shook his head at this suggestion.

“I think Bella could use a moment alone,” Jasper tried again.

Carlisle walked out, Jasper following, looking back worriedly at Bella, and then Edward.

“Bella,” Edward said, “I won’t hurt you. You know this.”

He stepped forward, and she flinched.

“Don’t,” she said, “just—Jasper’s right. I could use a minute. Or two.”

Edward looked down, frustrated hands working their fingers at his sides. “You’re hurt,” he said. “You’re bleeding.” This alone made him anxious on any given day. The others were well under control now, but still. He didn’t think she’d be so opposed to having Carlisle treat her. “Please let Carlisle make sure you’re OK.”

“No,” she said, voice unhinging itself. “I think I should just go home.”

“No,” he growled.

She wanted to crawl up the wall, or bury herself in it.

“Edward.” Jasper’s voice was sharp to Bella’s ears. She didn’t need to hear his thoughts to know the warning he was giving Edward. She’s distraught. Frightened. Terrified. Of you. Back off, before I make you.

Edward only growled in response, head turned cursorily to his brother.
Jasper just raised an eyebrow, jutting his chin towards Bella. She’d slid down the wall, curling her arms around her legs.

When Edward moved towards her, she pushed him away with frantic hands, and he wisely, finally, listened.

“Enough,” Esme called, walking into the door, “everyone out.”

Edward only glared.

“Out!” she said, finger pointed imperiously to the door.

Then she sat down in one of the chairs, that faced the wall where Bella sat, and waited.
“What time is it?” Bella finally asked, when no one else intruded.

“Almost midnight,” Esme answered softly, adding, “you must be tired.”

“Yeah,” Bella said, still on the floor, leaning her head back against the wall.

“Do you want to head to bed?”

There’d be no point. She wouldn’t be able to sleep. Not now. She shook her head.

“Then can I get you something? To eat? To drink?”

Bella was thirsty, but she didn’t want her to leave.

Esme could sense her hesitation. “I won’t go anywhere, unless you want me to.”

“Just some water, please,” Bella finally said.

There was a knock at the door a moment later, and Esme stood, accepting a glass from an anonymously pale hand. Then she shut the door firmly.

Not that it would stop anyone, but the message was clear. They were alone.

“It’s just us,” she said, returning to her seat. “No one will intrude.”

Esme gestured to the chair near her, an eyebrow raised inquiringly.

Bella nodded, standing stiffly.

Esme didn’t approach, but watched surreptitiously. Edward’s worried monologue had been long as he’d left, and silent to all but Bella’s ears. He’d been vague, but clear enough about his concern for her wellbeing.

After Bella had sat, Esme asked her, “do you want to talk about what happened?”

Bella flicked her gaze up at her, and then away again. “How much did you hear?”

“I know someone hurt you,” she answered in a quiet voice.

Bella swallowed, nodding. She didn’t add anything else.

“Mm,” Esme said, kindly. “I remember a bit of what that was like.”

Bella stared. “What?”

“My first husband,” she said, “was not so kind as my second.”

Bella shivered. “Oh,” she said, “I’m sorry,” not sure what else to say, not wanting to be impolite.

“It’s OK,” Esme said. “It was a long time ago. It seems that what happened to you, though, wasn’t.”

She reached over, and brushed her finger by the bruise visible at her wrist.

Bella pulled the hand into her stomach, covering it with her broken one.
“Scary, I know,” Esme went on, smiling sadly. “Letting people know. Or help.”

Bella nodded. A tiny acknowledgement.

Esme considered her next words, pulling her lips together before she let them out. “Were his words hurtful too?”

Bella didn’t want to, but felt more tears snaking their way down her cheeks. “Yes,” she croaked.

“Did he tell you it was your fault?”

Bella stared at Esme. How could she—?

“They all do, Bella.” She shook her head, as if she wished it wasn’t true. This time her hand took Bella’s gently in her own. “It wasn’t. Whatever he did.”

Bella’s heart sank.

Jacob hadn’t been all wrong. It made distinguishing between where the truth ended, and the wrongness began all that much harder.

Esme’s fingers were tracing the same pattern that Edward’s had.

She yanked her arm away, standing.

“I think I should just go home, Esme, before Charlie realizes I’m gone.”

Esme didn’t move, but sat, legs folded at the knees, hands resting quietly in her lap.

“And then what?” she asked.

“I just want to go home,” Bella reiterated.

“And let Charlie think that Edward’s hurting you?”

Bella stopped, turning slowly to face her. Their features wore the same shade of white.

“Edward said that Charlie suspected he’d hurt you. He had to tell us, Bella. I’m sorry. It implicates all of us.”

This made Bella’s heart race.

It would.

*Oh God. If that spread...if the wolves thought she was being hurt. If—*

She sat down again, imagining—imagining things she could barely put words to.

“We’ll stand by you, Bella, no matter what, but we’d rather do it for the truth.”

Edward had found that small piece of truth, and pulled, and the world felt like it was unravelling. All coming undone.

“Did this person tell you they loved you, too? While they hurt you?”

Bella’s fingers dug into her palms, her torso cringing.
Esme stood, coming alongside her, “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice so full of emotion, Bella couldn’t help but look. Esme’s face was drawn with sadness, and more confusingly, apology. “I dismissed it as the stress of the battle. I should have trusted my instincts—said something.”

“No—” Bella started, voice breaking.

“Yes,” Esme said, “I should have. I knew something was wrong.” She put up her hand when Bella went to speak again. “And it was more than just bruises he left you with.”

Already pale, the blood sliding down her cheeks left her face grey.

“No,” Esme went on, “Edward didn’t say anything. It just isn’t too hard to put it together.”

There was nowhere to hide from this. They all knew.

She just wanted to curl back up in her denial. Oblivion seemed preferable to this acute awareness.

“Edward will not do anything. Neither will anyone else.” These sounded less like reassurances, and more like commands. Bella hoped they were.

“How long have you been bleeding, Bella?” Esme asked. She had a pretty good idea, but wanted to hear it from Bella herself, to be sure.

“A few days,” Bella answered, not so certain herself. The nights and the days had begun to smudge together, fuzzy and indistinct.

“You shouldn’t be,” Esme said. “And I imagine you would feel much better, not. Having yourself seen to. Cared for.”

It was the last thing she wanted. To be seen. Touched.

The familiar shudder returned.

“Not that it’s easy, to trust someone, when you’ve been hurt,” she said, that small, sad smile still there.

“No,” Bella managed.

Esme waited before she asked her next question. “Does Edward know who?”

Bella’s throat felt tight. Achy. She nodded.

“He won’t do anything, Bella. No one will. Not unless you ask it. And even then…” her voice trailed off. There were greater concerns. Things beyond her.

It helped, to see that. To know this was a spec in the greater constellation of their life.

Her stomach lurched, considering how apart from that world she was still.

She shut off the thoughts that wanted having. That wanted to explore what this would mean for them. For her, for Edward.

“Do you think Carlisle could come and help you, Bella?” Esme asked, the words smooth. Rounded. Like the gentle river stones that bordered the garden.

Bella lost herself in those soothing images. The cool wetness of the garden there, so close to river.
She could hear it, just outside the window.

“Bella?”

“Hmm?”

“Can Carlisle examine you? Help you?”

She said “OK,” before she could change her mind. “Alone. No one else.”

“Of course,” Esme said, eyebrows pulled together. “Are you ready now?” She hadn’t stood yet, but she looked like she was ready to.

Anxious, Bella realized. She was anxious.

For me.

“OK,” she managed, then, the manners automatic, “thank you, Esme.”

Esme said nothing, but held that same tiny smile, standing, squeezing Bella’s hand lightly.

Bella watched her open the door, and the silent exchange pass between her and her husband. Their hands touching, so lightly. Tenderly. It was almost an affront. The memories she’d walled off were oozing out of the cracks, and it was ugly, holding these up against what stood in front of her.

Then Esme was gone.

And she was suddenly alone, with Carlisle.
In the living room, Emmett had Edward pinned down, knees to his chest. “She’s fine,” Emmett was telling him quietly. “And having you bust in there won’t help.”

“Get off!” Edward growled, body tensing under his brother’s hold.

Jasper stood over them both, arms folded almost nonchalantly, but by the bent of his thoughts, Edward knew he was there in case Emmett failed.

Their voices were carefully modulated so as to be inaudible to Bella.

“You gonna behave?” Emmett asked, lips a grim line.

Edward only snarled in reply.

“Then sit tight.” Emmett replied, shaking his head.

Lost in her own memories, Rose was pacing by the windows.

Upstairs, Carlisle was still restraining Bella, but for very different reasons, and with a fraction of the force.

“She,” he said softly, both his hands holding hers to her knees, “I will stop, and remove everything, but I need you to stop moving, so you don’t get hurt. OK?”

She nodded, panicked breathing too rapid still. “OK,” she pushed out. The entire word rattled with effort.

“I’m going to let go,” he said, releasing her hands.

She balled them, one more painfully than the other, at her sides, a half swallowed gargle in her throat, and Carlisle noted that she would need a cast, not a brace, if the fractures there were going to heal.

Then he removed the speculum as quickly, and gently as he could. He’d seen enough to know the general scope of treatment required.

She’d seemed as fine as she could be, given the circumstances, when he’d started.

He’d begun by asking to see her bruises, and then her ribs. She hadn’t blushed at that, rather becoming alarmingly pale, as he’d examined the purple patches on her sides.

“Bruised ribs,” he said, “are very painful.” Pulling out a tube of ointment, he began applying it to her arm, her wrist, and then her ribcage. “Have you taken any of the pain medication I gave you?”

She’d shaken her head. She’d been too afraid to. She already talked in her sleep. She didn’t trust herself not to say more than was safe.
He’d explained what the potential complications were, and she’d shaken her head again.

She needed to be in control.

When he’d told her he needed to complete an internal exam, she’d become that disturbingly grey colour again, but nodded silently.

“Feet together, and let your legs just relax.”

*As if that’s possible*, she thought.

She’d jumped when he put ointment on the bruise at her thigh.

He’d treated more than his fair share of women who shared Bella’s experience. But there was nothing routine, ever, in seeing their bodies painted with bruises, or the startled reactions to the most careful touch.

Nor was he prone to vengeance, but he was angry now, and mentally wrestled that beast back into its place.

He could help the person in front of him, he told himself. Nothing would be served by stewing in thoughts of revenge.

“OK,” he said, “you’ll feel the speculum now.”

Boy did she ever.

It was wet, and cold, and it stung. Then he’d expanded it, along with the pain inside.

Carlisle was very carefully working, trying to see as much as he could, touching as little as possible.

All those raw memories were hissing and spitting at her, angrily and violently demanding to be felt. Jacob was over her again, the hurt inside growing, the loss of control stealing her breath and making her ache.

“Get it out,” she’d said, and then more frantically, “get it out!” She’d used her hands to try to remove it herself.

“It’s out,” Carlisle said, putting a blanket over her.

She curled herself up and onto her side. Over the last few days, she’d discovered that when she pushed her knees far enough into her chest, the knot in her stomach lessened.

If he’d been human, Carlisle would have sighed. But he wasn’t, so he waited, balancing his unease with her emotional state with the knowledge that she was in no immediate physical danger.

“Do you want me to get Edward?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

Downstairs, Emmett looked at Edward, “you gonna listen to her?”

Edward’s resigned grimace was answer enough, and his brother released him, offering him a hand up.

“Do you know who?” Emmett asked, all pretense of calm vanished.
Edward nodded, then said, in a whisper audible to everyone but Bella, “Jacob Black.”

Carlisle had turned his back on Bella, purportedly putting things away, giving her time to compose herself.

Giving himself time.

“Sorry,” she said quietly.

Carlisle shook his head. “No need to be. Perfectly normal reaction.”

*Normal*, Bella thought. This didn’t feel normal.

“No trauma,” he said, “shows up differently for everyone.” Coming to sit beside her on the small stool, Carlisle went on quietly, “and you will feel it, for some time to come. It’s normal,” he said, “and important that you don’t try suppress it.”

She closed her eyes, trying not to think about what that would mean.

Carlisle waited before continuing. “You need some stitches, but I expect everything will heal cleanly.”

*Stitches*, she repeated to herself.

She didn’t think anyone would react well if she started screaming, so she didn’t.

But she really wanted to.

What disturbed her even more was the weary resignation that was sweeping over her. What did it matter if she was touched so intimately again?

*Did* it matter?

These sluggish ruminations were interrupted by Carlisle.

“Bella?” he asked.

Had he been talking, and she hadn’t noticed?

“Do you want to see a female physician for this?” he asked quietly.

She thought about it for a moment, and then shook her head, unwanted, and embarrassing tears perched, ready to fall. “No,” she said, breaking the word into two syllables. It would mean other people knowing. It would mean attention brought to things that should never have attention brought to them. The Cullens. The wolves. She shuddered, imagining the carnage, the return of the Volturi.

“Can you just...get it done. Here?” she asked.

“I can,” Carlisle said, coolly observing the tremble in her hands, the rapidly rising heart rate.

“Will it hurt?” she asked.

“No,” Carlisle said, “I’ll numb everything before start.”

*Needles*, she thought. More shivering.

After a moment, she nodded, as if to herself. “OK. Can you—can you just, get it over with? Now?”
Carlisle imagined himself crushing the bones he’d helped set on Jacob Black. His face showed nothing.

“Of course,” he said instead. Pausing, he asked, “do you want someone to come sit with you? Esme, perhaps?”

“No,” she said. She’d suffered what Jacob had done alone, and she would endure this alone too. “No,” she said again, reassuring herself.

He nodded, and proficient clinician he was, assembled his tools. Before he had her move, he pulled out a small vial of pills from the cabinet. He pretended to read the information on the bottle, considering the potential side effects of the medication.

“I’d like you to take one of these,” he said, holding it out to her so she could read the label for herself.

“Diazepam?” she asked, eyebrows pulled together in questioning.

“A mild sedative,” he answered

“Why?”

“Because you’re having difficulty keeping yourself calm, and I don’t want you to hurt yourself while I’m working,” he said gently. It had been close before. He didn’t want her to start bleeding afresh, not with a house full of vampires already on edge.

Her fingers weren’t quite cooperating. Trying to open the bottle, she fumbled it, Carlisle catching it neatly. He opened it and pressed one of the triangular pills into her palm. “Just hold it under your tongue,” he said.

She did as instructed, and after a few minutes, felt the room begin to wobble.

“Whoa,” she said, trying to focus, “should I feel—?”

“Woozy?” Carlisle asked, smiling a bit, “yes, a little. How do you feel otherwise?”

“Strangely...calm. Is that...Jasper?”

“No,” he said, still smiling, “that means its working. Ready?” he asked.

She nodded, feeling the room nod with her.

It was easier this time. Not easy, but easier.

His touch, and the tug of the sutures brought more than sensation, though, and bits of memories were snagged up that she would have preferred to leave in the safe space of didn’t happen.

The intricate work in such intimate space was leaving no room for such evasion.

Happened. Definitely happened, her body told her.

“Almost done,” Carlisle said, feeling her body tense.

And then, he was. She put the back of her hand to her mouth, stifling a sound whose source she didn’t want to own.
He’d covered her with a blanket again. “Don’t sit up, just yet,” he said quietly. “I think Rose would like to help you get dressed.”

Rose?

The question must have shown on her face.

Carlisle’s small smile was sad, “yes,” he said. “I’ll let her explain.”

Rose and Carlisle crossed paths, he exiting, she entering with a bundle under her arm.

Bella reached for it, not feeling the need for the help, blushing that they thought she couldn’t get her own clothes on.

Then she sat up, and the room spun uncooperatively.

Rose waited for Bella to ask for the help she so clearly needed.

“OK,” she said, trying to make the table stop moving, “if you pass me those, I think I can handle this.”

“Sure,” Rose said, voice full of doubt, but handed over the clothes. She averted her eyes, slightly, listening to Bella struggle with which way was up, and right side out for the t-shirt.

When Bella finally huffed out an exasperated breath, Rose pretended to clear her throat.

Bella was beet red now. “OK, fine, I could use some help. Would you?”

Rose said nothing, but slipped the shirt over her head, not asking if she needed help with the rest of the clothing. Just efficiently putting things on.

When she moved the sheet aside to help Bella slide up the underwear, Bella made a startled gargle, the cold pad between her legs a shock.

“Frozen,” Rose said evenly. “Good for swelling.”

Bella decided she didn’t need to know.

“Um, thanks,” she opted for, instead.

When she was dressed, Rose sighed, mumbling “give us a minute,” to Edward, who was hovering outside the door.

“Maybe lay back down,” Rose said, watching Bella sway, sitting on the table.

Still nervous about Rose’s unexplained presence, Bella complied, watching her as closely as the haze of her mind would allow.

“Rose,” she said, strangely lucid and uninhibited by the medication, “you don’t like me.”

“Really?” Rose answered her, smiling at this unusual frankness.

“No,” Bella said. “So why are you here?”

Rosalie’s smirk stayed on her face. “I wouldn’t say that,” she said, “more your decisions I disagree with. As for this,” she went on, taking in Bella, and the room, with her gaze, “I never needed this
treatment. I was too far gone. That’s why Carlisle changed me.”

Bella looked at her, shock and horror walking all over her face. “You—”

“Was raped. By several men. Violently. Yes.” She answered. “One of them was my fiancé.”

She let that sink in, watching Bella’s face.

“I have some insight as to how you’re feeling, Bella,” she added, her voice softer by several degrees.

Bella could imagine, but decided she didn’t want to.

There was a swell of tears, knowing someone she knew had experienced this.

Rosalie made an exasperated sound in her throat. “Your fiancé, however” she said, “is ready to break down the door. Girl time’s over, I guess,” she said, as the door did open, and Edward entered.

He only had eyes for Bella, ignoring his sister. He took Bella’s hand, brushing his thumb over her fingers. “Do you want to go lay down in my room?” he asked.

“Thank you, Rose,” Bella mumbled, watching her leave, nodding to Edward.

He lifted her effortlessly, and walked at a human pace, letting Bella’s eyes adjust to the shifting scenery, as he moved her upstairs.

When he set her on the bed, he leaned down to kiss her forehead, and she started, hands out at his shoulders, trying to push him back.

Closing her eyes, she reminded herself of all the things that were not real. Of where she was. Of the smell that told her it wasn’t Jacob.

Just Edward, she told herself. You’re safe.

When she opened them again, he stood two steps back from the bed, posture rigid, and face stricken.

“Sorry,” he said, “I didn’t—”

“I know,” she answered him, trying to keep her hands relaxed. “Sorry—”

“No!” he said, too loudly, and she started again, bringing her knees up. He looked immediately apologetic, searching the floor with his eyes. “No,” he said more softly, “don’t apologize. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“OK,” she whispered, frightened by this outburst.

She didn’t feel like there was nothing to apologize for.

She had everything to apologize for.

She’d insisted on seeing Jacob. Insisted that he was trustworthy. Put herself in his hands, literally, when she knew it wasn’t safe. And now it was all just a source of guilt and grief for the man she loved.
She was finally asleep.

This was normally his most peaceful time, watching her rest. Seeing her body slip into that place he couldn’t follow, her dreams as silent as her thoughts. Beautiful mysteries he longed to untangle. Things he loved to later be told.

Not tonight, though.

He was all tangled up in his own guilt.

He’d handed her over to the creature. Against his own instincts, he’d literally driven her to meet him.

Let him crawl into a sleeping bag with her.

And the day before the battle. He cringed, thinking of it. He hadn’t even asked her yet, what had happened then.

Or the morning of the battle.

He was too afraid to.

Jacob’s thoughts were always loud. Usually obnoxious. He’d dismissed so much of what he’d seen and heard as fantasy.

It was his own special torture now, trying to see if he could now discern the difference between them.

Tonight though, he’d avoided Carlisle’s thoughts, as he’d treated Bella, trying to afford her the little privacy he could. But it was difficult.

Stitches.

She’d needed stitches.

She was so brave. Always. He didn’t want to imagine her being brave with that.

He looked at her sleeping form. So small, bones fine. Bird-like, Emmett liked to think. While he made jokes about it in his head—perpetually trying to annoy Edward—the undercurrent of his thoughts was genuine. She reminded him of the little Tennessee finches his cat tried to catch, but never could.

No. She’d been prey for another creature, hadn’t she? the little voice reminded him.

The distinct flavour of Rose’s opinions was growing stronger, singling itself out by proximity, from the others in the house.

He said a curse word silently in his head.

I’m not here to fight. Her soundless words were soft, but clear. And you shouldn’t be blaming yourself either.

Was it so obvious? He wondered.
“You can’t change her,” Rose said, breaking his focus. She kept her voice low, beneath the threshold of human hearing. “Not now.”

Edward hadn’t moved. He was still seated, eyes fixed firmly on Bella. She shifted slightly in the bed, murmuring something he couldn’t catch. Then she whimpered.

She’d refused the pain medication for the night, but promised she would try it in the morning, not trusting her uneasy stomach.

Should he wake her? He wondered. If she was hurting—

“Let her sleep,” Rose said, beside him. “At least she can escape it then.”

The parallels Rose was silently drawing disturbed him. But he couldn’t argue that they weren’t warranted.

“Don’t change her,” she whispered. “Please.”

It was so earnest, he could feel it slicing into his head.

“I hear you,” he said, hands in his hair.

She was twisting her fists together. She did that when she was lost in her only human memories.

“Please Rose,” he asked. “Not today. I can’t—”

“Sorry,” she said, trying to move her mind into something else. “I just—I don’t want this for her, Edward. She needs time. She can’t—it will consume her,” she said.

“I know,” he said, this time with less patience.

She looked at him. No, you don’t. You haven’t got a fucking clue.

He opened his mouth to protest that he’d heard enough of her thoughts.

“No,” she repeated. “You don’t.” Then she looked at Bella, and back at him. “I will do whatever I can to help her. To help you. But you mustn’t change her. Not now.”

She glared at him. “Promise me.”

He sighed.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s her choice, Rosalie. Not mine. But speak to her. Convince her.”

Rose’s mouth twisted in dissatisfaction.

“Alright,” she said.

After a moment, he said, “night,” to her.

She blew a breath out of her nose, finding this old human habit funny. She’d been dismissed, she knew. “Night,” she said back to him.

The night stumbled forward, marked by his fits of guilt, and the indecipherable mumblings of Bella’s sleep.
And now?

Edward was still sitting by the bed, unmoved for all the hours that had passed, waiting for Bella to wake.

“Morning,” he murmured, hearing her eyes open.

She blinked a few times, sifting through the previous night’s memories. “Morning,” she finally said, sitting up slowly.

He wanted to help her. The pull of her muscles was all wrong. They were tight and anxious when they should have been waking slowly. Even her breathing was off. They’d have to watch that, he realized. She’d been fighting a cold, and he knew well enough the risks that sore ribs could present, mixed with that.

Esme had come up with a tray of food a few minutes before. Bella’s circadian rhythms were easy enough for the rest of them to hear.

He had the vial of pills in his hand.

She looked over at the rattle, grimacing a little. Then she caught sight of the tray, and it turned into a frown.

“I’m not sick,” she said, blushing.

“No,” he said, “not yet. But you’ve had stitches. Best to stay put as much as you can today.”

He handed her two of the pills, which she took with a sigh, swallowing them, making a face.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, almost with a sigh.

“Prefer me drugged, huh?” she smiled.

He chuckled, his own smile wide, hearing her sense of humour alive and well.

“Esme brought you breakfast,” he said, hoping he could get her to eat, riding the coattails of this good humour.

She cocked an eyebrow, leaning over, and then laughed. “Impressive,” she said, picking up one of the pop-tarts. “Nutritious, too.”

“Don’t get used to it,” he said, grimacing a little. It bothered him to no end that she considered this appropriate nourishment, but he wouldn’t badger her about it today.

When she’d eaten, she pulled back the covers, moving to get out of bed.

“Um,” she said, seeing him going to help her. “I think I can go to the bathroom by myself.”

“Humour me,” he said, slipping his arm around her.

Standing, and taking a step, she stopped suddenly. “Oh,” she said, not quite able to stop the sound. “What?” Edward asked.
She shook her head.

He clamped his lips together. He’d promised himself that he wouldn’t summon Carlisle. Not after his idiotic decision last night.

“Bella,” he said, tone full of worry and warning.

“Just a new sensation,” she said, clearing her throat. A very unpleasant, wrong sensation, in a very private place.

“I’m OK,” she insisted, “and I’d really like to be able to pee alone. I promise to let you worry all over me when I come back.”

He didn’t even think about not kissing her, just leaned in and kissed the top of her head, and then mentally, reeled. What was he doing?

She felt it. “It’s OK,” she said, “we’re still us.” She wanted to ask, “right?”, but didn’t. She was too nervous to.

“Of course,” he said, “always.”

She nodded, slipping into the ensuite, closing the door behind her.

He made himself walk away, listening to her sneeze, and then cough. He didn’t miss the pained tightening he could hear her make, as the air pushed out of her lungs.

Carlisle made his thoughts audible, *I’ll check her before I go to work*.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

Bella emerged from the bathroom, changed into the clothes that had been left for her there.

“Thanks,” she said, a little uncertainly, gesturing to them.

“You’re welcome!” Alice called, from somewhere in the house.

Bella smiled. “Total opportunist,” she called back, breaking off into another cough.

Edward was practically prancing with worry. “Come back to bed,” he said, “or maybe you’d prefer to lay down on the couch?”

The thought of facing all the Cullens felt daunting. “Um, here’s fine,” she said.

Edward slid in beside her, a careful arm around her. He’d waited to ask, the question rattling around in his anxiety. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked. “Why did you put yourself through that alone?”

She swallowed, breathing suddenly shakier than it should be.

He wanted to spare her all this, but he needed to know.

“The battle,” she whispered. “The wolves—it would’ve jeopardized the alliance. I couldn’t—what if you’d gotten into a fight with them, or someone had gotten hurt?” Her voice rose with each word, high and becoming even shakier.

Edward nodded, still holding her, trying to offer comfort with the soft squeeze of his hands. “What happened,” he asked, “when Jacob took you up the mountain?”
Her sudden stiffening told him something had.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. She wouldn’t torture him with the things that didn’t matter.

“Bella,” he said, putting his lips in his hair, “no more lies. If you don’t want to say, that’s fine, but...”

She swallowed nervously, nodding. He hadn’t run off, or done anything foolish. Not yet. Would he still restrain himself, if he knew, in more detail, what Jacob had done?

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she said nervously.

He really couldn’t help himself, moving his arms to curve around her, “please forgive me for saying this, but I need to be honest with you.” He paused before continuing. “It would help me, to know, rather than imagining the worst.”

“You are good at that,” she said, giving him a half smile, then feeling the tears stinging in the corners of her eyes.

“Very,” he agreed, his sad smile matching hers.

“How much do you want to know?” she asked.

“Everything,” he said.

Of course he did.

*He told me he should have been more gentle when he raped me, and that he really should have said sorry for hurting me right after he did. Not that he used those words. Then I’m pretty sure he told me I was still lying to myself about how i wanted it.* “He said he was sorry he hurt me,” she mumbled.

Edward nodded every so slightly, wanting to encourage her to speak.

*He forced his tongue into my mouth, holding my head with his hands so I couldn’t move, and made me feel like I was going to vomit.* “He kissed me.”

“He asked me when I was going to tell you. Why I hadn’t told you already. Told me he loved me.”

Sitting behind her, Edward winced

“Did anything else happen?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“And in the morning?”

“Can we stop, please?” she asked. “I don’t—I really don’t want to talk about this, Edward.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I love you so much. I’m so sorry this has happened to you. That I let this—”

“You let?” she asked, turning to fully face him. “How does that figure?”

“It’s my job to protect you, Bella. I put you in his hands. Literally, I—”

“Did as I asked,” she said quietly. “And I don’t want you to stop doing that. And right now, I’d really like to stop talking about this.”

He ground his teeth together, biting back the words he wanted to say, swallowing them.
Bitter. It was oh so bitter.

Carlisle was knocking though, loud enough for Bella to hear its soft sound.

“It’s Carlisle,” Edward explained, “he wants to see you before he leaves for work.”

“Right,” Bella said, paling a little.

Carlisle entered, a small case in his hand. “Hi Bella,” he said, and looking at Edward added, “I’ll call when I’m done.”

Edward’s gaze met Bella’s, eyebrows up, questioning.

“It’s OK,” she said, trying to smile.

This alarmed Edward even more.

Quietly, Carlisle turned, and pretending to look in the case, spoke to Edward, so only he could hear. “Everyone else has left. I’d like her to have privacy for this, Edward. I’m sure you do too. I won’t leave until you’ve returned.”

Hiding the sigh he wanted to give, Edward kissed Bella gently on the top of her head, breathing in deeply, not moving until he felt her arms loosen around him.

“See you soon,” he said.

Carlisle noted the uptick in her heart rate, having Edward leave, and wondered if she’d guessed why he’d asked him to.

He’d only asked the most basic questions the night before, keeping them circumspectly tied to her body’s present needs.

These questions would pick at things she might not have yet given thought to.

“How’re your ribs feeling?” he asked, sitting on the side of the bed, pulling out a stethoscope.

Her brow furrowed, seeing it. “Thought that was purely for show,” she murmured.

“It is,” he said, “most of the time, but it is handy for hearing lung sounds. May I?” he asked, gesturing to her back.

“Sure,” she said, braiding her fingers together nervously, trying not to start at the cold touch of the metal.

“So far so good,” he said, “but I want you to work on taking deep breaths at least three times a day—more if you can stand it.”

“Sure,” she said.

“How’re the stitches feeling?” he asked.

She really hoped he didn’t want to check those.

“Fine,” she said, too quickly.

Carlisle considered her answer for a bit. “They might feel strange, or you might get the odd
unpleasant sensation, and that’s normal, but if you get any pain, let me know, OK?”

She nodded, a relieved breath let out slowly.

“I just need to ask a few more questions,” he said, still in his soft voice. “The assault happened Friday, yes?”

Bella nodded, looking away nervously towards the floor.

“When was the first day of your last menstrual period?”

She looked at his face, mouth opening, stomach revolting, and then bolted, awkwardly, for the bathroom.

Carlisle knew better than to follow too close, waiting a few steps from the door. When she came back out, a shaky, damp hand at her mouth, he gave her a quiet, “sorry, I know this upsetting.”

She could only nod, sitting back down.

“Do you know the date?”

“Yes,” she said as calmly as possible, “about two weeks ago.”

“Was there any birth control used during the attack?”

The curtain of her hair rustled, as her head moved back and forth.

“It’s too late for emergency birth control, isn’t it?” she asked.

“It is,” he said. “But there are other early methods available, if there is a pregnancy.”

No wonder he’d asked Edward to leave.

“I’d also like to cast your hand,” he said, touching the hand in question lightly.

Bella didn’t need to ask why. It hadn’t gotten better, and the dull ache it had settled had become fiery and sharp again.

He was pulling things from the case he’d brought in, quietly setting it, when he spoke again. “I also wanted to ask if you had any questions, Bella, about anything.”

She did, and Carlisle could see, from the taut workings of her face, that she was searching for words for the asking of them.

After a minute, she said, “Is what happened—the damage,” she hurried out, “is that normal?”

Carlisle felt the familiar despair, at hearing this question. It wasn’t the first time. That anything should be normal about rape—made his own insides twist. It was better now, in this century, in this place, but only just.

“Yes,” he said, avoiding any qualifying statements that would complicate the response.

“It’s not because he’s a werewolf, then?” Bella asked, slowly.

“No,” Carlisle said, and wondered at her questions. “Is there something else you’re wondering?”

She nodded, a small blush creeping up her cheeks as her jaw clenched. She said the next words very
quietly. “I was wondering if that was why Edward didn’t...want to—,”

Carlisle’s horrified “no!” was louder than it should have been. “No,” he said more quietly. “He
would never do that to you.” He returned his attention to her hand, wrapping the final pieces of the
casting material in place.

“OK,” she said, accepting this with some relief.

After a moment, Carlisle spoke again, “is there anything else you’re wondering about?”

Bella was working up to her next question. “Is there anything else I need to know?” she asked.

Carlisle applied the last layer, pressing it on carefully, waiting for it to set. “You’ve experienced a
traumatic event, Bella. Be kind to yourself. Expect it to take time to be well—physically, and
mentally.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Anything else?”

“No,” Carlisle said, standing, putting his supplies away, “but I want to see you in about a week to
take the stitches out, and in another week for a pregnancy test.”

She swallowed, breathing suddenly shallow, and rapid.

“Everything will be alright, Bella,” he added gently, his cold hand over her free warm one.

She nodded, a half smile on her lips, wishing she could believe him.
A/N for May 29, 2018: I'm actually cringing as I post this. I'm quite sure you'll see why at the end. Hopefully, we can still all be friends.

The cold she’d come home with hadn’t gotten any better, and when Charlie woke her up on a rare, sunny Wednesday—rare even for early July, Bella was groggy and exhausted.

“Come on,” he said, “Billy’s invited us over for lunch.”

Billy.

“Oh,” she said, clearing her throat, making her voice solidly level, “I’m not really up for it, Dad. Think I’ll take a pass on this.”

Charlie sat down on the edge of her bed, a slight frown starting just between his eyebrows. “I think you can handle eating,” he said gently. “We won’t be there long.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think anyone wants my cold, Dad.”

“Probably not, but they’d like your company,” he countered. “You get dressed. I’ll meet you downstairs in a bit.”

Bella bit her lip, watching him leave. He had that look about him. The kind that let her know he meant business. He wouldn't give up on this easily.

As she was coming down the stairs, she could hear him on the phone, “maybe next time, Alice,” he was saying, and hanging up.

A shiver went down her spine.

Alice had been her backup plan, in case he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Good, you’re ready. Let’s go,” Charlie said. He had his keys in his hand, and a paper bag on the table that smelled of freshly purchased baked goods. She peered over it, a worried clench in her belly. He’d prepared. Gone shopping.

He was very determined.

“Dad,” Bella said, using her best, most I’m-eighteen-and-an-adult voice, “I’m not going. Um...give everyone my best.”

Charlie stood, keys dangling, half-moving towards the door, then turned to face her.

“Bella,” he said, voice quiet, and tone too serious to match his casual stance. “I’m going to be honest, I’m really disappointed with you. Embarrassed, even.”

Bella stared, stomach sinking.

“Jake was there for you when you were barely yourself. Got you through some pretty tough stuff, and now, he’s really badly hurt. And you haven’t even gone seen him.” He looked at her, gauging
her reaction, the pale face, the nervous tremble she thought she was hiding.

He grimaced, knowing what was really behind this.

“You’re a better person than you’re acting right now. Get yourself together, go see him.”

Bella was scrambling for something that was safe to tell him.


“Edward,” he said. “Kinda obvious.” He was turning a dangerous shade of pink. It would be red soon. Then she was really in for it.

“No,” she shook her head, sitting down at the table, “it’s not.”

Charlie snorted.

“Jake kissed me, Dad,” she huffed out. This was true. It was on the dangerous edge of what else was true, but she could say it without losing control. “I told him to stop, and he wouldn’t.”

He couldn’t possibly argue with this.

But the smile that blossomed on his face made all the blood drain from hers. “Good for him,” he chuckled. “Edward could use some... healthy competition.”

She just stared.

The emphasis on healthy was unmistakable.

“Let’s go,” he said, “Jake could use a friend.”

“I punched him, Dad,” Bella continued, shaking, but not moving. She held up her now casted hand to illustrate her point.

He had taken several steps towards the door. “Should we go see if he wants to press charges then?” he quipped, putting on his shoes.

She blinked, and felt the mortification of tears, ready to fall. God, not now, she thought.

He looked at her, and as much as he wanted to, couldn’t ignore her anger, or his own, rising up to meet it. That bastard, Charlie thought. He’d done more than hurt her. He’d completely derailed her closest friendships too. When was the last time she saw a friend? Beyond the Cullens? Or Jake? Not that she saw him much. Frickin’ control freak.

He had finished tying his shoes, and stood, not wanting to give credence to prolonging this exchange.

“We’re going. You don’t have to do more than show up, but we’re going. I don’t care if Edward doesn’t like it. He isn’t in charge of your life.”

He held the door open for her, gesturing to her to go ahead of him.

“You think this is about Edward,” she said, the statement almost a question.

Charlie muttered something obscene under his breath.
This was not the way he’d wanted to have this conversation.

He put his keys down, closing the door, and sitting down.

He pointed wearily to the chair across from him. Bella joined him, but warily.

“I saw the bruises on your arms,” Charlie said.

Bella’s stomach twisted in on itself. Edward had warned her. She just hadn’t thought he’d bring it up. Not yet. Not this way.

“It wasn’t Edward, Dad,” she said, jaw tight, face flushing angrily.

*God, he’s got her so wound up she’s even lying for him.* It was so clear on her face, the strain, and the stress.

His hand was a tight fist on the table.

“Then who?” he asked. “Hmm? Who else do you even see?”

She closed her eyes, feeling shaky. “Jake, Dad. It was Jacob.” She said it so softly, he could hear the shame wafting off of her.

Charlie had seen it too many times. Women, terrified of the men they depended on for any number of things, so much so that they blamed anyone but. Best friends. Brothers. Fathers. He’d seen it all.

He wasn’t letting Jacob be thrown that way.

“No!” he said, and he punctuated this with his fist, thumping into the table. “You are NOT going to lie for the man that beats you! Jake would never hurt you, and you know it!”

Bella was stunned. She could barely breathe.

He didn’t believe her.

“’Scuse me,” she said, standing, going to walk back to her room, deathly pale, now nauseated.

“No!” Charlie said, and stood to block her. “You want to make accusations like that, then you stand by them, and you make them to his face! Let’s go.”

This time, he wouldn’t be refused. “In the car. Now,” he said, feet planted wide.

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“I’m not taking no for an answer this time, Bella. Now.” He’d put his hand on her shoulder, and was using the leverage of his height, and weight to move her out of the house.

“No,” she said again, pulling her shoulder away from him.

He did it so quickly, that she found herself breathless, good arm pinned behind her back, face down on the table.

His voice shook with feeling: grief, anger, and a hopeless rage he wouldn’t wish on anyone. “I’m sorry, Bella. No. You’re going. Either in the back of the car, or the front. I am not NOT going to let my daughter protect the man who’s hurting her.”
Bella said nothing, trying to grapple with her own grief.

He didn’t believe her.

She couldn’t say that line enough to make it believable to herself.

He hated Edward that much, that he would rather think he was hurting her, than believe Jacob could.

She felt an extraordinary pang of sympathy for him.

She could hardly believe it herself.

“Front, or back?” he growled, not letting go.

Fine, she thought, resolving herself, stuffing her many griefs away.

“Back,” she said.

And so it was, Charlie frog-marched her from the house, anger waning, nerves trilling. He was so over the line, he wasn’t sure what to do next.

Get your shit together, he told himself. If she has to face the lie she’s telling, maybe she’ll be able to say what’s really going on.

When he opened the back door of the cruiser, she didn’t fight him, but got in. He couldn’t miss her tremble now.

She said nothing on the drive there, and neither did Charlie.

By the time they arrived, she was pale, looking small and shaky.

Charlie felt exactly the same, wondering what the hell he was doing, and if it was all going to blow up in his face. He frowned, opening the door, and Bella got out without comment.

“Well you two look terrible,” Billy said, all smiles when he saw them. “Good to see you, Bella,” he said, pulling her into a hug. “Jake’s missed you.”

“Hey,” she said quietly.

“He can’t really walk well, without help,” he said, “maybe you want to take him out for a bit?” he asked, gesturing to his wheelchair.

Bella knew, from what Carlisle had said, that he would be well enough by now, and her stricken face confused Billy.

“Don’t worry, he won’t knock you over or anything,” he said, slapping her on the back. This sent her stumbling in the direction of Jacob’s room. She stopped, just short of it, to see Jacob coming out, one leg, and one arm secured in braces, the other arm holding a crutch.

“Hey,” he said, “you took long enough to visit.”

She nodded, trying not to panic.

Nothing will happen, she told herself, not with Billy here. Or Charlie.

Charlie had sidled up beside her.
“Lookin’ dangerous, Jake,” he said, raising an eyebrow meaningfully at Bella.

“Thanks Charlie,” he grinned back, not taking his eyes off of Bella.

Charlie paused a minute, eyeing them both, “you gonna go for a walk?” he asked. “Get some air?”

“That’d be great,” Jake said, “been pretty cooped up.”

“There ya go, Bella. Be a friend. Take him for a walk.” Then he patted her on the back, and walked away.

“Yeah, take your invalid friend out for a bit,” he winked, still grinning at Bella. “Like walkin’ a dog.”

He held out his arm, noting the tremble in hers as they linked theirs together.

When they were down the stairs, Bella mumbled, “not too far. I don’t think I’ll be much help if you do fall.”

“Don’t worry,” he whispered back, “all for show. Come on.” And then, he was turning her slowly, steering her in the direction of the woods that banked the rear of the property. He kept his pace appropriately slow, and it took them some time to reach the treeline.

Testing his grip, Bella tried moving her arm away, but he kept it locked in place. “What?” he quipped, “you gonna leave the invalid to fend for himself?”

She said nothing, accepting she couldn’t move away, feeling like she was being led to her execution.

“He wasn’t too hard on you, was he?” Jacob asked. “After I left?”

Her lip trembled, answering him. “No,” she said.

“Good,” Jacob breathed out. “I was kinda worried.”

Bella’s jaw felt glued shut.

When they reached the tree line’s deep shade, Jacob discarded all pretense of injury, wrapping his arm around her back, and pulling her into a kiss. “God I’ve missed you,” he said. His lips were insistent, pushing at the stubborn clench of her mouth, tongue probing for entrance. When she tried to wrench backwards, he tangled his fingers tightly in her hair, not letting her move.

“Stop!” she said to his lips, trying to twist her face away. Catching him unawares, she used her knee to reinforce the message.

It lacked the result she’d hoped for, and his hands were just as tight on her arm, keeping her from moving back.

“Why?” he hissed, partly angry, but mostly trying to keep his voice down from Charlie and Billy hearing, “why do you keep fighting it?”

Her squirming was useless. He had her pressed to him, showing just how little effect her knee had had. “Your reaction is just as obvious,” he said, feeling her resistance “Your body knows what it wants, even if your head doesn’t.”

“I don’t want to be with you, Jake, and I didn’t before!” she hissed, still trying to move away from him. His grip remained insistent.
“Are you afraid to tell him?” he asked.

“Tell him WHAT?” she spat out, “That you raped me?”

His eyebrows lifted, and he stared for a moment. He still didn’t let go. “That’s the way you’re spinnin’ it, huh?” He blew out a surprised breath. “We made love, Bella,” he said very quietly, “and I get that you’re afraid to tell him, but telling him that won’t exactly uncomplicate your life.”

She was angry now, shaking under his grip. “You don’t have to hold people down to make love to them, Jacob. That’s when it becomes rape.”

His eyebrows moved higher, and he brought his face closer to hers, speaking softly, “rapists don’t usually take their victims to the hospital, where they have every opportunity to tell someone what happened. And rape victims don’t usually put themselves in the hands of their rapists, or sleep beside them, either. Or come to visit, either.” He stopped, swallowing. “They have fucked with your head so much, you can barely even see it.”

“Bella, Jake!” Charlie’s distant voice called, “Lunch’s ready!”

Thank God, she thought, feeling Jake’s hands loosen. Before she could move away, though, he pulled her back to him, his hand digging into her hip. “Why don’t I make telling him easier for you?” he said, grinning suddenly, and then put his lips to the jointure of her neck and shoulder in a powerful kiss that became a painful suck, raising the flesh to a welt.

He held her good hand in his, freshening the bruise there, making her eyes water.

“There,” he said, “now you have a conversation starter your leech won’t be able to miss.”

Then he turned around, as if nothing had happened, holding out his arm for her to take again. “Don’t want Charlie getting suspicious, hmm?”

She followed numbly, trying to tug up her shirt to hide the mark he’d left.

Charlie was sitting by Billy at the table when they came in.

Bella’s face, much as she tried to mask her feeling, was paler than pale, and Charlie’s lips pulled down slightly, listening to her numbed silence.

She made only the most essential noises during lunch, artfully picking apart the food on her plate.

“Not feeling well, Bella?” Billy asked, unaccustomed to her taciturn behaviour.

“No,” she said, “bad cold.”

Charlie, pursued by a wisdom he needed better possession of, didn’t prolong their time together. The house was soon full of their subdued farewells.

“Don’t be a stranger, Bells,” Jake called.

She didn’t respond.

Bella sat in the front on the way home, and when they pulled into the driveway, got out without a word to her father, walking inside, and going straight to her room. He waited nervously, downstairs, listening to the shuffling sounds he could hear through the floor.

When she emerged about an hour later, it was announced by the thunk of her duffel bag bumping
down the stairs.

“Bella—” he called, his shoulders falling, “come on, don’t you think this is a bit much?"

She looked at him, wishing she didn’t want to cry.

“I told you that someone was hurting me, and you shoved me in the back of your car—your police car, and made me go see him. I don’t think there’s anything left to say.”

He might have said something. In fact, she was pretty sure he had, but her ears felt like they were ringing, and the sun was too bright, as she took her bags out to her truck.

When she felt Charlie’s hand on her back, she jolted away, hands up, ready to defend herself.
He backed away, his own face pale with worry, and a well deserved fear.

He’d fucked up royally. That much was clear now.

And she was leaving.

When she reached the shadowed crunch of the Cullens’ driveway, Edward was there, suddenly, and she stopped the truck, exhausted, and relieved.

There weren’t words, just tears from her, as he opened the door, turning off the ignition, holding her, murmuring desperate “I’m sorry,“ over and over and over again.
A/N 2018-05-30: Some of you have asked if this story is done. Um, no. Not by far! So much more to come. I never leave stories unfinished.

Finally, thanks for commenting folks - I consider your words payment in kind for the writing, which I do for free :-)

Edward had not questioned her arrival, but taken her directly to his room, burying—at least temporarily—his own concerns about the weal he could see forming on her shoulder, and the rasp of her breathing. When her tears had finally exhausted themselves, along with his repeated and horrified apologies, he asked her softly, “what happened?”

He would have been there, himself, all caution thrown to the wind, if his family hadn’t intervened.

It had been Jasper and Emmett that had tackled him, their trail a fifteen foot running divet in the forest floor.

He’d already been penned in by the sunlight, but all sense had gone when he’d seen what Alice had: Charlie, physically forcing her to go see Jacob Black. He’d been willing to risk exposure, given the danger he imagined, but it had been Carlisle, using all his authority and persuasion, reminding him of the potential consequences to Bella, that made him stop.

When she told him, in fits and starts, he made himself not scream for Carlisle, to find out what fresh physical damage the dog had wrought. These he could see tended to. Her other hurts remained elusive to his help.

“I can’t believe he did that,” she said again, “I thought my dad would believe me. I just can’t—” and the lump at her throat stopped the words again.

When she opened her mouth again, she asked, in a very uncertain voice, “I packed my things, they’re in the truck—can I stay?”

He had her in his arms, wrapped in a blanket against his temperature. He breathed out, closing his eyes, “this is your home, of course you’ll stay.”

Her answering exhale showed him just how tenuous she’d been feeling. She’d been worried that she might not be welcome.

“All that is mine is yours, Bella. Everything.”

She could only nod.

The strain of the day was evident, and Edward wasn’t surprised to feel her start to fall asleep, reluctantly slipping her onto the bed, and away from the chill of his own form.

*I’ll wait with her*, Esme thought, when he emerged.

He nodded in thanks, following the intentions of the others to the dining room, where they sat, waiting for him.
There were various states of anger and disbelief, lining the space.

*Please tell me I didn’t hear that right*, Emmett asked. *He shoved her in the back of his cruiser?*

*And he didn’t believe her*, Rose was thinking.

Alice’s thoughts were sadder, a plaintiff and mournful Charlie resonating in her mind, all the good she’d seen of him, smacking up against what she’d heard Bella say. Of what she’d seen presciently.

Carlisle was full of a deeper grief. He’d called Charlie friend, and this betrayal of his daughter cut deeper than he wanted to say aloud.

Jasper sat uneasily, feeling all these things, and his own anger. Charlie’d laid hands on his own daughter, and then forced her to see the man...he just couldn’t think about it. He was afraid of what he’d do.

“You won’t,” Alice said, “I know you won’t. It would hurt Bella too much.”

“She’ll stay with us,” Carlisle said. “She’s family now, and we’ll behave accordingly. We’ll need to be much more careful about hunting,” he added practically, “and we need to respect what Bella wants to do with her father.” He looked meaningfully around the table. “And Jacob Black. No one will force her hand, or take matters into their own. Can we agree to this?”

There were nods around the table, some more begrudging than others.

“One of us stays with Bella at all times,” Edward said. “I don’t trust either of them not to try to physically compel her again.”

The nods to this were more agreeable.

“Long term,” Carlisle said, “we need to make other plans.”

Rose looked pleadingly at Edward, and he nodded, eyebrows pinched together in worry.

Carlisle didn’t miss the exchange. “We can’t wait indefinitely,” he said softly, “they’ll come check, and we can’t be found wanting on that front again.”

“No,” Edward said. They couldn’t. There were no second chances. Not with the Volturi. “But we can give her some time. Alice—is there anything you see?” Edward asked.

She shook her head for the benefit of the others there. “Nothing, now. But it’s in Aro’s thoughts to send someone to check.” She looked apologetic, saying this.

Edward gave her a small, and what he hoped was a slightly reassuring smile.

The Volturi felt like a very distant worry at the present.

His more pressing one was upstairs, sleeping, not so soundly.

He flicked his eyes in her direction, hearing her cough.

Rosalie’s thoughts were coming to a boil. “Can we talk about what no one seems to want to mention?” she asked.

Carlisle gestured for her to continue.
“Jacob Black raped her. And no one’s done anything.” She looked at Edward, her glower low and meaningful.

“And what would you suggest doing, Rose?” Carlisle asked evenly.

“Do you really need to ask?” she gritted back.

“Starting a war?” he asked, voice still calm, as if he was weighting this with real possibility.

“He attacked her, after we’d entrusted her to his care,” Rose went on, growing angrier.

“I don’t dispute the crime, Rose,” Carlisle said, “but I suspect Bella didn’t tell us because she feared that outcome.” He looked at Edward, who nodded.

“We do nothing,” Edward said, his voice heavy. “Not until Bella asks us to.” It killed him to say it, but it was clearly what she needed.

Emmett made a derisive sound, standing.

“Don’t,” Edward said, looking at him, “you don’t have any idea what this is like, so quit it.”

Emmett gave him a dark look that spoke to the contrary, and then turned, and walked away.

The rest of them stood, their meeting clearly adjourned, Edward returning to where Esme waited. She squeezed his hand, as she left.

Then, the phone rang.

*Charlie*, Alice said silently.

Just what they needed.

“I’ll get it,” Esme said, and the rest of them stopped, listening, as she picked up the phone.

“Hello?...Hi Charlie. Yes, she is here.” Her voice was polite, but cool. Notably absent was the warmth she’d always spared for Bella’s father. “No, she’s sleeping right now. But I’ll let her know you called...of course...bye.”

Edward grimaced, seeing what Alice was showing him. “You’re certain?” he asked.

“Very,” she sighed.

Edward looked at Bella, still curled up on the bed, sleeping, but restlessly so.

“She has to call him,” Alice said, “he’ll be here before sunset, otherwise.”

Bella coughed again, this time, the rattling enough to wake her.

“Hey,” he said softly, coming to sit beside her, “I don’t like the sound of that cough.”

“You should try feeling it,” she said, hand at her ribs.

Edward frowned. She never complained about things hurting. Ever. “When was the last time you took your pain medication?”

“This morning,” she said, taking in another breath, coughing again. When she put her hand down, the temperature startled him, and he put his hand to her forehead.
“You’ve got a fever,” he murmured. He was back in a fraction of a section, glass of water in hand.

“Thanks,” she rasped.

Carlisle had heard all of this, and was tapping his fingers at the door, more by way of announcement than request.

“How’re those deep breaths going?” he asked, taking Edward’s place, watching the irregular flutter of her chest.

“Not so good,” Bella admitted, wishing he would leave her be. She was pretty sure she could happily go right back to sleep.

She was awake enough, though, to catch the look between the two of them.

“What?” she managed, frustrated with the way talking and breathing seemed to be increasingly incompatible.

“Mmm,” Carlisle said, “I think you might have a touch of pneumonia.”

She pushed her eyebrows together, having heard the term before, but not sure what it meant.


“Antibiotics?” Edward asked, worriedly.

“I think so,” Carlisle said, sounding almost distracted. “And oxygen too.”

Bella groaned, and then immediately regretted it, coughing again, hands to her ribs.

“Do you want something for the pain, Bella?” he asked.

After a moment, she said, “I think so.” Her hip and the crook of her neck were starting to smart too.

Carlisle noticed her hand, moving to her shoulder, and stood to look at it.

He stared at the mark there, a bright red patch of angrily raised flesh, clearly made by the shape of a mouth. It looked painful, too. “Did that happen today?” he asked softly. Too softly.

Bella’s nod was tiny.

“Is there anything else that’s new?” Carlisle asked, remembering to smile gently, to hide his anger, “I need to know,” he added, trying to make her feel at ease.

Bella’s hand marked her hip, and then her casted hand touched the sleeve of her other shirt.

When Carlisle looked at Edward, he shook his head. He wasn’t leaving. They were together in this. Carlisle didn’t argue this time.

The bruising at her wrist was freshly mottled, new whorls of red smeared over the darker hurts already there. At her hip, a disgruntled mark was forming, the flesh having been clearly pinched together with force.

Both men stared, swallowing. Considering.

It was brutally unfathomable. How did someone do this and call it love?
“OK,” Carlisle said, breaking the silence, “I’ll go get a few things. Be right back.”

Edward took his place back again, his hip at hers, fingers twining with her own. “Alice saw Charlie coming here later.”

“Great,” Bella rasped, trying to sigh.

“Not really,” Edward said, “it’s sunny.”

Right, Bella thought, closing her eyes.

“But she thinks you phoning him might deflect that decision.”

“OK,” she nodded, trying to sit up.

He put a gentle hand to her shoulder, trying to keep her from exerting herself more than necessary, but the gesture made her tense, hands moving to push him away.

When he caught them, trying now to prevent her from hurting herself, she stopped breathing, the shallow air she’d taken locked in place, eyes closed, body rigid in fear.

Edward let go immediately, backing away. “You’re safe,” he said softly, “no one will hurt you.” Belatedly, he added, “I’m sorry I frightened you—”

“Don’t,” she said abruptly, coughing as she got it out, shaking her head to stop more words that sounded too much like Jacob’s.

She shuddered, and drew the blanket up as far as she could make it go, leaning back against the headboard, resting and trying to breathe at the same time. It was a laboured effort.

Edward was wrestling with his own frustration and rage, trying to stuff them away. The creature had restrained her, clearly, and more than once. She’d been habituated to fear touches that might become that.

He hated that he had to impose, to ask anything of her for his family’s safety, but her safety was twined up with theirs. Charlie couldn’t come today.

“Are you ready to call?” He asked, voice quiet, calm.

She nodded, making a shallow cough.

He brought over the handset for the house line, and watched her struggle with the buttons, eventually getting the combination right. Carlisle was giving them a moment to do this, but he really wished he wouldn’t. The fever was moving quickly, and he was anxious for her health.

“Hello?” Edward heard Charlie’s voice, tinged with a perfect replica of the apprehension he was feeling.

“Hi,” Bella managed.

“Oh, Bella,” Charlie started, “I’m so sorry—”

“It’s OK, Dad,” she said, eyebrows pinched together. It wasn’t. Not by any stretch, but she didn’t want to get into it on the phone.

There was a pause, as Charlie audibly cleared his throat.
“You’re at the Cullens.” This was said with an unease neither of them could miss.

“Yes,” Bella said, “and I’ll be here from now on.”

“Bella,” he said, voice full of reproach, “I know I was an idiot this morning, but please—”

“No,” she said, “I’m not coming home.” Here, her airway, worked beyond capacity, made its protest clear, and she launched into a coughing fit, sweeping the handset away to the side so she didn’t deafen Charlie.

She could hear him talking, but couldn’t make out the words.

“Sorry,” she murmured, when she put it back to her ear.

Edward clenched his fists together. She was apologizing to him, for God’s sake—

“That cough sounds bad,” Charlie said, the frown evident in his voice.

“Yeah,” Bella said, trying to clear her own, “Carlisle thinks its pneumonia.”

“What?” Charlie asked, alarmed. “That’s serious—you should be in the hospital—”

“I’m fine. Carlisle’s getting what he needs for here,” Bella said, tired suddenly, sinking further down in the bed.

The fading colour in her face alarmed Edward, and he mouthed “say goodbye,” to her, wanting to stop this drain on her energy.

Charlie had launched into another long-winded list of concerns, missing her quiet, “Dad,” trying to interrupt him.

Edward pulled the phone away, his patience with Charlie evaporated.

“She’s really sick, Charlie,” he said, “she needs to rest now.”

Charlie’s “tch,” was loud, and derisive, “Great, you’re there. Supervising her talking too, I suppose?”

“I want to make sure she’s OK,” Edward practically growled.

“Yeah, you’ve done a great job of that so far, haven’t you?”

The stinging guilt, and anger at this misplaced accusation, made Edward hiss in a breath. “Perhaps you should listen to your daughter on that front.” Then he hung up.

Carlisle was back, Esme with him, both with arms full of items.

Bella moaned, seeing the IV bags.

“I know,” Carlisle said sympathetically, “but I don’t want to take any chances with this.” Then she saw the oxygen canister. She’d used up all her excess air by this point, and could only close her eyes in protest.

“Just for now,” Edward said softly.

“Rumour has it, breathing is important for humans,” Esme said, a wry smile on her lips, helping Carlisle set things up.
Bella tried to laugh, but it came out as a raw cough.

Edward took the cannula from Esme, slipping it over Bella’s face. She grimaced, as he set it in place.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I like you alive.”

She didn’t try to laugh this time, and the clench in his chest lessened, seeing the colour return to her cheeks with the oxygen.

Carlisle was hooking three bags on a rolling stand.

*Crap*, Bella thought. If he had a stand, he meant business. She was taking these things everywhere. Not that she felt like getting up to go anywhere at present.

When she saw the morphine label, she shook her head. “No,” she said. “No way.”

He hadn’t inserted the IV yet, but was putting everything he needed on the bedside table. He sighed, more for human effect than anything else.

“Pneumonia thrives on poor lung movement, Bella. Lessening the pain makes it easier for you to breathe.” He looked at her face, taut with anxiety and fear. Very softly, he asked, “is it the side-effects you’re worried about?”

She nodded. The dreams, before, had been horrific. She’d felt pursued, relentlessly in that half-sleep, not able to escape the creatures that sought her. She didn’t want to be trapped with the fresh ones Jacob had left her with.

“I’ll be right here,” Edward said, “not going anywhere.”

Not that he can reach where I go, Bella thought guiltily. She made herself nod, more for his sake than hers, and looked away as Carlisle slipped the IV needle in. She didn’t feel much, beyond a light pinch, but resented this trapping of her sole good hand.

“This shouldn’t be for long,” Carlisle said, “I hope just a day or two. Let’s see how you feel then, OK?”

He had the lines plugged in quickly, clicking in the dose of morphine.

She could feel Edward’s hand in hers, but the fear was rising faster than its grip could allay.

“Come hold me, please,” she said, voice shaking, fever making everything rattle.

He slipped onto the bed, sliding her onto his lap, as the illness he couldn’t fight, took her places he wished he could follow.
“It’s OK,” Jacob whispered, as the pain spread outward from her chest, a rippling band. “I know it hurts, but you’re safe.” The panic fluttered with it, making her thrash, trying to get away.

This time, though, his hands were icy cold, as they locked down hers. “You’re OK, Bella, just relax,” he said, and she could only panic more. The pressure in her lungs was vicious, pulsing with each strained breath.

There were cold hands at her face, then her mouth, and finally, the cupping of something over both that made her flail even more. When she felt his body sliding over hers, she only knew the fire in her lungs and throat as she tried to scream him away.

The last thing she felt was an echoing sting in her arm, and then a blessed, and silent oblivion.

Edward released her arms, feeling them go slack, wishing he could feel such release. Or sleep. He stood, half poised over her, dully aware of the rapid, and medical machinations Carlisle’s mind was making.

Becoming louder, were Alice’s panicked sifting through a set of other possibilities.

Edward swore softly to himself.

What? Carlisle asked calmly, wordlessly, still weighing different medical treatments.

“Charlie,” Edward spat, reviewing the fractured futures Alice was seeing. “He’s coming here to get her, but... it’s still uncertain.”

“How long?” Carlisle asked, calculating when Bella would waken from the sleep he’d put her in.

Edward focused, listening to Alice. “Late afternoon,” Edward finally said, brushing Bella’s hair off her forehead. She was still febrile, even after the night.

The future refused to solidify, flickering and flowering in too many different paths for Alice to be precise. “We’ll deal with what comes,” Edward said quietly, hoping to reassure her. He didn’t feel it himself. “She’s safe. He can’t force her to leave.”

But Charlie was exploring just that option.

He was standing at Judge Neal’s door, hand poised to knock, when it opened, and the honourable Mark Neal stood before him, slightly startled, clearly dressed to head into the garden. “Charlie,” he said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked, a little confused. A little worried. It was his day off.

“Nothing official,” he said, his face a painting of many feelings, all warring for expression, “it’s Bella,” he finally said.

“Come on in,” Mark said, “if it isn’t official.”

They sat down at the dining room table, Charlie waving away the offer of a coffee. “Bella’s gotten mixed up with someone...Kinda like your Diane was,” he said, looking at him pleadingly.

“Oh God, Charlie, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” he said, “me too. She left. Yesterday, after...well, you remember what we tried.”
“Oh God,” Mark said softly, rubbing his face briefly with his hands, “you didn’t.”

“I did,” Charlie sighed, mirroring his friend’s gesture. He felt Mark’s hand briefly grip his shoulder.

“How can I help you then?” his friend asked, trying to settle his own pained, but empathetic expression.

“I’m not sure you can,” he said, “she’s sick. Pneumonia. Holed up with the bastard who’s hurt her. Doesn’t want to see me.”

Mark nodded, and Charlie went on.

“His family. It’s weird—cult-like, almost. I don’t know how, but there’s some kinda hold they’ve got on her.” He paused, adding, “I think, if I could get her away, even for a few days, she’d see sense.”

Mark looked at him shrewdly. “Ah,” he said, understanding, seeing Charlie’s look. “You know those orders are rare, Charlie,” drumming his fingers on the table.

“Yes,” Charlie said, watching him just as carefully.

“You’re asking a lot,” Mark continued, quietly, looking down at his hands.

“I’m only asking what you did of me,” Charlie said softly, all his pleading in his eyes. “Please, Mark. I don’t know what he’s doing, but she was bruised as all heck and hiding it. Jittery. Afraid to see her friends. Making all sorts of crazy accusations.”

The judge blew out his own breath, stomach twisting. He knew exactly how Charlie felt. Had been there himself.

“Is it just the temporary custody you need?”

“And a restraining order,” he said. “At least temporarily.” Then he explained for who, the name making Mark’s eyebrows curve high on his forehead.

“Jeezus, really?” he asked.

Charlie nodded, staring at the table.

“And she hasn’t made a complaint?”

“No,” Charlie admitted.

“Course not,” Mark mumbled, looking down, shaking his head.

They both sat silently for a while.

“You gonna try to see her?” he asked, turning possibilities over in his mind.

“Try to,” he said, “after I leave here.”

“If she isn’t competent—and there’s no wiggling on that, you can enact both, but if she’s awake and refuses, you haven’t got anything, Charlie. I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” he said, “thank you,” nodding, standing.

Mark was grabbing the phone, dialing his clerk’s number.
Alice squeezed her eyes together with her hands, moaning. “Carlisle,” she said, “you need to wake her up. Now.”

Edward made the same sound, seeing what was playing out. He crunched an angry fist into his thigh.

_Damn him_, he thought. _Fool! If the man couldn’t see sense—_

Alice was filling in Carlisle, who was shaking his head. “I can’t,” he said, “she needs this,” he said, gesturing to her now peaceful form.

“He’ll take her, Carlisle,” Edward was growling.

“Where?” Carlisle asked.

“The hospital,” Alice said.

“He has orders from his friend, a judge,” Edward said, “until she can speak for herself, he has legal control.”

“Would it be so bad, that she be in a hospital?” Carlisle asked, looking at him.

“No,” Alice interrupted, “but the restraining order he has on all of us is.”

Carlisle regarded her calmly, and then at Edward. “We can leave,” he said softly. “If you want. If you think it’s what Bella wants.”

Edward considered it, but shook his head. “No,” he said, “she isn’t ready.”

Carlisle’s thoughts were clear. _He loves her, Edward. For all his mistakes, he’s her father. He prizes her well being as much as we do._

“He needs to know what happened,” Edward said, “for her to be safe.” Unspoken, but just as true, they all knew this needed to come from Bella. Their credibility was too suspect with Charlie now.

The three of them sat, listening to the rhythmic wheeze of Bella’s shallow breaths.

A legal challenge to Charlie’s authority simply wasn’t possible. There was simply too little time.

“Then we let him take her,” Carlisle said softly, running a hand through his hair.

Edward was feeling the closest thing to panic a vampire could feel. “No,” he said. It made the hair on his arms stand on edge, his muscles rigid with anxiety. “No,” he said again, imagining the worst possibilities.

Carlisle regarded him coolly. “If she isn’t ready to leave, or you’re not willing to make that choice for her, then I don’t see what other choice we have.”

Edward wanted to scream at him, to deny this reality, but could see its cold logic, despite the heat of his own feeling.

Charlie was earlier than expected. And not alone.

Two police cars crunched their way to the Cullens’ front door, and matching police officers exited them. It was Carlisle who met them, eyebrows rising convincingly, as he opened the front door.

“Dr. Cullen,” Charlie said, remarkably even-voiced.
“Chief,” Carlisle said, nodding to his deputy. “This looks very official.”

“It is,” Charlie said, and handed him the papers.

Carlisle pretended to study them, asking Charlie, “and what do these mean, exactly?”

“That Bella comes with us,” Charlie replied, voice still tight with the pretense of calm. “And you don’t.”

“She’s quite ill,” Carlisle said, “and sedated.”

Charlie flushed angrily.

They were still standing on the doorstep.

“Sedated,” Charlie repeated.

“Yes,” Carlisle said. “She has pneumonia. It helps with rest.”

Edward could hear the wild accusations swimming under the screen of Charlie’s topmost thoughts.

“I’m sure it helps with lots of things,” Charlie said, lips pressed together angrily. “Like keeping her from leaving.”

Carlisle sighed. “She came here of her own free will Charlie,” he said softly.

“Free will my ass,” he spat back.

With a look that made both men take a step back, Carlisle leaned forward, saying, “I didn’t force her into the back of a cop car, to go see the man she’d just told you was hurting her.”

Charlie’s deputy’s eyebrows went flying, Carlisle’s predatory face forgotten, looking at Charlie incredulously.

Charlie made himself lean forward against his better instincts, gritting out, “the boy who hurt her is no friend of mine, and you have a lot of gall, patching her up for him to beat again.”

Carlisle’s voice was shoving at the edges of its human approximation, too loud in places, too perfect in others, to be believed without great denial, and Charlie was on the edge of this, hearing him talk. “Edward has never hurt Bella. Ever,” he said, “and wouldn’t.”

Charlie’s cheeks were a dusky shade of mulberry. “Yes,” he said, “breaking her heart. That was nothing. And the bruises—probably nothing to you. You waiting for there to be a body, before you think there’s something wrong with that kid?”

Spurred by Alice’s increasingly panicked visions, Jasper had come to the door, asking Carlisle in a perfectly innocent voice, “what’s happening?”

Everyone’s hands relaxed.

“They’re here for Bella,” Carlisle said, turning, not inviting them, but moving aside to let them enter. “She needs oxygen to travel. She’s on IVs. I’d recommend an ambulance,” he added, “but you can see for yourself.”

Charlie’s deputy pulled out his phone, starting to call, but Charlie put his hand out, stopping him.
When Charlie reached Edward’s room, his face darkened again, realizing whose it was.

Edward stood up from where he’d been sitting by Bella, moving aside to let Charlie pass.

In deference to the heat of the fever, Alice had changed her into a pair of light jersey shorts and a tank top. They left no question as to where her bruises lay, and Charlie gasped quietly at the bright weal raised on her shoulder, and the dark smear that was the bruise on her inner thigh.

“Out,” he said, afraid he might do something to undermine his authority. “Now.”

None of the Cullens protested, Edward included, who looked at Bella, heart and mind overfull.

Before he could leave, though, Charlie turned on him. “You,” he said, jabbing his airy finger at Edward. “You will answer for what you’ve done.”

Edward faced Charlie, and returned the sentiment in icy tones, “and so will you. We’ll see who lands on the better side of it.”

Then he turned, and left, and Charlie picked Bella up, carrying her outside.
A/N for 2018/06/01 - I fully anticipate there will be some big feelings by the end of this chapter. Happy reading all.

Bella’s eyes struggled to open. They were well glued shut with sleep, and when she did manage to crack them to bare slits, the lights above made her head swim. As her sight adjusted, she took in the shape, and colour of the room.

She wasn’t at the Cullen’s.

And then a very familiar, and terrifying voice spoke.

“You’re up.”

*No*, she told herself. *It must be the morphine*.

As she began turning her head, though, she couldn’t help but perceive how real everything felt—the scratchiness of the blanket tucked around her, the stiffness of the needle in her arm, the still painful breaths that moved in her reluctant lungs.

Then her gaze reached the voice’s source, and Jacob grinned at her.

Two things happened almost simultaneously: she flexed her arms and legs, readying herself to run, or defend herself, finding she couldn’t, and she tried to scream for help.

The breath caught halfway to her lungs, penned in by sharp pain and a violent cough, starting a fit of expulsive spasms in her chest.

“Whoa—slow down, you’re OK,” Jacob said, reaching out a hand, trying to calm her. “Emily!” he called, his voice as panicked as Bella felt.

The door thumped open, and Emily came in, bare feet silent on the carpet. She smiled calmly at Bella, and braced her against her own chest, smacking Bella’s back to help dislodge the phlegm in her throat.

When the regular, but tight, whistling wheeze in Bella’s airway began to move again, Emily laid her back against the headboard, snapping an oxygen mask onto Bella’s face.

Bella made herself stay where she was, only mildly less panicked with Emily’s presence. Her arms and legs felt dead, like uncooperative wooden logs: moveable, but only just.

“Welcome back,” Emily said softly, light fingers at Bella’s wrist. “Been a while,” she continued, pulling out a stethoscope, raising her eyebrows, lifting her chin to Bella’s chest, seeking permission to listen.

Bella’s eyes flicked nervously to Jacob and back to Emily.

“Outcha go, Jacob,” Emily said, not taking her gaze from Bella.
Jacob stood, rolling his eyes, and carried his crutch out of the room. “Later,” he called from the door, closing it softly.

Emily walked her look from the bruises on Bella’s ribs to the wary expression on her face, as she listened to her breathing. “Better,” she said. “Can you turn a bit, so I can listen to your back?”

It was exhausting to move, but she managed.

“Good,” Emily murmured, smoothing Bella’s shirt back down. Then she picked up a glass of water, straw in it, and offered it to Bella, sliding the straw under the oxygen mask.

“Bet you’re wondering why you’re here,” Emily said.

Bella was trying very hard not to, because the question as to why circled painfully close to the fear that she’d been left. Again.

Where were they? Had they...left?

She nodded, feeling her neck ache with the effort.

“Your dad brought you,” Emily said. “Said he was planning to take you to the hospital, but he was afraid they’d get to you again there. Even with the restraining order.” Here her face clouded, lips tight in a grim line.

Bella mouthed “what?” under the mask.

“Did they hurt you because of...you and Jacob?” Emily asked, eyebrows pulling together.

Bella stared, swallowing nothing. The tremor in her hands wasn’t visible, but Bella felt like a twanging string, plucked too hard.

Emily’s cheeks had darkened, assuming she’d hit upon the right tack. “I was pretty surprised when he showed up with you. Said Sue’d told him I used to nurse—” she stopped, pursing her lips together. Her voice was slow, quiet when she started again. “Why didn’t you ask us for help?”

There were silent tears running down Bella’s cheeks. She had it wrong. Utterly wrong. And Jacob was downstairs.

The tremble running up and down Bella’s body was becoming visible.

“I’m sorry,” Emily said, suddenly chagrined, putting a hand on Bella’s, “You’ve been through hell, and you can’t exactly talk. Let me get Jacob for you—”

Bella opened her mouth to protest, to scream, but her airway, so raw, so tight with inflammation, and lungs so weak, stoppered itself with panic, and she was choking again, Emily pulling her forward, turning up the oxygen.

“Calm down, Bella, it’s OK,” she was saying, but it wasn’t working, and Emily was rummaging through the box of supplies on the dresser, putting a syringe in one hand, an alcohol swab in another. “You’re gonna be OK, just relax.”

The prick in Bella’s arm was quick, and the blackness that it brought, faster.

The next time she woke, it was dark, and the light in the room softer, a low lamp in the corner shedding its small bloom.
It was Sam who was sitting by the bed, head leaning back over the edge of his chair, soft snores bubbling from his open mouth.

Bella tried saying his name. The air didn’t stick this time, but her voice was only a quiet whisper.

“Sam,” she tried again, with more volume.

He didn’t move.

“SAM!” she said, pushing her lungs to their full capacity.

“Whuh?” he said, sitting up suddenly, blinking. “Bella,” he said, “you’re up.” He rubbed his eyes, pushing his arms down as if to stand up, “Let me get Emily.”

With an effort that left her panting, she reached his hand before he could move.

“No,” she mouthed.

Sam looked suddenly uncomfortable, rocking himself back and forth slightly in the chair. “I’m sorry,” he said, jutting his chin towards her ribs, her arms, and then looking embarrassed, away, “Jacob told me. He warned me, and I didn’t listen. We won’t let them do it again, OK?”

*What did Jacob tell you?* Bella thought, a slithering chill curling up in her stomach.

“We protect our own,” Sam continued. “They can’t hurt you here.”

But Bella wasn’t thinking about the Cullens, she was wondering where Jacob was.

“Jacob’s downstairs,” Sam said, “Emily made him get some sleep. He’s barely left since you got here,” he added, “I knew there was something between you, I just thought—I didn’t realize what they’d been doing. If I’d known, I never would’ve—”

Bella held up her hand, feeling it shake and fall before she wanted it to, and Sam stopped.

The room was growing fuzzy at the edges, her eyelids heavy again, and she felt the pull of forces beyond the control of will, sucking her back into the darkness.

This sleep was more disturbed, and jarred by blurry, minute wakings.

When she could next hold on to more than a sliver of consciousness, the slant of the clear sunlight told her it was midmorning. Charlie was sitting in the chair now.

“Dad?” she tried, not certain of what her throat would do. It produced something recognizable as a word, and Charlie started up from the magazine he was looking at.

“Hey,” he said, coming to sit beside her, an uncertain hand over her own.

Bella realized that the oxygen mask was gone. She blinked, and didn’t fall asleep.

“How long?” she asked, finding more of her voice.

“Since?”

“I’ve been out of it,” she mumbled. Her tongue felt fuzzy, the words sticky.

“‘Bout three days since you got sick,” he said. He frowned, looking at her.
“Why’d you bring me here?” she asked, clearing her throat, or trying to.

Charlie handed her a glass of water, “just a bit,” he said, worried.

She clenched her jaw, being told what to do, but took the water, sipping slowly. Holding it made her hand tired, and Charlie took it back quickly.

“Billy’s always telling me the Cullens aren’t welcome here. Seemed like a good place to start,” he said darkly.

“They didn’t hurt me,” Bella said, teeth still tight together.

Charlie didn’t say anything for a minute, looking down at his hands. Jacob had finally come clean, told him what had happened the week before, and the pieces had all come clunking together.

“I get,” Charlie said softly, “that you’re probably embarrassed, that you feel like you cheated on Edward, Bella, but I think the cat’s outta the bag on that one now.” He looked at her, at the horrified widening of her eyes. “I don’t hold it against you honey, I just—why would you stay with him, when he hurt you like that? What kinda hold do they have on you?”

He barely let her pull her features together before he spoke again.

“No one loves you if they hurt you like that, Bella.” He shook his head, as if trying to shake off what his mind was supplying.

“It wasn’t Edward,” Bella said. She was so angry, but the tears were sliding down her cheeks. What had Jacob told them? Why wouldn’t they believe her?

Charlie looked at her, “I don’t care which one of them did it, Bella, if he let one of his brothers hurt you—what difference does it make?” His voice rose, angry, despairing.

“Jacob hurt me, Dad,” she said, for the last time, hoping and doubting, deeply, at the same time, that it would permeate, but knowing that his views were so rigidly set, they couldn’t absorb the truth.

Charlie stood, carefully putting the glass down. “I’ve got to go,” he said.

It ocurred to Bella that he was dressed for work.

“Wait,” she said, voice still weak.

“What?” he asked, his own voice tight with barely contained rage.

“Please don’t leave,” she asked.

A little bit of the rage slipped away. “You’re safe here, Bella. No one will hurt you.”

Her throat was so tight with grief, with fear, that she could barely say more.

“I’ll come back later, OK?” Charlie said, gripping her hand, and then turning and walking from the room.

She stared at the open door, willing herself to stand, to follow him, prisoner to the weakness of body. She could barely lift her arms without exhausting herself.

Emily came in, a small bowl in hand. “Hey,” she began, chattering on, sitting beside Bella. The words slid over her like water, running away into rivulets and puddles that her mind couldn’t hold
“Bella?” Emily said again, waiting for some sign of intelligent response.

“Sorry,” Bella mumbled, not sure for what, still trying to pick up what was happening.

“Can I get you to eat something?” Emily asked.

Bella looked down at the bowl.

“Soup,” Emily explained, unnecessarily. “Try a bit,” she encouraged her, holding up a spoon, eyebrows raised hopefully.

Bella looked at it, stomach turning, but steeled herself to eat, knowing she needed to get herself out of here. That the Cullens, if they hadn’t left, hadn’t abandoned her—and those felt like big if’s—couldn’t help her here.

She took the spoon, and after finishing what she could slumped back against the pillow. “Thanks,” she said. “Don’t suppose you can get me a phone?”

Emily looked away awkwardly, mumbling “maybe later,” standing. “Jake wants to see you.”

“No!” Bella said, “please don’t leave me with him!” Her voice rose with panic and fear.

“Bella,” Emily said reproachfully, “Jake would never hurt you. No one here would.”

“Then it won’t matter if I’m not alone with him,” Bella said.

Emily’s face was dark, with anger, and some pity. “I know,” she started, “that you’ve been hurt, but we don’t deserve your mistrust, Bella, Jacob least of all.”

“Yes,” Bella said, swallowing, hoping this didn’t thrust her into the sphere of complete discrediting, “he does. He hurt me, Emily.” She looked at her, pleading, imploring, knowing Emily was the only one who would understand just what the wolves were capable of, regardless of intention.

Emily shook her head angrily. “Those boys have been up at all hours for you, fought alongside those creatures for you. Got hurt to save them. And you—” she shook her head in violent disbelief. “Scuse me,” she said, picking up the bowl and leaving.

Jacob’s entry was almost silent.

Seeing him standing at the door, Bella closed her eyes, and curled over onto her side away from him, hoping his presence would not become malignant.

“Hey,” he said softly.

She said nothing, focusing on hoping. Breathing.

Then she felt him lay down behind her, sliding one arm under, the other over her body.

She shuddered, telling herself nothing would happen. Not with Emily nearby. Her mind refused to invest in this fantasy, throwing flashes of memory into the forefront of her consciousness.

“You cold?” he asked, tightening his grip.

She shivered from another feeling, entirely.
He rubbed his hands up and down her arms, undaunted by her silence.

“Why’d you lie, Bella?” he asked softly.

She said nothing, hoping, that if he found her unresponsive enough, he might just leave.

“You said he didn’t hurt you,” Jacob continued. “What did he do, Bella?”

He thought Edward had hurt her? What the hell kind of denial was he in?

“Emily said your legs were bruised. Did he—?” He didn’t finish. He didn’t want to. Instead he kissed her neck, and listened to her breathing become shallower, raspier.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, “you’re safe now.”

They stayed like this for some time, she in silence, and he speaking. He took her wordless responses as the result of the pneumonia.

Then she felt him hardening, his erection pressed into her tailbone. He’d kept kissing her neck and shoulder between his questions, and now he whispered, “make love to me.”

She froze.

His hands pulled her closer to him, his hips gyrating slowly against her. One hand slid under the waistband of her sweatpants, pushing between her legs, and the other under her shirt, cupping the softness of her breast. His fingers curled into her, and she tried not to move, feeling the fragility of her tender flesh, so tentatively held together by stitches.

Downstairs, Sam’s face puckered, hearing this last comment by Jacob.

Emily hadn’t caught it, but Sam’s hearing, keener than hers, had. They’d been talking about rescheduling their plans. They’d hoped to go away, just for a weekend, but with Bella here, that’d had to be put on hold again.

“Is she—?” he started, “Um, should they, be..?” and he looked at Emily.

“What?” she asked.

The flush in his cheeks spoke before he could answer.

“No,” she murmured, standing, skipping lightly up the stairs.

She didn’t knock, pushing the door open with a muffled thwack, as it the handle smacked into the wall.

“Jacob,” she said, in a tone that was all exasperation, “Enough. Out. Now.” She pointed, an authoritative eyebrow arched, leaving no mystery as to where she wanted him.

“Sorry,” he murmured to Bella, kissing her still frozen form on the neck, “see you later, I guess.”

“Not at this rate,” Emily mumbled, turning to follow him out. “I’ll be right back, Bella,” she called, closing the door part way.

She whirled on Jacob in the hall, hissing, “What the hell are you thinking? Are you blind? Stupid? Or just an idiot?”
She didn’t leave space for him to answer, launching into another spitting volley before he could open his mouth. “She’s been sick, Jacob. Life-threateningly sick. You don’t come running in like a dog in fucking heat when someone’s been ill like that—not to mention whatever the hell they did to her. And they did something.” She didn’t mention the stitches she’d seen, when she’d cleaned Bella up. “You don’t touch her until she asks you to. You clear?”

Jacob huffed out a breath.

Emily was less than impressed with this response.

“I’ll have Sam order it, if I don’t hear what I need to right now. Do right by her Jacob. She deserves it.”

“Fine,” he mumbled, crossing his arms, moving to go back inside.

“Oh no,” she said, “go home. Get some space. Take a cold shower. Whatever. I’m done having you underfoot right now. Come back tonight if you have to.”

“But—” Jacob started.

“No,” Emily said, “I don’t run a hospital. Out,” Emily said, finger illustrating the way outside.

Jacob shook his head, but listened, knowing there was no choice.

Once was he was gone, Emily checked on Bella, finding her pale and silent, still curled up on her side.

“Do you need anything?” Emily asked.

Bella shook her head.

“OK,” Emily said, checking her pulse, finding it too fast again. “I’ve sent Jake home. Your dad’ll be back later today. Do you want me to have him bring you anything?”

Bella only shook her head again, closing her eyes. Withdrawing, Emily realized.

This, Emily’d seen before, and she narrowed her eyes, beginning to make sense of what was in front of her.

She left Bella, promising to return within the hour, and walked slowly down the stairs, trying to find the words for the hard news she needed to give Sam.

And Charlie.
"A psychotic break?" Charlie asked.

Emily nodded, fingers curling in and out over the table, watching him.

Their respective cups of coffee sat untouched.

Charlie swallowed.

It made sense.

It made perfectly horrific sense—the illogical choices, the abandonment of friends, the wild accusations.

The giant wolves she'd claimed to have seen.

My God, Charlie thought. How long had it been going on for? Had he been missing the signs all along?

Then he speculated as to what could have begun it: the Cullens leaving? Drug use? Stress? Emotional upset?

Like being beaten by the man you thought loved you.

"Schizophrenia?" he asked, almost a whisper.

"I don't know," she said, "I can't—I'm not qualified to do that."

Charlie nodded, eyebrows pulling together.

"She needs to go to a hospital, Charlie."

Here Sam looked at her, disapproval in his features.

They'd fought about it, and Emily had pointed out, repeatedly, that protecting Bella's body was pointless if it left her with a broken mind.

Sam had finally acquiesced, but reluctantly.

They hadn't said anything to Jacob. Sam agreed that he and Emily would go with her, taking Seth and Leah, purportedly for Charlie's moral support, to keep her safe from the Cullens.

Charlie sighed. If she was at the hospital, she would be safe—theoretically. The restraining order had expired, though, but if she was held for evaluation, she couldn't go anywhere, and if they found her mentally unwell, Charlie's custody would continue.

"OK," he said, "have you talked to her?"
"No," Emily said, eyebrows rising. "I don't recommend telling her why we're taking her there. Let her think it's for follow up. That we need an xray of her lungs. Don't say why."

"Alright," he blew out in a sigh, standing. "You ready?"

"Sure," Emily said, standing with him. "I'll go talk to her."

Edward, Emmett and Carlisle still kept grim vigil at the boundary line.

Keeping just as uncomfortable a watch, were four wolves, whose identities might change with their unpredictable shifts, but whose presence was continuous.

The Cullens had respected the boundary line so far, and stood unmoving and stolid, simply watching.

When Charlie had made his decision, literally at the turn-off to the hospital, Alice had gone wide-eyed, her mouth sucking in air, a horrified 'O', seeing his and Bella's futures disappearing, and Edward had bolted, this time evading both Jasper and Emmett's attempts to stop him.

Charlie had kept driving, pulling out his phone, calling Billy, asking for Emily's number. Billy had done one better, and told Charlie to just worry about getting Bella there, and let him call Emily. They'd be ready for her.

Edward had arrived at the boundary line, with no intention of stopping, but had been met by a trio of wolves, their snarling forms hunched against any ingress. They'd barely made it there themselves, but more arrived, as Sam's summons reached them.

He'd ordered that none of them so much as think of Bella.

His gag was effective, and Edward found nothing in their thoughts that would lead him to her.

The Cullens had moved since then, now flanking the only road in and out of the reserve. When Charlie drove back home that first night, his murky thoughts revealed little.

Edward refused to leave, or assure Carlisle he'd honour the treaty.

"I can't," he said, voice full of wild emotions. "You can't ask that of me."

Carlisle could only say "I'm sorry," feeling just how inadequate this was. His mate was safe at home, and Edward's was...unreachable at a cost they didn't know they could pay.

_They know how we fight_, Emmett had thought at him.

"I know," Edward snapped.

"Chances of getting in and out with her even with all of us here, are barely over zero," Emmett said aloud, but not so loud so that the wolves could hear.

"I know," Edward growled.

When Jasper had arrived, hoping to be useful, Edward had turned and hissed, feral and angered in the face of his brother's attempts to calm him.

"If you want to fix this, use your contacts," Edward said, almost soundlessly, "in case our efforts here fail."
Jasper had nodded, vanishing to do as Edward asked.

It was Bella's scent that reached Edward first, the evening westerly breeze throwing her smell far ahead of her as Charlie drove East.

Emmett and Carlisle looked at him for confirmation, the smell too faint for their noses to know with certainty.

"Where?" Carlisle asked, voice inaudible to the wolves, seeing the change on Edward's face.

"The hospital," Edward said, just as softly, frowning. "We need to be close by," he said, worried about sparking a fight near Bella. "Jasper's contact will be there."

The wolves kept their line, watching uneasily as the Cullens sped away in the direction they knew Sam, Bella and the others had gone.

Bella's mind was running circles around itself, sitting in the back of her Dad's car one again, Sam and Seth on either side, Emily in the front.

They were taking her for x-rays, so they said, but the careful way they spoke around her, and the vague answers they gave when she asked why she needed them, told her there was something else going on.

She couldn't figure out why they were leaving the reservation, but she was trying to find a way to escape, or at least find a phone. If they were going to the hospital, there was a good chance she would be alone. Surely she would be able to find one then?

Alice, she knew, would still be hobbled by the proximity of the wolves, but if she could get a message to the Cullens—to Edward. *If they're still there,* the voice said. *If they haven't left.*

*How could they let Charlie take her? After what he'd done?*

She refused to dwell on these uncertainties. She had to find a way out, because the idea of being trapped by her own bodily weakness, again, in a bed, with Jacob, made her shudder.

Sam frowned, feeling it, wondering how Bella could be cold between them.

When they pulled up the hospital, he got out first. "I'll get a wheelchair," he told Charlie, looking at Seth, eyeing Leah as she pulled in behind them. The clear air of the hospital made him exhale in relief. They weren't here, not as far as he could tell.

Edward, Carlisle and Emmett waited downwind, safety out of scenting range, but close enough to be there almost instantly, if needed. Esme had parked down the road, waiting for their phone call.

As Charlie wheeled Bella into the hospital, he headed not to emergency, but to central reception.

"Hi," Charlie said, "I called ahead." He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Right," the receptionist said, pulling out a file.

Bella watched all of this nervously.

They were most definitely not here for x-rays.

Edward had heard enough in the thoughts of those that flanked Bella, and had called Jasper, who put his contact into play.
"Scuse me!" a woman said, trotting to catch up with Charlie. "Chief Swann?"

He turned out of habit, frowning at being called on out of uniform. "Yes?" he said, taking in the woman's appearance, tidy hair and well cut suit.

"And Ms. Isabella Swann?" she asked, looking at a sheaf of papers in her hand.

"Yes," Bella said, feeling a flicker of hope.

"I've been hired to represent you," the woman said, extending her hand, "Marie Richter." She presented Bella with a card. The fine script beneath the woman's name read Attorney at Law.

Charlie was frowning, shifting his weight.

"A lawyer?"

"Yes," she said.

"You need a lawyer, Bella?" Charlie asked, eyebrow raised.

She didn't answer him, but said to Marie, "I'd like to leave. Can you arrange for that?" She knew exactly who had sent her. Her heart was fluttering with anxious hope, nerves, and tenacious fear.

"Absolutely," Marie said, moving to take the handles of the chair.

"No," Charlie said, keeping hold, realizing where the woman's interference stemmed from. "She's here for an evaluation."

"What?" Bella said, trying to turn, to see his face. It hurt her ribs to move.

He looked down at her, face creasing with worry, with fear now, "I'm worried about you Bella," he said softly. "We all are."

Bella turned back, looking up and around at all of them. "You think I'm crazy." Her breathing, already uncertain and wheezy, became moreso.

"No," Charlie said softly, "I think you just need some...help." He said it as kindly as he could, his hand on her shoulder, and she wrenched it away.

"Can we leave?" she asked Marie.

"No," Charlie said again, "you can't. You're a danger to yourself, and to others."

Seth's eyebrows shot up at this last statement, and his sister elbowed him, catching it.

A doctor, and a nurse had emerged from the assessment room they'd been heading for. "Hi Charlie," the doctor said, nodding to him, recognizing him from their work together, "why don't we go inside?"

"Just a minute," Marie interrupted, a brief hand up, "she wants to leave," she said, nodding to Bella, "and I haven't seen any reason why she shouldn't."

By this point, the Cullens had determined that enough time had passed that Marie could have notified them, and allowed them to arrive at plausible speeds.

The nurse recognized Bella. She'd treated her in the ER, and she was watching her body language:
nervous, shying away from the people around her. She smiled at her, trying to make eye contact. It was brief, and Bella's shallow breathing resumed its irregular ant, as soon as the flicker of a polite smile had left her face.

The hospital's front doors slid open, and in the air that wafted in was a sharp scent that made every werewolf present snap their heads towards it.

Everyone else's gazes followed, including Bella's.

"Edward," she croaked, as he stopped, some twenty feet from her, Emmett behind him, and Carlisle just ahead of him.

Sam moved quietly in front of Bella.

Marie was focused on the task at hand, and immune to the feeling stretched between the woman penned in the chair, and the man beyond her.

The nurse wasn't though, and she was shrewdly evaluating Bella's response. She knew relief when she saw it.

"How is she a danger to herself or others?" Marie asked.

Charlie frowned. No one else said anything, too preoccupied with the mortally dangerous creatures opposite them.

"Has there been an official complaint made?" Marie asked Charlie, eyes narrowing.

"She attacked her friend," Charlie said. "Punched him."

The nurse's eyebrows were high on her forehead, hearing this. She bet she had, she thought. The body language on that girl screamed terrified from the minute she'd walked into the ER, and only abated when that boy had left.

"Has there been an official complaint made?" Marie asked again.

"No," Charlie admitted.

"Why don't we go inside," the doctor suggested. "Maybe just Bella and us?"

"No," Marie, Charlie, and Edward said together.

Edward and Bella still had eyes locked. Emmett's hand was on his brother's shoulder, and she was fairly sure Carlisle was in front of him to keep him in place.

"You're free to go, Ms. Swann," Marie said. "There's no reason why you can't."

"I have a custody order," Charlie said, pulling the paperwork form his jacket.

Marie took it, reading through it quickly, and then looked at him, eyebrows raised. "Not applicable. Emergency only, and only when she wasn't able to speak for herself." She handed it back to Charlie, "which I'm quite sure you're aware of."

Charlie's face was growing pale with worry, and fear. He knelt down, and sotto voce, whispered to Bella. "Listen, please," seeing her go to open her mouth. "Please. I love you. Just think about this. Someone's hurt you. You've been seeing things. You've turned on your best friend, and you've moved in with the man who abandoned you in the middle of the woods. I think you need help, Bella."
I don't think you're well. Please, just—come inside, talk to the doctors."

She'd heard him. She'd heard all of it, and she knew, knew, that he loved her. There was no doubt there. But he didn't believe her, and his rancid hatred of Edward was so overpowering, that it clouded all his judgement about anything to do with him.

"I love you too," she said, "which is why it hurts so much that you don't believe me," and here she dropped the words that had curdled in her chest with her illness. "Jacob raped me. I can't help it if you won't believe me."

This statement landed, the resulting silence awed and cracked around her.

"I'd like to go now," Bella said to Marie, who promptly took the handles of the chair that Charlie had released in shock, and began pushing her towards the door.

Edward had been vibrating since he'd finally seen her, his body ringing at a frequency that only knew his love.

At some appointed place, some space finally far enough from the wolves, Edward began to move, Emmett's grip released. He met Bella, kneeling, hands on hers, and in a voice intended only for her, said, "I have failed you, in all the ways I promised I wouldn't. Allowed you to be in danger, let your father take you against your wishes, and not seen to you through this illness." His voice shook as he continued, "I have no right to lay claim on your love, but I ask your forgiveness, and swear I will not fail you again."

Bella could barely speak. She put her hands to his shoulders, his face, tears running too quickly down her own. "I love you," she whispered, "you're here. There's nothing else that matters. Please take me home."

He picked her up out of the wheelchair, the relief of holding her again sweeping through his body. Without taking his eyes off of hers, he turned and carried her outside to the waiting car, and home.
“What do you need?” Edward asked Bella, carrying her inside the house.

Her head was resting against his shoulder, too heavy to hold up, but she spoke clearly, wanting to be rid of every last ghost of a touch that Jacob had laid on her.

“A shower,” she breathed out.

“OK,” he said, his nose buried in her hair, going to set her down on the bed in his room. “I’ll go get Alice.”

“No,” Bella said too quickly, voice rising, clawing at his shirt, trying to keep hold of him, “don’t leave. Please—just stay.” Her voice was desperate. Terrified, he realized

“I won’t,” he said softly, holding her, perching on the edge of the mattress.

They stayed that way, he holding her, hands gently moving, waiting for her breathing to calm down again. More surreptitiously, he was trying to discover, through the fabric of the sweatshirt, any new hurts.

“Can’t you?” Bella asked.

Edward didn’t respond right away, startled by the request. Of course he could. Just—

“Please,” she said in a small, tremulous voice, nervous at this silence.

“Of course,” he said, realizing how much she must need his confidence and reassurance. He stood, moving towards the bathroom with her, feeling full of trepidation.

He had never undressed her. Ever. He’d always done his best to not just give her this privacy when Alice and Rose had had to help her before, but to keep his own wants under control. There had been unintentional flickers of his sisters’ thoughts he’d caught unawares, but nothing like this.

He was afraid.

That he would be moved by his own desires.

Helping her stand, he gently tugged off the t-shirt and sweatpants she was wearing.

“All of it,” she said, shivering, “get rid of it.”

Then, “and burn it.”

He paused, knowing the scents he’d caught at her neck, grimly speculating what had happened to her. He didn’t ask, instead doing what she asked, averting his eyes as he braced her against himself, turning on the water. As the water hissed and steamed, he shrugged off his own shirt and trousers, leaving only his underwear on.

She could barely stand, and while he held her close, he fretted that she would be chilled, and turned up the water’s temperature.

Bella was trying to rub the soap between her hands, but she kept fumbling with it, and Edward took it from her.

He nodded, and washed her as gently, and quickly as he could. Everytime he touched her, he expected this next contact would be the one that made her flinch, or cry, but she simply laid against him, head at his shoulder, hands curled up under her chin.

He was nervous beyond himself when he turned her around, commanding his body not to respond in the way it wanted to.

He hated himself for wanting her. Loathed that he could even think it. He washed her chest quickly, trying to brush his hands over her lower body as dispassionately as possible. When she spoke though, he froze.

“Make love to me,” she said. It was almost cried out.

He put the soap down slowly.

“What?” he said, doubting his perfect hearing. She couldn’t have—

“Make love to me, please,” she whispered, turning back to him. “I can’t,” she started, shaking her head, “I can’t have that—I can’t have that memory. Please, just end that—make it go away—”

She buried her face in his chest with this last request.

He closed his eyes, wrapping his arms around her, keeping her solidly in the showerhead’s spray, still worried, in the background of his mind, that she was getting cold.

“Bella,” he said, “I love you...and I can’t. You’re hurt, you’re so frail. You still...you still have stitches. When you’re better—”

“Please,” she whispered. “I can’t have this anymore. I need you to take it away. Please—”

“Bella,” he said softly, trying to gently rub her back, avoiding pressing too hard over the bones he could feel with a frightening clarity, “I will. I promise. But not now, not when you’re so unwell. And not because of anything Jacob Black has done. When we do, it will be because you want to, not because of anything he’s caused.”

She had started crying as he spoke, and didn’t stop, sobs breaking out of her throat.

“I love you,” he whispered, and held her. When the shaking from her tears subsided, and he felt her shiver, he said “I love you, Bella. Nothing will ever change that.” He turned off the water, wrapping her in a towel, carrying her to the bed.

It was warm when he laid her on it, and he put another warm blanket over her. Electric, she realized, feeling the cord snaking through them, above, and below her. They did little to lift the chill she felt inside.

“Alice wants to come and dry your hair,” he said, sliding a nightgown over her head, and pulling away the damp towel.

“OK,” she said, grabbing at his hand, “but don’t leave.” This last was said with near panic.

“I won’t leave,” he said, “but I think I should probably put something dry on if I’m going to be by you.”

He was standing beside the bed, doing his best not to drip on her, his hair still wet, underwear
soaked.

She’d been so lost in herself that she hadn’t even realized, and then she looked, and giggled.

Edward’s eyebrows rose, lips rising in a gentle curve.

“You’re in your underwear,” Bella said, giggling more.

“I am,” he said, smiling, “and before Alice comes in and makes fun of me, I’m going to change.”

It was seconds later that he returned, dry and decent.

“Can Alice come in?” He asked, hand in hers.

“Yes,” She said, feeling the heaviness of exhaustion coming on, “but don’t leave.”

“I won’t, unless you ask me too, OK?”

She breathed out nervously, nodding, watching Alice enter, and approach, a hair dryer in hand.

Edward sat behind Bella on the bed, keeping their hands linked.

“I’m sorry, Bella. When I saw his choice, it was too late,” Alice said, swallowing.

“It’s OK Alice,” Bella said, wanting to say more, but the words felt like they were slipping away, falling places she couldn’t reach. Her eyelids were drooping, heavier with each blink, until finally they didn’t lift again.

Alice plugged in the dryer, and began methodically working through Bella’s hair.

*It’s going to be bad, Edward,* she told him.

“I know,” he said, thumb running over Bella’s hand.

*No,* Alice said, frowning, and showed him.

He cringed.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

He shook his head. “Thank you. I knew it would be difficult...just...” he sighed.

After a moment, Alice said, “Oh!” and looked at him, quickly obscuring her thoughts.

“What?” he asked, eyebrows making a suspicious and deep V, “what are you hiding?”

She gave him a genuine smile, tinged with what would surely have been a teary sadness in a human, “something...really beautiful. I just...don’t want to spoil it for you.”

Bella’s hair dry, Alice brushed it, and moved it away from her face, slipping from the room with a soft “bye.”

Edward pulled Bella into his arms, wrapping her securely in the warmth of the heated blanket. It was early evening, and he had a sudden stab of practical worry: he wasn’t sure if she’d eaten.

Her breathing was better, but the pneumonia had thinned the flesh on her. Her skin seemed even more translucent than usual, cheekbones now pronounced in her face.
Carlisle was asking him silent questions, and Edward was answering them, almost as inaudibly.

“No,” he said, when Carlisle asked if he’d seen any new bruises.

*Do you think there was another assault?* Carlisle asked.

Edward cringed again. “I don’t know.” He looked down, a solid lump in his throat, hoping. There’d been no blood, or other smells, but the odour of typically latex didn’t linger. He could have. It was clear enough from Emily’s thoughts that he’d had access. That something untoward had happened.

That he’d been in bed with her.

Carlisle had other, more specific questions that needed answering by Bella, and he wanted to listen carefully to her lungs. He would have to wait until she was awake, though, so he left Edward to his own thoughts.

Bella’s sleep was not peaceful. She shifted in his arms, twisting, and he reluctantly put her down in the bed, sliding in behind her. His light kiss to the back of her neck chilled her, and she started, a choked “no!” coming out of her mouth.

“I’m here,” Edward said calmly, hearing her heart thump, smelling the adrenaline, and the rank odour of fear. “You’re safe,” he tried, “and if it helps, you can pretend I’m standing in front of you in my underwear.”

The sound of her breathing shifted, an uncertain laugh there. She had turned over to face him, burying her face in his shirt. “Oh God, Edward, I missed you so much. No one believed me. I told them. They thought I was crazy. Jacob was there—”

Edward had stopped moving. Stopped breathing. He was too full of attention, and then she stopped mid sentence, afraid of what she’d done.

“You can tell me anything,” he said softly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Her breathing quickened, and she tested this claim. “I thought you’d left,” she said, almost choking on the words, “I thought—I thought you’d changed your mind—”

“No,” Edward said, his chest tight, “I’m so sorry, Bella. Never—I can’t—I won’t leave you.”

She nodded, pressing her forehead into the pocket made by his clavicle.

“He thinks—he thinks that I wanted to.” She was struggling to get the words out, not brave enough to even meet his eyes, “he thought I wanted to today.” The words were barely formed, coming out with sobs, “and if Emily hadn’t come in—I don’t know. I couldn’t move—when he touched me I froze. I’m sorry—”

“No,” he said, lifting her chin gently with his fingers. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Bella. He…” and here he sighed, looking for words, “he has wronged you horrifically. It doesn’t matter what he thinks.”

He let these words rest on her mind, and hoped that their repetition would allow them to become a truth she could accept. The fraught expression on her face told him their meaning had been refused entrance there so far.

“I’m afraid,” she said, “of so many things right now. I’m afraid that my dad will try something else—use his contacts somehow. Can he?” she asked. “Take me away? Again?”
It would have been easy to say no, to lie, to hold her and offer her this empty reassurance. Charlie could. Edward didn’t doubt the inventiveness of the human mind, when it came to love. He was legally next of kin. Here though, his own thoughts proved equal to his feeling, and he understood the happy thing that Alice had seen.

His eyes brightened. “Marry me,” he said, “and he can’t.”

She finally dared to look up at him. “What?”

“Marry me,” he said again. “I’ll be your next of kin. He’ll have no say, not legally, over what happens to you.” There would be other legal means they would use to strengthen this new bond too. But marriage, this would tie them together in a way that Charlie would be powerless to break.

“How?” she asked, visions of a wedding, and all its practical entailments making her head swim.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “we can go to the courthouse. First thing. You’re eighteen, and on paper, I am too. We can get married.” Then, he whispered conspiratorially, “and then you can get out of the wedding Alice was planning.”

She smiled, really smiled, looking at him. “OK.” Then he leaned down and kissed her forehead.

That was one fear down.

Now onto the others.

“What else is worrying you?” he asked.

He expected her answer to this one.

“Jacob,” she said. “I’m afraid he’ll try to come get me.” Her hands had begun to tremble as she spoke, and he took them in his, not sure if fear, or her physical state were responsible.

“We’ll keep you safe,” he said. “Sam will know, soon enough, if he doesn’t already, what Jacob’s done.”

Bella paled. “He thought I’d cheated on you, Edward. They all did. Jacob told them—”

“Lies,” Edward said. “Sam will make him phase, Bella. He hasn’t, because Carlisle told him not to. He was already thinking about it when we were leaving. The truth will out, soon enough.”

The tremble was not subsiding with his reassurance, and he squeezed her hand, “you need to eat,” he declared, and stood, “let me get you something.”

“No,” she said, all her energy in her frail hand, “stay. Please don’t leave.”

He was beginning to understand just how literal this repeated request was. She was afraid to be apart from him. At all. Even inside the house, only separated by walls.

“OK,” he said. “But you need to eat.” He knew someone would have heard him, and would bring something for her soon enough. “And Carlisle wants to see you, too.”

Bella bit her lip. She wanted neither food, nor more attention, but recognized the necessity of both, reluctantly nodding.

Carlisle tapped at the door before opening it, a few minutes later, bag in one hand, tray in the other.
“Thank you,” Bella said, still marvelling at the dexterity the Cullens so carefully concealed in most human company.

“No problem,” Carlisle murmured, setting the tray by the bed, “I’d like it you had something, before I look at you. Your blood sugar seems very low.”

How he could tell that, she had no idea, but took the glass of juice he handed her with shaky fingers. Edward’s own wrapped around hers, helping her hold it steady.

“Pneumonia packs a punch,” Carlisle said, pressing the stethoscope lightly to her back, “but you’re young, and you’ll heal quickly. You should be able to walk and stand mostly unaided by tomorrow,” he said, “for short periods.”

Edward nodded, understanding. It took Bella a moment to latch on to the significance of this.

“Oh,” she said, realizing anew, and then blushing, that everyone would have heard everything.

Carlisle saw, and said gently, “there are no secrets here, Bella, but there is privacy, as much as we can offer one another. No one will speak of what they know you aren’t comfortable discussing”

She nodded, appreciating this small consideration. They’d had decades to get used to this. She, much less time.

After he checked her blood pressure, he inspected the bruises on her arms and ribs, satisfied that they were healing.

“How’re your stitches feeling?” he asked softly.

Bella wondered if this was a polite way of asking if Jacob had raped her again.

“OK,” she said quietly.

Carlisle made a noncommittal “mm,” wondering exactly what “OK” encompassed.

“Any discomfort, or pain?” he asked, more precisely.

She wasn’t sure how to answer this. When Jacob had touched her, her frozen stillness had made his presence painful. Things seemed fine now.

“I feel fine now,” she said.

This alarmed Edward far more than it reassured him.

“What do you mean, you’re fine now?” he asked, not able to stay silent.

“I’m fine,” she shook her head—an attempt at dismissal—heart pounding.

“Edward,” Carlisle said, the word a warning. Then he turned his attention back to Bella. “But you’ve had some pain?”

She nodded, swallowing.

“Bella,” he said slowly, trying to find a circumspect way to discover what he needed to know, “were the stitches disturbed at all, beyond your own movement?”

Yes, Bella realized, that was what he was trying to ask.
“Yes,” she said. The word slipped out with a distinct quaver.

Edward was glad his face was behind Bella’s, because it was pulled tight, jaw shut with anxiety.

Carefully avoiding putting an operator to the statement, Carlisle said, “then your stitches should be checked. They might be ready to be removed” He waited a moment, letting her consider his wording. “Which I can do, or I can have someone make a house call.”

Edward’s hand moved mechanically at her back, forming an infinite repetition of soft circles there. His thoughts were too lost in contemplating how he could enact a slow revenge on Jacob Black.

“Can you check?” Bella asked. Her heart rate was a Bach prelude, skipping and tripping over rippling arpeggios. The speed of it brought Edward back to himself, and he shifted slightly on the bed, knowing she would need space to move.

“Don’t go,” she said, tensing.

“I’m not,” he assured her, fingers meshing with her own.

“OK, Bella, can I get you to lay down?” Carlisle asked. He was pulling out the supplies he might need.

Bella did, a wave of nerves sweeping over her. Edward sat beside her still, her hand cemented into his.

She started at Carlisle’s touch, despite his quiet talk, narrating what he would be doing.

*No signs of trauma*, Carlisle purposefully thought to Edward, whose hand softened in Bella’s.

“Can I take the stitches out, Bella?” Carlisle asked.

She nodded, trying to breathe normally, trying not to cry.

Edward kept silent, vibrantly aware of how tenuous her control was.

Mercifully, Carlisle was efficient. “All done,” he said quietly. “You’ll feel a little tender still, for a few days,” he added, pulling the blanket back up over Bella, “and I recommend not disturbing those tissues for another week or so.”

A horrified thought struck Bella. Despite what she’d asked, in desperation, just hours before, the realization that Edward might expect...would he? No, she told herself, absolutely not. She couldn't, not really.

Her breathing accelerated.

“Bella,” Edward said, hand brushing her hair away from her face. “You’re safe, remember?”

She nodded, but it was mechanical.

“I love you,” he whispered. “You’re safe.”

The nod this time was more genuine.

Carlisle packed up the remainder of his supplies, and then turned to Bella with an almost playful look. “One more thing,” he said, “completely non-medical,” pulling out a flexible tape measure. He handed it to Edward, who grinned, taking it.
“Alice,” Edward said, by way of explanation.

“Wants to measure..?” Bella asked, eyebrows up, stifling an unintended yawn.

“You,” Edward said, as if this was obvious.

Carlisle caught Bella’s eye, smiling, miming sewing with one hand.

“Hold still,” Edward said, sliding the tape measure around her, quickly measuring her around from shoulders to hips.

Bella caught Alice’s distant “thank you!” and looked at Edward, still confused.

“For tomorrow,” Edward smiled at her, kissing her forehead. “She’s making you a dress.”
Sam, Emily, Leah, Seth and Charlie had stood, shocked into silence, watching Bella leave in Edward's arms.

Emily had put her hand to her mouth, the events of the afternoon and the day before acquiring a quality so ugly, it nauseated her.

Charlie was staring at the ground, as if hoping it would supply something different in the way of explanation.

The doctor had raised his eyebrows, turning and looking at the nurse beside him, and then walked away, looking back when she didn't follow. She was trying to find a way to catch Charlie's eye.

"You said," Charlie finally managed, looking up at Sam, "that she and Jake—you said—" he couldn't even finish it now.

"He did," Sam said, voice grim. Looking at Emily, he asked her, "did she say anything to you?"

"No," she said, "just the same thing Charlie'd said she'd say. I thought—"

"We all did," Sam said, blowing out a breath. Then he collected himself. "We need to go. I need to talk to Jacob."

"No," Charlie said, wanting to speak with Jacob himself. He needed answers. "I've—"

"Done enough," Sam said. It wasn't meant unkindly, but he might as well have slapped Charlie, who blanched, knowing the truth when he heard it.

"We'll deal with this Charlie," Sam said. "We'll find out what happened."

Charlie looked at him, face curving in with horrified understanding. "No," he said, "you can't go off —"

"All half cocked, making accusations?" Sam asked, eyebrows raised.

Charlie held his tongue. What was there to say?

"You got no grounds on the res, Charlie. And even if you did, no one's filed an official complaint. We'll find out what happened. Understand?"

Charlie decided he probably didn't want to know. "I need to…" he didn't know what he needed to do. Probably go home. His statement dangled.

"I'll call you as soon as I know something," Sam promised.

Charlie nodded mutely, the full bloom of horror bleeding out from his centre.

Sam gave a curt nod in farewell, and then left, Emily's small hand in his, the others following.

"Chief Swann?" The nurse asked. They'd met a few times at the hospital in the course of their respective work. "Can I talk to you?" she asked.

"Another time," he mumbled, going to move away.
"It's about your daughter," she said, stopping Charlie midstep.

He pivoted, coming back to her, eying her intently. He didn't say anything, but looked at her, eyes narrow, and demanding.

"I can't say much," the nurse said, a little nervously, "but I saw her when she came in. The guy who brought her," she said, "big kid."

"Jacob," Charlie muttered.

"Sure," she said, "she was scared of him."

Charlie nodded, face softening a little, wanting to encourage her to continue.

Very quietly, she said, looking around to make sure they were alone, "I filed a suspected domestic abuse form. Didn't you see it?"

He had. Had dismissed it entirely, thinking the doctor was simply seeing the result of her natural clumsiness. Her legs were always bruised from running into things.

But the bruises he'd seen. He could barely, still, wrap his head around...Jacob...hurting her.

Not just hurting her, the little, and now spurious voice in his mind spat.

"I did," he said, "gave it to a deputy to follow up with." He sighed, "we get a lot of those reports—"

"You didn't ask her yourself?" the nurse asked, trying to keep the incredulity out of her voice.

"I did," he said again, just, he thought, I jumped to assumptions. Didn't listen. Thought she was in denial.

The nurse's face was twisting sympathetically, "it's hard," she said, "when it's someone we love. To see beyond what we expect. I get it, I just...thought you should know." She turned, walking away.

He sat down on one of the chairs in the lobby, his thoughts swim together, trying to step back into the logic of his work. Piecing things together.

Only Seth spoke in the car. He hadn't believed that Edward had hurt Bella, and it made no sense to him that Jacob had either. He'd imagined some third threatening third party lurking somewhere. His youth and inexperience allowed him to entertain the sweet notion that the people who loved you, couldn't possibly hurt you. Not that way.

"You don't think, that maybe," he started, "maybe it was someone else, like—"

Leah's hand rested briefly on his arm. "Don't," she said. Her voice was pained. She knew exactly how well the people who loved you could hurt you. Intent was immaterial.

When they pulled up to Sam's place, Leah and Sam shifted, and summoned the remainder of the pack.

Sam phoned Jacob, giving a curt "pack meeting, my place," and then hanging up.

They were waiting for him, all but Sam phased.

"Come on," Sam said, jutting his chin towards the other wolves, "you're late," when Jacob stepped out of his car.
"Uh," Jacob said, "I think I'm s'posed to wait a few more days."

Sam rolled his eyes. "You've been playing hockey with that crutch for the better part of a week. Change. Now."

The command in his voice was unmistakable.

As soon as he'd shifted, his pack mates circled him.

*Um, hey, Jacob thought. What's up with the ring around the rosy?*

Sam wasted no time in skipping directly to his central question. *What happened with Bella?* The way he phrased it left not room to wonder to the subject of the 'what'.

*That's kinda private,* Jacob thought nervously.

Sam had ordered the pack's silence, and it made Jacob's unease with this line of questioning stand out even more.

*She said you raped her, Jacob. And she went running to the Cullens like a bat out of Hell at the hospital. What happened?*

A flicker of images of a battle between the Cullens and the wolves erupted in Sam's mind, explaining much of his reasoning.

In response, the images in Jacob's mind were beginning to leak. He'd tried to stuff them away, wanting to keep their time private, just theirs, but the accusation stung, and he couldn't help but recall what he'd experienced. Her response to him, the way her hair curled against her shoulders, the way he'd touched her.

The wave of revulsion that rippled through the pack was visceral.

Jacob couldn't understand it. *What?* He asked defensively, thinking they were alarmed by the invasion of his and Bella's privacy. *Not like you all keep your shit private.*

Seth couldn't help himself. *You held her down?!* He was traumatized by what he'd seen. *She was crying. She asked you to stop. How could you—?*

*Quiet!* Sam ordered, and the growing babble of thoughts, simmering under his order, stopped abruptly.

*I did not hold her down!* Jacob protested.

Sam replayed, in his mind, for all but Jacob to cringe at, what he'd shown them in his memory.

*This is bullshit,* Jacob said. *You, he thought at Seth, are so freaking in love with the Cullens, you can't even see what they did to her. Charlie—*

*ENOUGH!* Sam said, his voice shaking with the effort of controlling Jacob.

*Charlie, Sam finished for Jacob, trusted you, and us...and what you've done has—*

*Where is she?* Jacob asked.

*You've—*
WHERE IS SHE?

SILENCE! Sam roared.

The entire pack dropped, heads down, whimpering.

All except for Jacob. He was fighting it, struggling under the weight of the order.

You are to stay in your home, Jacob Black. You are not to leave, not use the phone, not attempt to contact her, or Charlie, or the Cullens. You're to leave her alone, until the council has met to decide what to do with you.

The play of possible consequences were flickering in the background of Sam's mind, along with the horrific weight of guilt, at having literally put Bella in Jacob’s hands.

No, Jacob thought, and he was standing, mind full of his need to find Bella. To keep her safe from the ultimate end the Cullens intended for her.

There was another eruptive babble from the pack's mind, at this revelation.

DOWN, Jacob! Sam said, using all the force of his silent voice.

But Jacob was still rising, and then he was gone. His form had bounded over the circle of still prone wolves, his voice as absent in the pack’s mind as his bodily presence.

What the hell? Leah thought.

Go! Sam ordered, and they were after him. He had the lead though, and the chase took them far East of Forks, and then north, the towns growing smaller, and sparser, the further they went. Sam called halt near the border, knowing they wouldn't catch him, not wanting to leave the tribe so unprotected.

Shit, Leah thought, as they retraced their steps.

The rest of them retained an uneasy silence, thoughts subdued and anxious.

Go home, Sam said, mentally sighing, I need to call Billy. And Charlie.

And the Cullens.

A/N for 2018-06-03: Thank you all, for your vibrant engagement with this tale. You make writing it a joy. Heads up, inviting all to continue the convo about where I'm dragging this story next (or, rather, it's dragging me) on FB where you can find my page FlamingMaple (@ErinAffleckTarbuck)

~ Erin
The night was not an easy one.

Carlisle had left, fully intending to give them their space, and Bella her sleep, but found himself hovering nearby, worried by her still distressed breathing.

Edward was getting a much clearer, and uglier picture of what had happened to her. Her body, impressed in its very musculature, with the distress of what Jacob had done, wound itself into the violent shape he had forced on her. She resembled a grotesque violin: one hand stretched above her head, a tight, wooden fist, her back arched, one one limp hand horizontal to her—a broken bow. The discord of her nightmare ran through her centre, knees bent hollow, straining into the mattress.

He held her down, Edward realized, after she'd punched him.

When her hand was too damaged to defend herself.

Edward was afraid to touch her, too full of rage to be gentle, and fearful his hands would lend tactile reality to her already lucid dream.

He whispered to her instead, "It's just a dream, Bella. Wake up. I'm here, you're safe." He repeated it until she did, sweating, shaking, nervous, flicking eyes showing she wasn't sure where she was.

"You're home," he said, risking touching her hand. "No one will hurt you."

She said nothing, but curled into his form, kicking off the heated blanket, wanting to know only the safe chill of his body.

When she began to shiver, he pulled the blanket back up. Her breathing had returned to a worrisome shallow pant.

"Does it hurt to breathe?" he asked.

She nodded.

He went to get up from the bed, but she gasped, hands digging into him, panicked he was leaving.

If it wasn't for the distress of what she had gone through, he would be happy with this development. He never wanted to be parted from her, and now he had his wish, in the most distorted way possible.


When Bella saw him, by the low light of the bedside lamp Edward had turned on, she said, "no," fearing he'd come with morphine.

He gave a quiet "hello," and put three bottles of pills on the table. "If you can't take a deep breath, you won't get better," Carlisle said.


"No," he said lightly. "no morphine. I'm afraid you're stuck with plain old non-prescription painkillers." He picked up the bottles, pulling out a dose, handing them to Edward. "Which I will leave all the convincing of taking to with Edward."
Edward made a sound that might have been a chuckle, palming them.

"These, though," Carlisle said, rattling the third bottle, "are in case you need help sleeping, which I
hear is also important for humans. Along with breathing," he added dryly.

He stood. "They won't give you dreams," he said softly, and left.

"Please," Edward said. "Something," he said, "at least for the pain."

Bella blew out one of her shallow breaths, needing to struggle to take it back in again. She held out
her hand for the pills, taking them in an awkward swallow.

"Thank you," he said.

"Drug pusher," she mumbled, but good naturedly, making him chuckle more distinctly. She'd calmed
a bit, and shifted in the bed, sitting up more fully beside him.

If his own heart still beat, it would have been thudding, looking at her. Her hair had fanned out
behind her, the rich blush of her skin its own light. He moved slowly, so she could stop him if she
wanted to, bringing his lips to hers. Her hands rested on his cheeks, one more awkwardly than the
other in its cast, and he felt her shoulders relax at his touch.

He pulled back after a moment, watching carefully, looking for any sign of distress.

"No," she said, smiling, "that hasn't changed."

"Good," he said, matching her expression, running his finger along her cheek. Then he kissed her
again, testing the limits of this togetherness, his own hands cupped at her face.

He didn't want to stop, and neither did she, but he pulled back. "More tomorrow," he said, hearing
her sigh. "But first, sleep."

"Yes'm," she said, turning her cast into a mock salute, then looked over at the bedside table, eyeing
the familiar bottle there, picking it up, starting to try to open it.

Edward took it from her, twisting the cap off, and returning it to her.

"Now that," she said, "is really annoying."

"Mm," Edward said, in such a way that told Bella that she'd just have to suck it up.

She placed the small tablet under her tongue, hoping Carlisle was right.

When she woke the next morning, she felt fuzzy, almost blurred around the edges of her mind. It
took her the panicked stretch of a minute to remember where she was.

By the time it resolved, she had laid, clearly awake to Edward, but completely unresponsive to his
voice. He was on the verge of summoning Carlisle when she finally took as deep a breath as her
lungs would allow, and opened her eyes.

"Bella?" he asked again, perched nervously over her.

"I'm here," she answered, more to herself, than him.

"You are," he made himself reply gently, silencing his still vigorous anxiety.
She sat up slowly, remembering what today was, reminding herself of the protection this would provide. That they would never have to be apart.

He could see the muscles in her shoulders and back release. His own followed suit.

"What time do we have to be there?" she asked, realizing they hadn't talked about the details. She blushed, thinking of it. Did one make an appointment to get married? Or just show up?

"No time, in particular, but I think earlier would be better for you," he said.

"OK," she said, moving to stand, which he also mirrored. Now the blush was vibrant. "Um, I need to use the bathroom."

"So I surmised," he said, an eyebrow raised, smiling. He'd been wondering how far her insistence on their togetherness went.

"Can you stay outside the door?" she asked shyly, "where I can see you?"

He looked at her, eyes narrowed slightly, "I will," he said, "but I expect you to tell me if you get dizzy, OK?"

The blush turned scarlet.

"What?" he grinned, "I can see you naked, but not on the toilet?"

She a small laugh bubble out of her. "We all have our lines, I suppose."

As she was leaving the bathroom, there was a soft knock at the door. "You two lovebirds decent?"

"Yes, Rose," Edward called, and then looked at Bella apologetically, "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can quite spare you all the wedding fluff."

Rose poked her head into the room. "Good, you are up," she said. Alice breezed by her, a cheerful "morning!" on her lips, a garment bag over her arm, followed by Esme, who was carrying a tray that steamed seductively.

Bella looked sideways at Edward, who whispered, taking her hand, "say the word, and we can be alone."

She was nervous, he could see, with so many people, even just family, around, and he turned away briefly, still holding her hand, saying, below her hearing, "maybe just one of you at a time for now."

"Bon appetit," Esme said, putting the tray by the bed, leaving with Alice, who blew Bella a kiss from the door, jumping a little in excitement.

"She really does love weddings," Edward said. "Even at the courthouse."

Bella smiled, and breathed out nervously.

"You eat," Rose said, "and I'll do your hair." She sat behind Bella on the bed, and began brushing.

In a pert voice, Bella asked Edward, "Do I get a doll house to live in too?"

"Sorry," he chuckled, "just this one," gesturing to his room, but then more seriously, "unless you'd like our own place. We can do that, if you want."
There was a flicker of appeal, and then a frisson of fear, wondering about being alone, about what Edward would expect.

He caught the shift, saying, "we don't have to do this," looking towards the dress, and back to her, "unless you want to," misinterpreting the change in her.

"No," she said, "I do," and then laughed at her choice of words.

"Cute," Rose quipped, making a tidy braid.

After a bit, Bella spoke again, "I'm just…" she shook her head, "odd things—"

"Set you off?" Rose supplied, finishing the last piece of the braid. "Of course they do," and she looked at Edward, eyebrows lined up in the universal sign for I-told-you-so. She hopped off the bed, and was gone.

Bella looked at Edward, wanting to dismiss Rose's blitheness, but couldn't find it in herself to. She was right. She took a spoonful of breakfast instead, some sort of soup, rich with a bouquet of flavours she hadn't encountered before.

"Vietnamese," Edward said, seeing her surprise.

"It's amazing," Bella said. "It still blows my mind that you are all such good cooks, when you don't eat." Then she paled, putting the spoon down.

"What?" Edward asked, suspicions rising.

"You'll need to hunt," she said, trying not to let her breathing race. She knew she couldn't be near him when that happened.

He squeezed her hand. "Not going anywhere," he said. "Won't need to for a long time."

This was a blatant untruth. She knew he had just under a week before he entered territory he himself called dangerous. She gave a small smile, though, not having the energy to argue, and went back to her soup, less enthusiastically than before.

"Oh no you don't," he said, pulling her back over to him, "I know that look. What's worrying you?"

It was easy to smile with him, to take the kiss he offered, to smooth her hands over the softness of his face, but then he slid his hand to her hip, steadying her.

She jerked as if he'd burned her, her heart beating a wild tattoo.

He moved his hands just enough away, ready to catch her if she fell.

"What did I do wrong?" he asked.

Her eyes began to water, "nothing," she whispered, "I just…" she didn't know how to explain it.

Edward put his hands slowly to her back, settling her onto the bed, so she was sitting beside him.

"I interrupted you answering my question," he said, "what's bothering you?"

She sighed. "You will need to hunt, and we will need to be apart—soon."

"We'll find a way around it," he said, "OK? But you don't need to worry about it today."
She'd eaten a bit more, but not much, and when he lifted his chin in the direction of the tray, she shook her head. "You, however," he said, "do need to eat more frequently than me."

"Can we not worry about that today, too?" she asked, smiling at him.

"Debatable," he said, but not pressing the point. He stood and picked up the garment bag Alice had brought in. "Ready to get dressed?" he asked, unzipping it.

"Oh," she said, seeing the dress Alice had made. "Wow."

She'd set aside her nerves out of necessity, when Carlisle told her Alice was sewing, but they'd risen, unbidden, when Alice had arrived in the morning. She'd had visions of some lace or meringue monstrosity. This, though, was simple, and elegant: a heavy cream knee-length dress, capped with a high tulip collar, and long, demure bell sleeves.

"She wanted something that hid your cast," he said, "in case you wanted to take pictures."

When the next wave of tears found their way out of her eyes, Bella felt more annoyed with herself, than anything else. Why did she need to cry over everything these days?

"I would," Bella said, "like to take pictures. For Mom," and then there were more tears, "and Dad."

Edward held her, burying his face in her hair. "We can always have a ceremony, later, for friends and family," he said. He did not address the issue of her father, whose very continued existence Charlie ignorantly owed to the love Edward bore his daughter.

"Do you want help?" Edward asked, wondering where the lines of her shyness lay, and if they would reassert themselves, as she felt safe.

The thought of dressing her was remarkably appealing, as was the reciprocal thought of undressing her.

There were other thoughts that followed those lines, which he guiltily, and quickly dismissed.

"If you can help with the zipper, I think I'm good," Bella said, blushing.

"Not looking," he said lightly, turning his head away, "tell me when you're ready."

She called his name softly, and he set his hand to hold the sides of the garment together, zipping it up slowly. His mind was too eager to imagine the reverse process, and he reminded himself of exactly why they were getting married, and thrashed the beast of his desire back into submission.

He wouldn't let her walk down the stairs, and when they arrived at the bottom, Emmett snickered. "That's my brother, ass backwards, carrying his bride on the way to the wedding." Emmett slapped him on the back, once Bella was safely on her feet.

"Almost ready," Alice chimed, arriving with a large paper bag in one hand. The rest of the Cullens were assembled, and it was only Bella who stood shoeless.

"And you've got her barefoot already," Emmett went on, waggling his eyebrows, looking towards the kitchen meaningfully.

Rose looked at him, face dark and brooding, and he muttered, "sorry," and became uncharacteristically quiet.

"Here," Alice said, ignoring Emmett, pulling a pair of shoes out from the bag, "something
borrowed," and smiled at Rose.

"And something blue," Esme said, picking up a bouquet of indigo hydrangeas from the entranceway table.

"Thank you, everyone," Bella said slowly, awed by the care they'd all given to this.

"You got something new in there, Alice?" Emmett asked. "Because Edward covers the old part."

Edward rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Emmett, let's go."

The drive to Port Angeles was far under the hour it would have taken Bella, and she was glad she'd eaten little by the time they got there. Edward held her hand, as they walked into the red brick courthouse.

"Not Vegas," he said apologetically.

She smiled. "Better than Vegas," she said, "less driving."

He laughed.

When the judicial clerk called them, Bella found herself suddenly nervous again, and Edward turned to face her, hands in his, watching.

"I love you," she said, "are you sure you want me?"

He leaned forward and kissed her, murmuring, "I would marry you a thousand times, to assure you of that."

The curve of her lips was soft, and warm. "Hold you to it, then," she said, and they turned, as one, to meet the judge.

"Wait," Alice said, ducking forward, pulling one last thing out of her bag. "Something new," she said, pinning a simple veil to the back of Bella's head.

Bella felt silly, but only for a moment, when she caught Edward's eyes. They were waning in colour, but lustrous. His gaze was all for her, and when the judge spoke, Edward's eyes studied her face, and all the beautiful colours that shimmered over her cheeks.

When the judge asked for the rings, Bella shot him a panicked look, realizing she hadn't even thought of this. Edward smiled, whispering, "and something old—my mother's and father's," as Carlisle put the rings on the judge's book.

At the last words, Bella was so overwhelmed with feeling, she needed to close her eyes when he kissed her, reminding herself to keep breathing.

It was so easy to forget to under his touch.

Emmett coughed, and the judge cleared his throat.

"Congratulations, Mr. Cullen," and then looking at Bella, "Mrs.?" he asked, not quite sure. She blushed, nodding. "Congratulations Mrs. Cullen," he added, an arm kindly, but purposefully pointing their way out. Bella became aware of the click of a camera, seeing the dark shape in Alice's hands.
Edward made Bella sit down in the waiting area, not alarmed, but certainly concerned by the wanness of her cheeks, so rosy moments before.

He followed her line of sight.

She was staring a young couple, clearly the next in line to be married, waiting much more anxiously than she had. The young woman's protuding belly marked her as very near birth.

Edward wished he knew where Bella's thoughts lay, but lacking that gift, whispered what he knew of the ruminations of the woman she looked at. "She thinks you look beautiful," he said, not adding that this was tinged with some envy, and a wish that she'd been able to dress herself better than she had.

Bella knew there was more to the young woman's pensiveness, and standing too quickly for Edward's liking, took several steps towards the other couple. "Congratulations in advance," she said, "you need something borrowed, and something blue." Bella pulled the veil from her hair, and offered it to the woman, adding, "kinda doubt I'm going to use this again." The woman smiled, and took it, and the bouquet with a sincere "thank you."

She let Edward take her hand again, this time sliding a sturdy arm around her waist, barely letting her walk as they left the courthouse.

"Where to, Mrs. Cullen?" he asked gently.

"Home," she said, and disposing with all pretense, he picked her up, and carried her to the car.

---

A/N for 2018/06/04 - Your comments, questions and suggestions have been extraordinarily helpful in continuing this narrative - merci, mes amis. I do respond to all questions & wonderings, so please make sure you're logged in when you comment.

~ Erin

@ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB
Charlie put the phone back into its cradle. Then he put the bottle of beer he was holding, very carefully, onto the table beside it.

It wouldn't do to start throwing things.

Much as he wanted to.

Jacob Black had hurt his daughter.

No, Jacob Black had raped his daughter.

Jacob'd admitted to it, Sam'd said, but then uttered words that had made the blood swim to Charlie's face: "He took off, Charlie, I'm sorry."

"What do you mean, 'took off'?” Charlie had asked.

"He literally bolted. In the car, gone, before I could stop him."

Charlie was wondering how he could finangle a state-wide alert for Jacob's car, without breaking too many rules.

He hadn't found one yet, and knew he likely wouldn't.

"You get the license plate?" he'd asked. It wasn't like he could ask Billy.

Oh God, Billy, his heart clenched.

"Does Billy know?" had been the next question.

"Yeah," Sam said, voice subdued. "Council's meeting tonight."

_Council?_ Charlie thought. _Why?_

Sam had started talking again, almost babbling, like he'd said something he shouldn't have. When he hit the "I'm sorry's", Charlie was listening again.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie. I had no idea—"

"You're sorry?" Charlie asked, blowing out a beery breath. "Nothing from this sticks to you kid," he sighed. "This is on me."

Sam had paused for a moment, before saying quietly, "it's on Jacob."

Yes, Charlie thought, it was most definitely on him, but he was next on that list.

"You didn't force her to go see him, Sam," he'd choked out, voice coming apart in pieces.

Sam had been quiet for a moment. "No," he said, "but she asked not to be left alone with him, and none of us listened to her," he sighed, "it's on us too."

The _us_ had a strange emphasis to it that made no sense to Charlie, but he chalked it up to his own general distress, and the effects of the beer in his hand.
He'd come home, shell-shocked, after the hospital, at loose ends, not sure what to do with himself.

The weight of the guilt he felt made his chest ache. Literally.

Hence the beer.

There was nothing he could do. He had no official complaint, and no jurisdiction on the reserve if he did.

He had no daughter.

No, the voice in his head said. It was running freer than usual, thanks to the alcohol. No, you're the idiot that stuck her in the back of your squad car and made her go see her rapist.

Then you accused the man she loves of hurting her.

Jesus.

He picked up the beer again, taking a long swig.

He wondered, for the hundredth time, if she was OK, if she was getting help. Those worries were a constant thrum, running through him in an anxious buzz.

He'd lost track of how many times he'd picked up the phone, wanting to call, to talk to her, but putting it down, before he could finish punching in the number.

What would he say?—that he was sorry?

He snorted, then spluttered, trying to keep the beer from flying out of his nose.

Beneath his worry, his guilt, his anxiety for Bella, was something deeper: the foundation-shifting knowledge that he'd been so prejudiced, that he couldn't see straight. Wouldn't listen to his own daughter.

He'd screwed up cases before, missed things, but not like this.

His angry prejudice against Edward had been the stew he'd swum in for so long, that he'd ignored his own child. Thought he knew better than what she spoke from her own mouth.

He'd meant so well, that he'd paved the road to Hell for her with his good intentions.

Setting down the empty bottle, he pulled a full one from the fridge, cracking it open, and took another long drink.

A/N for 2018-06-5 - Question: what do you all imagine Jacob is doing right now? A little stumped on this front. Would love to hear your thoughts. A03, sadly, is blocked at my worksite, so can't check on breaks and respond to comments, but I can on FF.net (best to make sure you're logged in there so I can PM you).

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB
He wants to see us—to talk, Carlisle thought at Edward.

Knowing who, Edward gave a low growl in reply, one that only Bella did not hear.

They were seated around the table, trying not to make Bella feel self-conscious about being the only one eating. So far, they'd been doing well, but she didn't miss Edward's sudden stillness beside her.

He turned, smiling at her, their hands still linked. She smiled back, and to his great relief, actually took a bite of food, letting her attention drift back to her conversation with Alice.

The thought of Sam Uley, so near her, made his skin crawl.

"Did he say anything else?" Edward asked.

No, Carlisle responded silently.

"When?" Edward asked, voice still too quiet for human ears, keeping his hand loose in Bella's, rubbing his thumb over her fingers.

Tonight, Carlisle thought, showing him where, in the woods beyond the house. He'll be coming alone.

Alone? A show of trust, Edward mused.

Or repentance.

Bella would be asleep by then. He could slip away, and be back in seconds if she woke. The idea didn't sit well with him—them being apart—but he wanted to hear, first hand, what the wolves had found.

"I'll come," Edward said subaudibly, stealing a glance at Bella.

Carlisle nodded, just enough for Edward to catch it.

It wasn't long after Bella was asleep, that he heard Carlisle's summons. He's here, his mind called out.

"Just us," Edward reminded the family, "everyone else stays near Bella."

Esme and Rose sat just inside the bedroom, silent and still as statues, with Jasper, Emmett and Alice positioned around the house.

In the small clearing, Edward and Carlisle looked at each other in surprise. Sam had arrived, alone, as promised, but in human form.

He stood, uneasily, some distance from them.

"Thank you," he said, "for agreeing to meet."

Carlisle nodded, but said nothing.

"Jacob has admitted what he's done," he began, but his thoughts ran ahead of him, and Edward
snarled out a response. "You let him get away!!"

Sam closed his eyes, nodding, glancing down. He abandoned his words, showing Edward, instead, what had transpired.

Edward flinched, revulsion growing, seeing what they had. He would have paled, if it had been physically possible. As it was, his stomach curdled at the images flickering through Sam's mind.

"How did he leave the pack?" Edward asked, hearing their conclusions.

"I don't know," Sam said, running through the many theories they'd discussed.

Of course, Edward thought. He was Ephraim Black's heir.

"Edward?" Carlisle asked.

Edward turned to him, explaining near silently, and at speeds incomprehensible to Sam, what had transpired.

"The council met," Sam said, interrupting their tête-à-tête. "Their conclusion was that we have wronged Bella, and by extension, you."

Edward only growled at this obvious, and gross understatement.

Sam continued on, "Jacob showed us your intention with Bella." His visual interpretation of this reflected his own genetic prejudices, and Edward snorted at the dramatic overplay. As if he would be so vile—violent, or traumatize his wife in turning her.

"We will not consider it a violation of the treaty, for you to do so," Sam said, "in recognition of the crime Jacob has committed."

Edward exploded.

"YOU THINK THAT OFFERS RESTITUTION?" he bellowed. "HE RAPED HER!"

Carlisle raised his hand. A wordless enjoining to silence.

I know, he thought at his son. He knows too.

He waited, letting Edward calm himself.

"Jacob is a danger," Carlisle said, "to our family. I would argue to you, as well. His actions considered."

Sam watched him shrewdly, waiting.

Carlisle spoke again, voice level and even. "He cannot escape consequence."

This statement hung, heavier for Sam, in their midst.

Bella stirred, murmuring something soft—his name?— and Edward's attention flickered. He would need to leave, and soon.

"He is beyond human justice," Carlisle continued. "And you yourself doubt your capacity to confine or control him."
Sam swallowed, nodding reluctantly.

"Unless he returns to seek his own remedy, we hunt him to destroy him," Carlisle said, this too, cold and level.

Sam closed his eyes, and Edward heard, with pained clarity, the distraught voices that had been heard at their council meeting.

Billy's was foremost. He'd denied every possibility of it, until each and every one of the pack had spoken, sharing in horrific detail, what they had witnessed in their joined minds. All the faces that ran the circle were paler by the end of the telling, and many wet with grief, at so much wrong. With shame.

Jacob's father had sat in silence after that, his muteness from shock, or guilt, Edward couldn't tell.

The thought of Billy led next to Charlie, in Sam's mind, and Edward flicked his eyes back up to the man in front of him.

"You told Charlie?" he asked, more as prompt to memory, than a real question.

"He thinks Jacob fled by car," Edward said to Carlisle, "And the vehicle in question?" he asked, turning back to Sam.

"Dumped in Wichita," Sam answered. Easy enough to fake a human trail for those who cared to follow it.

Like Charlie.

Not that he had any formal means to investigate. No report of a missing person had been made. No crime reported.

_Just his daughter, raped_, Sam thought bitterly, with pity and chagrin.

"I can't speak for the council," Sam said, "but I will take your proposal to them."

"Do," Carlisle said coolly. "And Sam," he added, "keep to your side of the line. I wouldn't want anyone in our family to be confused—or feel threatened—by the unannounced presence of a wolf."

Sam nodded, and in a remarkable show of faith, turned his back on them, walking away into the dark screen of the forest, shifting to his other self, as they returned to the house.

---

A/N for 2018-06-06 - First, another short chapter, I know. Next one will be longer. Hope this answered some of your questions about what was happening with the wolves. Secondly, thank you for all your energetic descriptions of what Jacob might be doing - or should have happen to him. Finally, the writing pace is slowing, as I figure out how to move through the plot difficulties in front of me.

After the very mixed reviews of "This Beautiful, Broken Thing", you all are buoying up my spirits with your beautiful encouragement. Thank you for responding - it is wonderful to connect with you.

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

FlamingMaple on FanFiction.net
She’d woken up—or seemed to, shrieking “NO!”

Edward had seen her beginning to stir, laying beside her on the bed, but hadn’t thought anything of it. She was a mobile sleeper, somnolently turning and shifting at the best of times.

The sound, and its abruptness hadn’t alarmed him, but the clawing at herself had. She’d raked her fingernails down the shirt and over the shorts she was in, trying to scrape something away from her thighs.

After his first attempts to wake her with his voice didn’t work, his sounds became more urgent. “Bella, stop!” he said, more loudly than he wanted to, and with his heart high in this throat, locked his hands around hers, holding them away from her body.

“CARLISLE!” he yelled, as she continued to somnolently fight not just her memory, but now him too.

Carlisle was there. “Let her go,” he said, calmly but firmly.

“But—”

“Let her go,” he said again, and Edward did, putting his hands to his hair.

She was scratching herself. He could smell the blood now, and if it wasn’t bad enough to see her hurt, his mouth was flooding with venom.

“They’re just scratches,” Carlisle said, “she’ll wake up soon.”

“You can’t know that,” Edward said, watching, a desperate feeling growing.

The one person who could tell, was not there. She and Jasper had left to hunt. He supposed he should be grateful, considering the smell now saturating the room.

Then suddenly, Bella was silent, hissing in a hoarse breath, curling over on her side.

When Edward moved to touch her hand, the startled “Don’t!” made him stop, halfway between Carlisle and the bed.

“Don’t touch me,” she said again, voice shaking, raspy.

“I won’t,” Edward said softly, face folding in over itself in worry, stepping back.

No one said anything else for a moment, but Carlisle switched on the bedside lamp. The soft click made Bella flinch.

“Bella,” Carlisle said softly, “you’re bleeding. Can you look and see how badly?”

When Bella looked at him, the pull of her eyebrows registering confusion, Carlisle said, “your thighs,” gesturing with his hand.

Her breathing was ragged, rippling irregularly in and out. She didn’t move.

“No,” she said.
“OK,” Carlisle said, frowning slightly, “be right back.”

And he was, true to his promise, gone and returned in seconds, carrying an inhaler. He didn’t move any closer than Edward was, but squatted, so that he and Bella were both at eye level. “You’re having trouble breathing,” Carlisle observed. “This will help.” He held it out ot her. “Have you used one before?”

She shook her head, not reaching for it.

Edward was growing more and more anxious. This was not normal. She’d been having a nightmare. Had he triggered something in trying to stop her from hurting herself?

“I’d like to be alone,” Bella finally said, wheezing through the words.

“Of course,” Carlisle replied, putting his hand firmly on Edward’s shoulder, turning him towards the door.

Edward shrugged away from him, an inaudible growl bubbling in his throat.

Carlisle turned him so Bella wouldn’t see their lips moving. “This is just the trauma speaking, Edward,” he said gently. “Give her some space.”

Edward’s face collapsed into one of worry, turning back to look at her. She was still struggling to breathe, the wheezy sounds unpredictable and strained.

“Just for now,” Carlisle said, and put his hand to Edward’s back, gently moving him out of the room.

Esme was waiting just outside for them. “Let me try,” she said quietly.

Edward nodded, but frowned too, the worry distorting all the lines of his face.

Esme reached the bedside without objection from Bella, picking up the inhaler. She shook it methodically, and told Bella “Deep breath in, hold, and release, OK?”

Edward listened, relieved when her breathing became more regular, and less strained.

“Edward’s rather worried about you,” Esme said after a few minutes.

The rustle of Bella’s hair, over the cotton pillow case told Edward she’d nodded.

“Bad dream?” Esme asked.

More rustling.

“How’re the scratches?” Esme said.

“Embarrassing,” Bella mumbled.

“Let me get something to clean them up with,” Esme murmured, heading to the bathroom.

Bella risked sitting up, and looking. Nothing bad, but the logical part of her mind was chagrined. How stupid did you have to be, making yourself bleed in a house full of vampires?

“Thanks,” she said, taking the damp cloth from Esme, wiping at her thighs. Then she froze, the action suddenly familiar, making her gorge rise, revulsion spreading.
“Can I—?” Esme asked, reaching.

‘NO!” Bella said, going to smack her hand away. Esme moved it quickly, wanting avoid greater injury.

Putting her hands in her lap, Esme said, “you’re doing fine, Bella.”

Bella did not feel like she was doing fine.

She knew what had happened, bits of it so clear in her mind that she couldn’t avoid them. Other pieces, though, lingered in lost corners, and surprised her with themselves in unexpected recall.

Deciding that this memory had had its moment in the open, Bella returned to wiping at her thighs, telling herself firmly that she couldn’t spend her life being afraid of a memory. “Just a memory,” she mumbled, blotting the last bit of blood away.

Esme didn’t ask. She knew better than to.

“It will get better, Bella,” she sighed instead, “really.”

Bella wanted to believe this. It just wasn’t feeling entirely credible.

“Here,” Esme said, hand out. Bella handed her the cloth, a little nervously.

“It’s OK,” she said, “we’re being careful.” They were hunting far more often than necessary, but it could only do good, this vigilance.

Bella nodded.

Esme was gone and back again, the door softly closed behind her.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Esme asked. “Or are you ready to see your husband yet?” She smiled, saying the word. It gave her an unspeakable amount of joy to see them together, and more, knowing this next step had sealed this bond so formally.

Bella’s answering smile was nervous. She shook her head, too jittery still.

“Have you thought about a honeymoon, at all?” Esme asked, thinking to move the conversation to lighter subjects.

Edward had asked her if she wanted to go away. They had lots of places they could stay, and be safe, but Bella had shaken her head. The idea of being away from the rest of the Cullens made her heart race. What if—?

There were so many what if’s.

Most of these possibilities felt completely ridiculous in her head, and yet, in her body, the anxiety was real. It made her bones vibrate.

There was also the one thing that everyone had been so blasé about, made seem almost insignificant.

They were married.

And she was in no way ready to consummate said marriage.

He hadn’t as much as whispered a suggestion of it, and she doubted he would, knowing his fear of
hurting her.

Especially now.

“How did you—” Bella started, she frowned, blushing, “after—” Frustrated, she blew out a sigh. She couldn’t even talk about it for goodness sake.

“Ah,” Esme said, nodding in understanding. “I think,” she said, “Rose would have better perspective on that, than I do, but...it’s different,” she offered, “after you’re changed. Everything from before is,” and she seemed to search the air with her hand, for the right word, “murky. Fuzzy.”

Bella wished very much for her own memory to be so selectively murky.

“The memories that are clearest,” Esme said, “are the ones you choose to hold onto. Or the ones you can’t quite let go of.” Her face, while she said this was marked by a sadness she couldn’t hide. “My son,” she said. “He’s mostly what I remember.” She didn’t add that it was pneumonia that took him, which was one of the reasons they were so careful with Bella.

Bella listened, nodding.

“Though I’m not suggesting being changed as a solution,” Esme clarified, thinking of Rosalie.

In the hall, Edward made an exasperated sound.

“But I should let you sleep,” Esme said, not standing quite yet, studying Bella’s face.

“OK,” Bella said, wrapping her arms around her knees. “Thank you,” she added, “you’ve all been amazing.”

“You’re family, Bella,” Esme smiled, as if this explained it, turning, and padding from the room.

“Edward?” Bella called nervously.

“I’m here,” he said, moving slowly towards the bed, stopping just shy of it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I know that upset you.”

He shook his head, wanting to reach out to touch her, but not certain of his welcome. Of the effect of his hands.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, standing, taking his hands in hers, resting her forehead on his chest. “I love you, I’m sorry I screamed at you.”

He let his hands rest on her cheeks. “No,” he said, “no more apologies from you. I failed you, Bella, in all the ways that mattered.” He didn’t list his well recited litany of faults. She’d silenced it earlier in the day, a finger to his lips.

“OK,” she said, “I’ll work on that, but you need to stop riding the guilt train. ’K?”

He smiled, “such a way with words, Mrs. Cullen.”

“Deal?” she asked, not letting him distract her.

“Deal,” he agreed, leaning down to kiss her cheek. She changed his target, and met his lips with hers.
It caught him off guard, and the touch of her hands, now at his torso, and the lingering smell of her blood, made his body collude against the better judgement of his mind. Her thin clothes, and their proximity, did not allow for her to miss the reaction this elicited in him.

She didn’t exactly freeze, but her movements slowed to almost that, like cold molasses, uncertainly liquid, approximating solidity.

It took Edward a moment to discipline his body’s reply to hers.

Bella didn’t know what to say. She cursed Jacob again, for the horrified, stilted awkwardness he’d brought to her relationship with Edward. It was their wedding night, and she’d just shoved her husband from their bed, screaming at him not to touch her.

Not that they could actually be together in that way. Jacob had physically seen to that too. Not for weeks.

Edward was wondering what to say, too. She couldn’t have missed his arousal. Did he talk to her about it? Or would it only draw attention to something she was already anxious about—with good reason. He wavered, uncertain, for a moment, but practicality finally took predominance, and he found himself saying, “you must be tired.”

*Always*, Bella thought, *at least these days*. But did she want to sleep? *God no*. The dreams were so unpredictable. But, her body was starting to tremble, tired from standing, and needing sleep more than her she could muster her will for peace and wakefulness.

She nodded, sighing, tired of being tired.

“Can we do something tomorrow?” she asked. “You know, normal?”

“Of course,” he said, “what do you have in mind?”

She thought about it for a minute. “The bookstore.” There was a small one in town. Mostly second hand, with a limited selection, but normal, certainly. “And maybe coffee after?”

“Perfect,” he said, an arm gently gesturing towards the bed.

She looked at it, feeling resigned, but climbed back under the covers, looking at him, and then patting the spot beside her.

Without even jostling the bed, he swiveled himself over her on his hands, landing gracefully on the other side. He grinned, hearing her laugh.

“Show off,” she smiled.

He slid his arm under her, pulling her close, kissing the top of her head. “Sleep,” he said, “more entertainment tomorrow, I promise.”

The movement of him, beside her, brought the familiar, and pleasant tingle that raced up and down her arms—her legs. She twisted herself to face him, a tentative hand on his hip, inviting another, longer kiss.

*Dangerous*, his mind warned him. *She’s swinging between extremes.*

She was. Sensations she hadn’t felt since before Jacob had hurt her were waking, blossoming in secret places, drawing blood away from her hands and feet.
Not satisfied by the distance between them, Bella turned Edward onto his back with her own movement, straddling him.

The voice in his mind was louder: *too dangerous.*

“Bella,” Edward whispered into her lips.

“No way,” she said, hearing the tone, “we’re married.”

He smiled, widely, under her kiss, but it hid the bubble of worry he was feeling, swelling inside.

“Well then, Mrs. Cullen,” he said, pretending to clear his throat, “as you were.” He folded his hands behind his head.

“That,” she said, bringing her teeth to his ear lobe, “is so not fair.”

He chuckled, returning his hands to the neutral—and he hoped, safe—territory of her back, gently kneading it. He could feel her relaxing into his touch.

Then he kissed her again, letting his hands drift to her hips.

This pleasant set of developments continued, and then Bella slid her hand to the waistband of his pajamas, tentatively moving them lower on his frame.

He raised his eyebrows, moving his head aside, and catching her eyes, seeing her blush.

“We are married,” he reminded her, very softly, kissing her again, letting her slide them down further, pulling them off when she reached his upper thigh.

She traced the line of his legs, hands soft and warm over the fine hair there. She avoided touching him intimately, but he caught her quick and blushing glance.

She was so shy, still.

It was a relief to him.

Seeing her the other day, he’d been in awe of her own beauty. He wondered if her reaction to him would be the same.

Or one of fear.

Sitting up slightly, he pulled his shirt off in a smooth movement, returning his hands to their familiar cradle at her hips. His thumbs traced the velvet curve of her skin, a small patch exposed between her shirt and shorts.

She paused a moment, hands at the base of her top, and then slipped it over her head. Nervous to be seen, she ducked her head back down, to hide her torso in another kiss, and the curtain of her hair. Then she slipped off her own shorts.

It was Edward’s turn to freeze.

She still straddled him.

“Bella,” he said, in all seriousness, “we can’t—”

“I know,” she said, “I just—I know,” she said awkwardly. “We can—” she blushed. She didn’t have
words for what they could do. She wasn’t sure where the boundaries of what she could do were. But she didn’t want to stop what they were doing.

“How ‘bout, we just...not stop...this,” she suggested.

Edward was listening to every part of her, and in the still present wheeze of her lungs, he could hear her fatigue. The gooseflesh on her back told him she was cold, too. He worried that it might be a sign of something else—nerves. A memory surfacing.

The trauma, reborn in their bed.

“Come lay beside me, under the blanket,” he said, “you’re cold.”

Bella obliged, he settling the quilt over her, but she didn’t like the distance it put between them, and pulled him closer, feeling the flesh between his hips brush hers.

Edward didn’t make any move that wasn’t lead by hers, but there was nowhere to hide his physical response this time.

She didn’t flinch, or pull away, or do anything else to caution him, and he listened carefully to her reaction, gauging, making sure he wasn’t drawing out some silent fear. He dared to move his hands lightly up her ribcage. He could have brushed her skin, or it could have been the air moving in the room, but she felt something meet the soft undersides of her breasts.

Then she froze.

It didn’t seem preferable at the time, but when the overt shaking started, just a moment later, he wished her rigid posture would return.

He wrapped the blanket around her more tightly, fishing for his own clothes, slipping the pajama bottoms back on.

“Bella?” he said, “what do you need?”

She wasn’t prone to swearing, but she did now.

He raised his eyebrows, hearing it, and took it as at least a sign of life.

“Bella?”

She answered by flopping frustratedly onto her back. “I’m fine,” she said.

The tremble that rippled through her said otherwise.

He shook off the anger at Jacob Black, that made a similar, but quieter passage through his body, turning it towards a blunt confrontation of her lie. “OK,” he said, “where were we?” and then slid his hand over her waist.

In a violent movement, she snapped her hand to his, and he moved away immediately.

He shoved away the guilt that clawed at him, forcing himself to be present.

“So,” he said in all seriousness, “not fine?”

She gave him a dirty look.
“I love you,” he whispered “nothing will change that.” He grabbed her robe, laid at the foot of the bed, helping her slip it on, murmuring “you need to sleep.”

“I love you too,” she whispered shakily back to him.

“I didn’t doubt it,” he said with a small smile, “and I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I should’ve stopped—it’s too much—”

“No,” she said, “don’t.”

He opened his mouth to say more, but she put her finger to his lips. “You’re right,” she said, “time for sleep.”

In her heart, she let furl the small joy that they could at least begin a togetherness she’d wanted for so long.

The night soon made its natural demands known on her body, and she accepted that sleep was something she couldn’t escape. When it began to curl its tendrils around her, she let them pull her down, thoughts swinging wildly between their rubber textures of the gentle present, and the cloying memory of her past.

---

A/N for 2018-06-07 - You all have just been so incredibly encouraging with your reviews. Thank you - such things aren’t always so, and I really, really appreciate your kind words. Big shout out to Angie for pre-reading this chapter.

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

FlamingMaple on FanFiction.net
The clouds were playing hide and seek with the sun, letting stray rays filter in at odd moments, illuminating the dusty interior of the book store.

Edward had assured her they would be fine, that Alice had checked—twice—just a bit of unsettled air, and the stratus would be consistent for the rest of the day.

She was enjoying one of those loose rays of warmth on her back, running her fingers over the titles in the classics section, but not finding anything that appealed. She'd lingered over a beautiful new Austen anthology, but the thought of reading a romance made her stomach wobble. She didn't explore the why of it too deeply.

Adventure perhaps? she'd mused, but the anxiety of uncertain outcomes made her midsection feel queasy.

She'd glanced over at the small shelf labelled 'Travel', but turned away from that too. The horror of her last voyage was still too fresh, its consequences hanging over them.

Edward had stayed close by, picking out several titles quickly, not wanting to be more than a few feet from her.

Seeing her quandary, he'd added several selections for her to his own stack.

He watched her take books, one at a time, eyes scanning a few pages, frowning, and returning them to their allotted places. After a while, he noticed she was beginning to have difficulty focusing, eyes straining, face minutely paler than it was before.

"Ready for coffee?" he asked, coming close, but not touching her.

"Can't seem to find anything," she sighed. "Just...I don't know, hard to focus."

"Perfectly normal," he said, "you've been sick. And stressed."

The frown still rode strong in her forehead. "Suppose so," she muttered, but trying to shrug it off, said, "you seem to have done well," lifting her chin to the weight in his arms.

"Cookbooks," he said, "mostly. Esme wanted some new ideas."

Bella almost moaned, fully self-conscious, "I don't need anything elaborate."

Edward chuckled, "don't worry, she knows that. She just wasn't sure how much variety you needed. And she would actually like you to eat."

Here he raised an eyebrow meaningfully. She'd been picking at her food, and he'd actively frowned, seeing how much she'd left untouched at breakfast.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't press the point. She'd had enough discussion of her diet over the last few days.
As they approached the till, Bella cocked her head, watching the clerk scan the barcodes. Not all of them were cookbooks. Several poetry titles slid into the bag, along with a few novels, with authors' names she didn't recognize.

"Poetry," she murmured to him.

"Mm-hmm," he said, picking up the bag, taking her hand.

"Planning on wooing someone?" she asked.

He grinned, "just my wife," and bent down and kissed her. The grin widened, hearing the clerk's jaw drop, and his envious thoughts.

Under the safe cover of the clouds, they walked the block to the coffee shop.

Alice had checked this time and space thoroughly too. "Just the server who'll recognize you, Bella. No one else," she'd declared confidently.

Edward made her sit down, murmuring, "well, I could always wait until you faint, and then carry you out of here, but your choice."

She could picture this all too well.

Pride railing against the necessity presented by her jelly-like legs, she sat reluctantly.

"So, what can I get you Mrs. Cullen?" He smiled.

Heaven help her if she didn't blush, glancing about surreptitiously to see if anyone had noticed. "You are having way too much fun with that."

"Tonnes," he agreed, the grin impossibly wider.

"Tea," she said, "please."

He stepped away, still in her line of sight, to order.

Bella watched him, letting her muscles go slack. She'd allowed herself, in the small time since their wedding, to marvel at that very reality. They were married. She got to keep him.

It felt unreal. Impossible. Right until he would turn and smile at her. Or call her Mrs. Cullen.

It gave her shivers, just hearing it. Not that she was confessing that to anyone. Barely herself.

He turned now, and she smiled in anticipation, but he wasn't smiling, his face was set carefully, the neutral expression far too manicured to be safe.

Her face felt cold suddenly, the blood sliding from it.

"What?" She said, mind conjuring a thousand grim images.

He was slipping his phone back into his pocket.

Alice.

"Your father's colleague is on his way here," he said softly. "Alice saw him seeing you. She didn't see anything beyond that. Do you want to go?"
Bella felt like she'd braced for a punch, only to have it miss. Her stomach released its frightened contraction.

"That's all?"

"Yes," Edward said.

"No," she managed, "God no," and looked at him like he was nuts. "I thought...I thought something really horrific was going to happen."

"Sorry," Edward said, trying to stimulate the circulation in her hands, which were as icy as his.

She shook her head. "I'm just on edge."

The cashier had brought over their order, leaving promptly.

Edward nudged the tea, and the scone towards her.

She took the tea, but wasn't quite ready to introduce her stomach to something it could throw back at her.

The bell over the door jangled, and Edward listened to Deputy Mike Littlefoot's largely cheerful thoughts sail into the cafe. They were peppered with concern for his boss, who looked haggard, and, if he didn't know better, hungover. He'd dismissed that suspicion quickly. Charlie would never do that. He had, however, admitted that he was worried about Bella, mumbling something about screwing up, and her moving out. The deputy's own daughter was one, and Charlie had pointed a warning finger at him, "when she tells you something, just make sure you believe her." He'd nodded, wondering what had happened with Bella.

"What can I get you?" the cashier asked him.

"Oh, the regular, thanks," he said, pulling out his wallet.

"You check out the newlyweds over there?" she whispered, grinning, lifting her chin towards Edward and Bella.

Mike made a cursory, and polite glance over his shoulder, noting the prominent ring on Bella's finger.

Bella didn't catch the look, but Edward did, and the speculative thoughts that went with it.

He'd recognized Bella.

Turning back to the cashier, he took his coffee with thanks, trying to understand why Charlie hadn't mentioned his daughter getting married.

Then he put boss' appearance, and comments together with this new knowledge, and felt his heart clench.

She'd run off and gotten married.

*Oh man,* he thought, thinking of his own daughter, all baby teeth and dimples, just learning to walk. *I wonder if she's pregnant or something.*

Edward was wondering that too, but nothing was showing on his face. He flipped open one of the books instead.
Unaware of the drama that had played out in front of her, Bella leaned over, looking at the text his eyes scanned. He pushed the book towards her, his own eyes still holding the words in focus:

Within you, your years
are growing;
within me, my years
are prowling….
Love, what does it matter
that time,
The very time that raised two flames,
two waving heads of wheat,
my body and your gentleness,
tomorrow will hold them safe
or mill the grain,
and with those same unseen fingers
erase the identities that separate us,
giving us the final victory
of being one beneath the ground.

"That's beautiful," she said, remarking silently that it was chillingly true, too. Flipping over the cover, and eyeing the title she murmured "Neruda," looking up at him, eyebrows creased.

"Chilean," Edward explained, "he translates well."

"I'll say," she said, opening the text again to the page he'd had open.

Edward could still hear the deputy's thoughts, though they were becoming thinner with the distance. His plan to talk to Charlie was becoming more precise.

Edward swore silently.

He worried that the news would distress her, or worse, provoke further idiocy on Charlie's part.

Without her seeing, he pulled his phone from his pocket, texting Alice with one hand. Better forewarned, at least.

Bella was paling more, though, feeling the still lingering effects of the pneumonia. "Maybe we can get this to go?" she asked, lips turning down a bit at the scone, as if she disapproved of the very premise of it being consumed.

Edward nodded, putting things in the bag, offering her his hand.

As they drove home, stopping at one of the few lights in town, Bella watched as a soft gust of wind rustle the cottonwoods that lined the street, the fluff swirling off them in the breeze's unseen eddies. She followed their patterns, invisible lines lifting them up and around in a dance she couldn't predict.

She felt like one of those bits of fluff, pulled by forces she could barely understand, and over which she had no control.

A/N for 2018-06-07: This is a wee chapter that needed happening. I figured everyone could use a little Pablo Neruda today. The excerpt is from his "Ode to Time".

~ Erin
Bella had refused to head back to bed when they got home. "I'm not an invalid," she protested, face pale, legs weak from standing longer than she was accustomed to.

Despite the fact that she looked like she was about to fall over from exhaustion, Edward humoured her, smiling softly. It wasn't like he would actually let her fall over—and if he did, certainly not get hurt.

Her protest against being coddled made, Bella sat down on the couch, her body sliding further down by inches, until she was leaning, half reclined against Edward, feet tucked beneath her, almost in the grip of sleep.

Carlisle was home from work, he and Esme murmuring quietly over paperwork at the dining room table. Emmett was watching a game, the volume low enough to be inaudible to Bella. Rose was in the garage, fiddling with the undercarriage of the jeep, giving Bella's truck the occasional dirty look for daring to exist. She'd silently asked Edward, when the couple'd returned, *you're not seriously going to consider keeping this monstrosity, are you?*

Edward had ignored her, focused on seeing Bella inside the house.

Bella's startled grunt brought his attention squarely back to her.

"What?" he asked, seeing her shift. Something had hurt. That much was apparent.

She shook her head, "just a muscle cramp," she said, rubbing her lower abdomen.

Then the smell of blood reached Edward.

He understood, with a precise, and horrified clarity what this signified.

"Don't," he muttered almost silently to his family, hearing Carlisle's thoughts. "She doesn't need to know. Not yet."

Emmett had stood, turning off the TV, leaving quickly, going to hunt. His thoughts were painfully disordered.

Esme slipped away too, taking her pronounced distress with her.

*Better now,* Carlisle thought to his son. *For so many reasons.*

Bella had laid back down against Edward, her face pointed away from him. She couldn't see his lips moving, or hear his words either.

"It might not take, or last," Edward said, his own emotions strangling even this quietest voice.

*And if she knows that you knew, now?* Carlisle prodded, gently. *Do you want that between you?*

Edward's hands were silently grinding into fists. He looked at his wife, swallowing. Did he?

No. He didn't.
But he didn't want to tell her what she'd just felt was the implanting of blastocyst.

That what Jacob had done had taken root in her.

So many pregnancies failed, many without even the knowledge of the woman in question.

He hadn't told her about Sam's visit either. She'd asked for a normal day, and he wanted nothing more than give her a semblance of that, not to perpetually freshen Jacob's violation.

_You can't build trust on such concealment, _Carlisle _was thinking, no matter how painful the truth is. _One man has already broken it. Don't be the second._

Bella felt, more than heard the snarl, but sinking into that peaceful near-slumber, didn't stir, trusting Edward, knowing he would keep her safe.

"I will not be compared to Jacob Black," Edward growled.

_Then don't act like him, _Carlisle _shot back._

Edward swallowed, uncurling his hands, making himself be calm. "Bella?" he called softly.

"Mmm," she said, feeling pleasantly limp.

"You're bleeding, love," he said quietly.

"What?" she asked, sitting up too quickly.

He braced her, a careful hand at her back, watching her wobble, even seated.

Carlisle had discreetly disappeared, giving them the appearance of privacy.

"That wasn't a muscle cramp," he said, putting a hand just beside her hip. "That was very likely implantation bleeding."

"What's that?" She'd never heard the term.

He hated himself for being the bearer of the next words. For not having protected her from what Jacob had done. "It's the beginning of a pregnancy."

All the blood in her face slid downwards, the capillaries shrinking—retracting against this information, and the grey of the sky was worn in her cheeks.

"Oh," she said. "Oh," she said again. Then she didn't say anything. Edward kept massaging her good hand. It was the same temperature as hers. "I don't—I don't feel very well," she finally managed. "I think—" she started, but then the world felt like it was sliding, colours bleeding together, all the pale shades of the house melting into one greyness, before it all became a sudden black.

When she returned to herself, she was in bed, and Carlisle was taking her blood pressure, quietly saying, "perfectly normal."

She was confused. Had Edward just told her—was she pregnant? Or had she dreamed that?

"You fainted, Bella," Carlisle said. "Completely understandable." He was handing her a glass of juice, nodding encouragingly towards it.
She shook her head, feeling nauseated by what she realized had been real.

Carlisle frowned, "no," he said, lightly pinching the back of her hand, watching it retract slowly, "you really do need to have something, Bella. This, or an IV. You're not eating and drinking enough."

She closed her eyes briefly, and then took the juice, taking the smallest of sips.

Carlisle raised his eyebrows at her, saying lightly, "Like those IV's, hmm?"

She couldn't help but smile at what she hoped was his sense of humour.

Edward interrupted. "Can we have a minute?" he asked.

Carlisle nodded, leaving the room, but not before mouthing "more" to Bella, eyeing the juice.

Edward sat beside her, "I'm sorry, but I have more things to tell you, that I'd rather not."

"OK," Bella said, bracing herself. What more could there be?

"Jacob phased," he started, and Bella nodded. "The pack saw what he did. To you," he clarified.

All the juice she'd consumed was violently ejected from her stomach.

"It's OK," he said, picking her up, carrying her to the bathroom, helping her clean up.

"Sorry," she said.

"For what?"

She half laughed, half sobbed, feeling exasperated with herself, the weakness her body presented her with. "This is just kinda gross. That's all."

"It's nothing," Edward said, bringing her a fresh shirt. "I seem to remember something about sickness and health, yesterday," he smiled.

"I think you got the bad end of the bargain there," she mumbled.

"Hardly," he said, caressing her cheek. "I love you."

But when he went to help her pull off her soiled shirt, she flinched, hands up defensively.

"I'll—I'll do it myself," she said softly.

"Of course," he answered, watching her blush. He turned away, eyes down while she changed, a distraught progression of emotions running over his face.

Her reaction was what he'd feared. More distress. Enough to make her physically ill.

He'd changed the bedding at a speed she couldn't comprehend, and taking her hand, pointed her back to it.

"No," she said, when he tried to offer her water. "I'm good."

She wasn't anything near it, but he didn't say anything else about it. There would be time later. He still had more to tell her.
"You were talking about," and she blanched again, saying more quietly, "what the pack saw."

Edward inhaled, and exhaled, "yes," he said. "They know what Jacob did." He made himself continue. "He broke free of Sam's control, Bella. He left. They followed him north, but he got away. They can't hear him." He stopped here, watching Bella's face, paler than pale.

She swallowed. "They don't know where he is." It was a whisper. She was trying to breathe normally. The air was getting thicker, harder to take in. "He could come back—he could—"

"He will never touch you again. I promise this," Edward said, voice fierce.

She shook her head. "You can't possibly know that," she breathed out.

"Never," he said again, daring her to contradict him. He would will it to be true in every possible way.

She smiled wanly, and the thin crust of his confidence disintegrated. That he should expect her trust, after he'd already so profoundly failed her—his pride would be the sharp edge of the knife that wounded her—again—if he wasn't careful.

"I will protect you with whatever I have, Bella. I can promise you that."

She squeezed his hand, and the tightness in his chest lifted a little.

After a moment, he said, in much softer tones, "because of what's happened, the council will allow us to change you—without it violating the treaty."

"And Jacob?" she asked. "What will they do with him? I mean," she started, "if they find him?"

"We don't know yet," Edward said, and fighting the desire to hold more truths from her, added, "we've asked for a...free hand, unless he returns to face his crimes."

A free hand. Bella remembered what she'd seen transpire between Edward and Victoria, and shuddered. She knew better than to think Jacob would return of his own volition. Not for justice. No.

"Is there anything else?" she asked, feeling another shiver, "That I need to know?"

His chest felt heavy again. He would spare her every piece of painful news, if he could, but Carlisle's words floated too prominently in his conscience.

"Sam called your father. Told him that Jacob confessed, but ran." His fingers were massaging hers, the rhythm familiar and soft.

She nodded, trying to be brave, trying not to think about the fact that Charlie hadn't called her. Hadn't even tried to reach out.

Or apologize.

"Oh," she said, wiping at her eyes.

"I suspect he will have heard our news, too," Edward said, "from his colleague."

The nod was becoming mechanical.

She didn't ask if there was anything else. She decided she didn't want to know. Not now.
First things first, she thought. "The pregnancy," she said, "how do we get rid of it?"

The 'we' gave him a small piece of hope. She understood they were together in this. He'd been afraid she would withdraw, isolate herself with the burden on it.

"Carlisle'll know better than me. Do you want to speak to him now?"

She nodded, tears still brimming.

Carlisle didn't knock, knowing his welcome, but he arrive with an IV bag in hand.

Bella moaned softly, seeing it.

"Your choice," he said gently, "but," and he looked at Edward for support here, "I don't want to take any risks." When she stared at the bag, as if considering, he added, "and we can't consider any medical procedures if you're not well."

Her nod was immediate.

"Let's just try this for today," he said, taping the IV he'd inserted in place. He went on to explain the different options available to her, calmly discussing the advantages and pitfalls of each.

"A medical abortion," she said, rephrasing what he'd told her.

"Yes," Carlisle said. "Highly effective."

But not always.

"And if it isn't?" she asked.

"Then surgical removal," Carlisle said, tapping the IV bag.

Her stomach lurched at the thought.

"But we're still a week away from anything." He'd explained that he wanted to wait, and avoid a potentially unnecessary procedure, in case the pregnancy didn't last.

She was thinking, biting her lip.

"What is it?" Edward asked, their hands still linked.

"Will I feel any symptoms of the pregnancy?" she whispered, almost too shy to ask.

"No," they both said, Edward more vehemently than Carlisle.

"It's too early," Edward assured her.

The idea of something, growing inside her, that Jacob had left, made her stomach twist painfully.

She pulled a breath in through her nose, and let it slowly from her mouth. "In a week then," she said, steeling herself to wait that long. Her casted hand rested on her abdomen, and she stilled the urge to use both to claw what remained of Jacob out of her.
A/N for 2018-06-08: A guest commentator made some really interesting observations about Bella's state of mind, and why she isn't giving so much thought to what has happened, feeling guilty, etc. I know that we're quite a ways into the narrative, word wise, but we're only ten days out from the original assault in this story's timeline, and they've been pretty busy ones. Now that she's had some time to get better physically, she will begin truly processing what has happened. Look for such work in the next few chapters. First, we need to deal with the plot complication that is Charlie - next chapter.

I keep telling myself I need to take a break from this story - and really, I probably should. Doubt it's going to happen - which you're probably all glad about.

Someone commented that this story is like Twilight on steroids. I think it's just me, high on writing.

Love hearing your questions and suggestions for this tale.

~ Erin

@ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB / FlamingMaple on FanFiction.net
If Charlie Swann hadn't been so distraught, he would have seen the insult on his deputy's face.

"You're sure?" Charlie asked again.

"Yes," Mike said, more tersely than he needed to. He had paperwork to get to. Didn't need his boss asking him the same question twice. Or three times. "Unless she normally has a ring on that finger, and her boyfriend refers to her as Mrs. regularly, I don't think I missed anything." Then he walked away, lips twisted to the side, and sat down at his desk, back set purposefully towards Charlie.

Had she really? Charlie was thinking. Would she really marry him?

He was mid-sip into his coffee, when he stopped abruptly, putting down away from the paperwork on his desk.

Was she pregnant?

And, if she was, whose was it?

He shook his head. It would be too early to tell, if it was Jacob. Or, would it?

He was counting back the days. They shared a bathroom. He knew when she was menstruating. And he knew how long it took bruises to run the rainbow.

He leaned over his desk, eyebrows squashed together, hands over his face. Yes, he realized, she could be pregnant. She wouldn't know yet. Maybe another week.

She'd resembled a tomato, the last time he'd asked if she needed birth control, and had muttered a horrified no. When he'd pressed the point, they'd had one of the most awkward, and Lord-help-me-forget-we-ever-spoke-of-this conversations where she made it clear that she and Edward hadn't had sex. Ever. That Edward wanted to wait.

He gave a soft moan, and kicked the desk.

*Enough,* he told himself. *Get off your ass and do something.*

"I'm done for the day," he called to Mike, and then, picking up his keys, walked out the door.

He stopped at home, deliberately changing out of his uniform, and then walked into Bella's room.

She'd packed her clothes, a few books, her toiletries, but nothing else. She'd been in such a rush.

*Because you shoved her in the back of your squad car, like a fricking criminal, asshole,* the voice reminded him. *To go see her rapist. Way to go father of the year.*

*Shut up,* he told it, and began to collect things he knew Bella might be missing: the favourite sweater he'd pulled out of the dryer last night, her photo album—probably too heavy or big to pack—and several CD's he knew she listened to. Once he'd packed it all neatly in a box, he added the mail that
had come for her. Then he sat down at the dining room table, and wrote her a letter. Just in case she wouldn't talk to him.

After an hour, there were several abandoned versions, each hastily scratched out, as he filled page after page of the school note paper he'd taken from her room.

When he was done, he lined up the edges of the paper precisely, making a perfect three piece fold, before setting it in an envelope, and sealing it. He wrote 'To Bella, from Dad', on it.

Then he walked purposefully past his squad car, and packed the box in his truck, normally reserved for towing the boat, and began the drive to the Cullens.

Bella had finally fallen asleep, and waking from this much needed nap, had utterly refused to stay in bed.

"You fainted earlier today," Edward pointed out, keeping an arm around her when she insisted on standing up. "And you haven't eaten much."

"I'm sure this counts for something," Bella said, pointing her chin towards the IV bag hooked on the stand beside her.

Edward tilted his nose down towards her, face serious.

"And there's no food here," she pointed out, starting to walk towards the bedroom door.

"No," he said, picking her up, "but that can easily be remedied."

"I can still walk," she smiled. "You wouldn't want my legs to atrophy or anything, now would you?"

He ignored her protest, and carried her downstairs, settling her on the couch, IV now hooked onto a lamp stand. "Food first," he said, "walking later."

Esme was busying herself in the kitchen, and Edward darted towards it, and back again with a bowl of what looked like...yup. Soup.

Soup.

She wanted to sigh, but didn't.

She liked soup as much as the next person, but after several days, her enjoyment of it had faded.

Edward had noticed the microscopic change in her expression. "Can I get you something else?" he asked softly.

"No," she said, lying incredibly convincingly for herself, "this is lovely."

Edward laughed quietly. "No secrets, Bella," he said, shaking his head. "What do you want?"

"Toast?" she asked timidly.

"Sure," he said.

Alice had been scanning Charlie's decisions, though, and now having seen the timeline they were operating on, gave Edward her precise warning. Ten minutes, she thought to her brother. She's going to be eating when he gets here. Warn her.
He put the bread into the toaster, rapidly explaining what Alice was saying to Esme, and to all the other ears in hearing.

"Bella," he said, returning, tucking her hair away from her face, "your father's coming here."

She pulled in a breath too rapidly. "When?"

"In the next few minutes."

"Oh," she breathed out, eyes flickering back and forth, like she was looking for something.

"You don't have to see him," Edward told her, "and he can't harm you, or compel you in any way."

She was nodding too quickly, breathing picking up. "I know," she said, voice catching, tears rising.

"Do you want me to send him away?"

She shook her head, wordless again.

"Do you want to see him then?"

She nodded.

What she wanted, was for her father to have believed her. To have given solace, when she told him someone had hurt her. To give her a hug now, to tell her everything was going to be OK.

And she wanted to yell at him, and not see him, all at the same time.

"You won't leave?" she asked Edward, hand suddenly tight over his.

"No," he said, his voice almost a growl. The man had earned far more than his distrusted. If he had any idea whose home he was really driving to, he wouldn't come unannounced, and certainly not alone.

Before Charlie's tires hit the crunch of the gravel, his thoughts preceded him, and the remorse Jasper could feel was almost painful.

"It'd better be," Edward growled quietly, hearing Jasper's thinking.

It took Charlie some time to calm his nerves, before he opened the cab door, and even more time before he picked up the box, and began what felt like a long walk to the house.

Carlisle was starting to worry for his health, by the time Charlie actually knocked. His heartbeat was far too rapid, to be sustained for long.

"Charlie," he said, aiming for a tone that was cool, but not threatening.

"Hi, Carlisle," he said, heart thudding. "I'd like to talk to Bella."

Carlisle stared at him, for just a moment longer than was necessary, nodding. "I'll see if she wants to see you," he said softly. "Please wait here." Then he closed the door, leaving Charlie waiting anxiously on the steps.

"Bella," Carlisle said, coming to squat beside her, "do you want to see him?" He'd overheard her conversation with Edward, but wanted to be sure. Her heart rate was running just as fast, if not faster, than her father's.
She nodded, hand wrapped too tightly around Edward's. The lump in her throat was making talking difficult.

Carlisle walked back at a leisurely human pace, and opened the door again, "Come in, Charlie," he said, "she's just this way."

After showing Charlie to the living room, he said softly, and purportedly to Bella, "Esme and I are just in the kitchen." It was loud enough for Charlie to hear, to know that Bella had advocates her father considered his equals in age close by.

Charlie was staring at Bella. She'd lost enough weight, that he could see it now, the IV hanging above her alarming him even more. "Hey," he said awkwardly, "how're you doing?" His hand moved up a bit, gesturing to the dangling bag above her.

How the hell was she supposed to answer that? She stared right back at him, and in a voice still tight with feeling, said, "I'm OK, Dad." The last word was choked out. Her face twisted, and there were tears.

She was anything but.

Charlie wanted nothing more than to pull her into a hug, and was half poised to take a step towards her when he caught a glance of Edward's face.

It was almost feral. His eyes were wide, nostrils flared, and if he didn't know better, the boy looked like he was snarling at him.

Charlie put the box down on the coffee table, sitting opposite to them, as far away from Edward as the couch he was on would allow.

His own voice shook with emotion when he spoke. "I owe you so many apologies that I don't even have words for, Bella. I'm so sorry."

Bella nodded, looking at him, her own jaw tight.

Edward made himself be quiet, trying to arrange the features of his face to resemble an acceptably human shape.

Charlie wanted to finish with apologizing, but his anxiety was riding over everything else. "Bella, you gettin' the help you need?" He was looking anxiously at the IV, and her face, pale and too thin.

"I am," she managed. She wiped her casted hand awkwardly at her eyes.

Was she? He thought. Had she seen a counsellor? Was Carlisle being careful? Thorough? Clearly, she wasn't eating or drinking enough.

He thought about his last addition to the box of supplies. He'd stopped at the store, picking up a box of those God-awful pop tarts she liked. At least, he thought, eyes skimming over the food on the coffee table, they were offering her healthier fare.

"I don't want to make excuses for what I've done, Bella. I know I hurt you. I should've believed you, when you told me Jacob'd hurt you, and I should never've made you go see him. I was...totally blinded by my own prejudices." Then he turned to Edward, "and I owe you an apology too, Edward. For thinking what I did. It's clear," and he cleared his throat, struggling even now with these words, "that you have her best interests at heart."
Edward could hear the sincerity, painful and begrudging as it was. He nodded, acknowledging, but not accepting, Charlie's apology.

Bella was struggling to form her own words. The hurt that lodged in her chest made the air hard to take in, and then let out. "How could you—," she started, and then stopped. "I get," she said, "that you didn't believe me, about Jacob. I could barely believe it myself, but—" she paused again, lungs reaching for enough air.

Edward moved his hand to her back, trying to rub it gently, trying to soothe her.

When the words were finally born, they were slippery with tears, "how could you shove me in your squad car, Dad? It's one thing to doubt me. It's...how could you do that?"

Bella's distress was his own, and he nodded, listening, trying to put words together for an answer.

"You would NEVER do that to someone who made a complaint, Dad, never." Her anger had slipped in over her grief, and she was shaking now.

He went to open his mouth, but she interrupted him again. "Then you took me when I was safe, and you put me right back where he could get to me again—" Her voice disappeared into a high pitch she couldn't hold. She shook her head, as if trying to shake off the feeling.

Charlie waited, watching her, swallowing. The words, 'where he could get to me again' held a chilling significance, that made his face feel cold, and his heart stutter.

When she said nothing for a bit, he spoke again. "I'll answer, if you want, or you can just yell at me for a bit too, if you need to," he said.

"Sorry," Bella mumbled.

Edward put his hand over hers again. "You have nothing to be sorry for," he said, looking darkly at Charlie.

"You don't," Charlie agreed, his face still numb.

Had Jacob hurt her again? Because of what he did?

He thought of the marks he'd found when he took her from the Cullens. He'd blamed Edward—been livid with anger at the fresh damage. His own culpability was screwing itself into his stomach, hunkering down for a long stay.

When it became clear she was waiting for his answer, Charlie started. "Been a cop for a long time, Bella. Never done what I did to you, to someone who made a complaint. Never would. But," and he sighed. "When you're a parent—it's different," he stopped, flustered by the inadequacy of his explanation. "I love you, Bella, more than I can possibly express, and I was terrified when I saw someone was hurting you. I mean, I'm the sheriff, and my own daughter—", he paused again, hands dropping back into his lap. "I failed, and then when I thought you were defending the man who was hurting you," he shook his head, "I lost my head. I blew it. Completely."

Bella nodded, listening, breathing still strained with emotion, wanting him to continue.

"After you took off last year, because of what happened—between you," he said, trying not to let his familiar repugnance for Edward surface, "and the Fall, and then this Spring," he blew a breath out.

Edward flinched, seeing with unusual clarity, what Charlie recalled of Bella in those months he'd
been away.

"After all that, I couldn't let something like that happen again. I couldn't lose you again to that black hole—or worse."

The familiar stab of guilt made Edward's face shift noticeably.

*Good*, Charlie thought. *He should feel guilty for the Hell he put her through.*

*Of course*, the little voice wheedled, *because you have so much high ground to stand on there.*

"I'm so sorry I did worse," Charlie said, now twisting his hands together, trying to dispel the nervous energy he felt. "I don't expect this to make us OK, Bella, but I wanted to apologize. You deserve at least that."

He looked at Bella, waiting for some response, ducking his head down, seeing the pained look on her face.

"Thank you," she said, a soft whisper. It wasn't forgiveness, but it was a beginning.

They all sat in an uncomfortable silence after that, before Charlie cleared his throat. He put his hand on the box, "Brought you some of your things. Thought you might want," he mumbled, sliding it an inch towards her.

Edward could hear Bella's throat closing up with emotion again.

"Thank you, Charlie," Edward said, his voice gentle for Bella.

"If there's anything else you want, I can bring it by another time, or someone else can pick it up, if you prefer," Charlie finished, wondering if he would be welcome again.

Then he steeled himself for his next statement, and Edward flicked his eyes up at him in nervous anticipation.

"I want you to make a complaint, Bella," he said softly.

She looked away from the box she'd been staring at. "What?" she asked.

"I want you to make a formal complaint," he said again. He wasn't sure how much she knew, and wasn't sure if he wanted to be the one to tell her. If she wanted him to be the one to tell her that Jacob had run off. "I can't do anything to Jacob without a complaining witness. And I'll be honest, there's not much I can do, considering how much time has passed, but I can do something."

Bella stared at him, and then looked at Edward. He gave a tiny shrug. What did it matter, if Charlie pursued him? It wasn't like he would find anything, but it would offer him a way to redeem himself, at least in his own eyes. "What do you want to do, Bella?" Edward asked softly. "It's your choice."

Then she looked back at her father, her gaze slipping over the box of things in front of her. She'd noticed the poptarts. Knew they hadn't been in the cupboards at home. He hated that she ate them, but he'd still gone and bought them anyway. Her favourite sweater was under them. All tokens of good will.

"OK," she said, surprising Edward, who looked sideways at her, "but not right now."

"Of course not," Charlie said, equally surprised. "Sooner," he said, "would be better. Tomorrow, if you can."
Bella nodded. She had a good idea of what such a complaint would entail, and swallowed, suddenly not so sure she wanted to make it.

"Only if you want to, Bella," Charlie said.

He could read her body language well enough, see the strain and exhaustion on her face. "You're tired," he said, standing, "I'll go."

Edward had stood when Charlie did, and when his father-in-law stepped to bring himself closer to Bella, Edward didn't exactly block his way, but moved into his path, looking down at Bella.

"It's OK," she said softly to him, and he moved aside, not breaking the contact of their hands.

Charlie knelt on one leg, the other awkwardly squatting, as he brought himself eye level with his daughter, reaching for her other hand. "I love you," he said, "always will. Even when I screw up."

There were too many tears for her to say anything, so Bella just nodded, mouthing back the breathy "bye" she could give voice to.

Carlisle had emerged from the kitchen, meeting Charlie on his way to the door.

"I overheard the last part," Carlisle said softly, catching Charlie's nod. "You think it's wise, putting her through that?"

Charlie stared at him, murmuring, "You think I should let a rapist run loose?"

Keeping his voice low, so Bella wouldn't hear, Carlisle said, "you know there's barely a chance of a case."

Charlie's face was cold now. "I don't plan on this ending in front of a judge, Carlisle. I just need a legal excuse to go after him with everything I've got."

Carlisle's eyebrows rose in surprise. "She deserves to know that."

"I'll explain it when she comes in." His voice was grim. He meant business.

In the living room, Edward listened, a small and begrudging respect growing for Charlie Swann. For a man of the law, he had a usefully elastic definition of justice.

A/N for 2018-06-09 - I'm posting this with a fair bit of trepidation - considering the rage several of you have expressed towards Charlie (and the cringe-worthy tongue-lashing I got from readers on another story earlier this week). I see Bella as being fairly vulnerable still, emotionally, and while she has Edward, she's also young enough to still crave her parents' love, and to be motivated to try to work things out, especially considering the final farewell she'll be making, when she is changed. As for Charlie, I have a great deal of empathy for him. I've made a lot of mistakes with my own four children (albeit, much younger than Bella), including not believing them when they've told me things, and making them do things that now make me cringe with regret. I'd like to think that she'd give him another chance, from her position of safety with Edward, to prove himself to her.

Happy to chat more with anyone about this via PM, if you like.

As always, thank you for reading, and for those of you who leave comments - for making me smile and glow with the engagement. They really do make my day.
~ Erin

@ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

FlamingMaple on FanFiction.net
For what felt like the fifth time he'd said as much, Edward told her again, "you don't have to do this."

"Kinda got that," she said, smiling wanly, taking a sip of her tea.

They were at the dining room table, purportedly a few minutes away from leaving. She felt, for the first time in days, remarkably well, or, at least not ill. She'd showered by herself, dressed unaided, and was now eating, nausea threatening, but only distantly. She'd begrudgingly admitted that the IV had helped, and hoped she wouldn't need another one.

"Sorry," Edward said, "I'm not doing any good by doubting what you want."

"No," she smiled more energetically, "you're not."

He pulled her casted hand over, kissing it, then looking more closely at it. "You ready to lose this?" he asked, tapping the plaster lightly.

"Can I?" she asked, "seems soon."

"I think you could just have a brace, for now," he murmured, turning her hand lightly. "But Carlisle'll know better." Putting it down gently, he pretended to glance at the clock. A well established human habit. "If you're ready, we should go, though."

"Sure," Bella said, standing.

Edward made himself not rush to her side, letting her find her balance.

In the garage, she paused, a hand on her truck, drumming her fingers there.

Edward raised his eyebrows, wondering if she wanted to drive it.

"Is this worth anything?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Something, certainly," he said, wondering where she was going with this.

"Can we sell it, then?"

Edward would prefer to send it over a cliff, but kept his thoughts to himself. "If you want to, yes," he said instead.

"I'd like Billy to have the money from it," she murmured. "He doesn't have any help right now—"

She stopped, her voice tight with emotion. "I know Dad got a deal on it, because of their friendship. Seems like the right thing to do," she finished in a hushed breath.

The confused swirl of emotions in Edward's chest made him pull her into his arms, as gently as he could. It didn't surprise him that she was thinking of other people, but that she was thinking of Billy, did. Her compassion never ceased to amaze him. The Black daughter didn't live at home anymore, he knew, and Billy truly would be on his own. The money from the truck would a pittance, considering his physical needs, but perhaps Jasper could arrange for the truck to find a generous
"Anything you want," Edward said.

"Thank you," she whispered, "but we should get going."

He nodded, taking her hand, letting her decide which side of the Volvo to get into. When she chose the passenger side, he was relieved. He wasn’t sure she was quite up to the attention driving required yet. Not that he would let anything happen to her, but he didn’t want her confidence shaken further.

Parked in front of the station, Bella let out a nervous breath.

"You don’t have to do this," Edward reminded her again.

Bella knew no justice would come of this complaint, but the motions of it would allow her father some way to try to redeem himself, at least in his own eyes, if not hers.

"Let’s go," she said, opening the door.

At the desk, the receptionist smiled at Bella, recognizing her, but a bit perplexed by the tenseness in her face. "I’ll get your Dad, Bella," she said, moving back to find him.

"Hey," Charlie called, walking up to the front, suddenly nervous himself. "You came."

Bella nodded, her body tight, and lacking in the give it needed to move.

"Come on in," he said, motioning to the back.

Edward took Bella’s hand, and they followed, sitting across from each other at the table in the station’s one, small interview room.

"Do you want me to take your statement, or Mike?" Charlie asked. Seeing Bella look down nervously, he waited a moment, saying softly, "would it be easier to talk to Mike, Bella?"

She swallowed, nodding. Her voice felt like it had disappeared.

Overhearing their conversation, Mike called over, "Just a sec, Chief, I’ll be right there."


It had her name on it, already.

But it was the wrong one.

Charlie had it set on the table in front of them, along with a pen, and Bella pulled it over towards her, scratching out Swann, and writing Cullen instead.

Then she pushed it back towards Charlie, swallowing, staring at him. She and Edward’s hands were linked on the table, her wedding ring in plain sight.

He’d seen it yesterday, but knew he had no right to ask.

"Oh," he said, keeping his voice as even as he could. "I’m….sorry I missed that," he added, making his mouth smile at them, his eyes contradicting it. "Congratulations," he offered, as genuinely as he could, meeting each of their gazes, as he fingered the folder.
After swallowing, and shoving all of his feelings deep down inside him, he explained what information they would need for her statement, in order to start an official complaint.

"You need to know, Bella," Charlie said, "that there's almost no chance of this going to court." He paused, looking at her, "But he won't know that, and it lets us go after him."

"I understand," she said. He'd told her enough of the wearying and grim statistics before.

Mike had finished with his phone call, and came into the room. Charlie took this as his cue to leave, standing, nodding his temporary farewell, trying to hide the anxious look in his eyes.

It was Mike's turn to pause, seeing at the paperwork Charlie had begun.

Jesus.

He wouldn't be so calm if it was his daughter coming in to report a sexual assault.

With her new husband.

Edward could read his shock as clearly as if he'd spoken it, but Bella only saw a calm exterior. When the next thought arrived, Edward bristled.

"I'd prefer if you could speak to me alone, Ms. Cullen," he said softly, apologetically. "It's hard to talk about this. Harder when your partner's listening, and it's important you don't censor yourself."

Edward was opening his mouth to say no, when Bella spoke, "I think that'd be better." She was staring at the table, not wanting to meet Edward's eyes.

She could feel his hand on hers, "I'll be fine," she said.

It was a long moment before he spoke. "OK," he said standing, looking at her worriedly. "I'll be just outside."

"Try not to listen, please," she whispered.

He hadn't told her that he'd already seen, and he didn't want to now. It'd been so much to tell her yesterday, it felt like kindness sparing her that, but he would have to tell her.

"Alright," he said softly, and slipped quietly out of the room.

Charlie was standing at the filing cabinet closest to the waiting area, as far away from the interview room as he could get. From the strangled quality of his thoughts, Edward knew he was doing his best not to listen to, or think about what Bella was talking about.

So was Edward, but with far less success.

He was avoiding the deputy's thoughts, but that didn't obscure the perfectly audible conversation unfolding some twenty feet from him.

He was learning that Jacob had not shown all of what he'd done to the pack.

"Maybe you should sit down."

"Pardon?" Edward said, looking at Charlie, who clearly had spoken to him.

"You look a little...unwell," Charlie said, still pretending to file things.
Edward sat on one of the chairs, trying to settle into the receptionist's pedantic thoughts. She was making a meal plan in her head, while running through the updates needed for their state emergency services coordination directory.

"When did you get married?" Charlie asked, not able to hold onto the question anymore.

Looking up at him, Edward answered coolly, "Monday."

Nodding, Charlie kept pretending to file. "Your parents know?"

Edward wanted to punish him with his words, tell him that they'd been there—that their entire family had been present, because Bella was terrified Charlie would use his legal influence to constrain or compel her again. But, he knew his wife's compassion, and only said "yes."

"Was it because of what I did?" Charlie asked. He'd stopped filing now, and was looking at the carpet, scuffing a raw part of it with his boot.

Edward imagined skewering him with a yes, watching him wince with the pain of it.

Right now, his wife was describing Jacob's—third? fourth?—assault on her, when Charlie had taken her to the reserve.

Her voice was soft, and she was explaining, that no, the people there hadn't realized what Jacob had done. What he'd continued to do.

So compassionate.

Even as much as Charlie had violated his daughter's trust, her will, Edward knew she loved him, grieved for what had been broken between them. Hurting Charlie would only add to it.

"I asked her to marry me months ago," Edward said, not mentioning that she hadn't said yes until the week before. "But the timing, yes, she was afraid you might try to...exert your influence again."

Charlie nodded, taking his time to ask the next question. "Does her mother know? About any of this?"

"No," Edward said. He'd asked Bella if she wanted to tell her, and she'd looked at him, horrified, a vociferous 'no' on her lips.

Charlie seemed to agree with Bella. It would only cause problems to inform Renee.

Edward sat, and Charlie stood, each a prisoner to their own thoughts, waiting, each trying not to listen in their own way.

"What will you do?" Edward asked, already knowing, but wondering what Charlie would tell him. Testing his honesty.

"Put out a bulletin on his car, a description, phone around. Use my contacts. Go to the res. Interview people. I think Sam, and Emily will be willing to help, all things considered," he said.

Edward nodded, and then closed his eyes, hearing what his wife was saying.

"And if you find him?" he asked, imagining what he himself would do.

Charlie looked at him, his face translated, lines grim and hard. He was deciding what to say. What was prudent. He wasn't sure if he trusted Edward's youth, so he chose his words carefully. "I would
use every tool at my disposal to deliver justice."

The thoughts that married these words were as dark as the ones Edward entertained himself.

He nodded, acknowledging Charlie's speech.

Mike was opening the door.

Edward stood, anxious to see Bella. Mike had gestured she wait, quietly calling Charlie over.

"Just a second," Charlie said, seeing Edward moving to follow him.

"No," Edward said, following. "You can talk to us both." He wasn't leaving Bella alone with her father, not until she told him to. And even then...only for the sake of human pretense.

She was pale again, Edward could see, and gripped his hand tightly when he sat back down. Her breathing and heart rate told him more than enough about her level of anxiety.

Charlie was watching her with concern. "I won't keep you long," he said, "but I want to thank you for coming, all things considered. I'll call you with anything I find."


Then Charlie said what he'd wanted only for Bella's ears. "Bella," he said, "this won't end with a trial, or a judge. But it will end." He didn't say how, but he looked at her, willing his meaning to be clear.

Edward looked at Bella, who understood, eyebrows pinching together. "Don't do anything dangerous, Dad," she said, "that won't make anything better." She was imagining a confrontation between him and Jacob, and it not ending well for her father.

"Think I can handle myself," Charlie mumbled.

Edward squeezed her hand, trying to reassure her. They had their own plans to find Jacob Black. The chances of her father finding him were barely negligible, they were so slim.

When Bella stood, she looked down to pick up her jacket, not seeing Charlie's hand coming to lightly touch her arm. As it moved into her peripheral vision, she started violently, almost tripping over the chair behind her. Edward caught her easily, but the tightness in her face, the crinkled pull of her eyebrows spoke eloquently of her fear.

"Sorry," Charlie said, dropping his hand away, his expression coloured with distress. He moved to step back, and this too made Bella jerk her hands up again.

"Let's go home," Edward murmured, curling his posture around hers, making a soft C with his arms, trying to get her to start walking towards the door.

"'K," Bella said, swallowing, staring at the table, like she was talking herself into it.

They left without any more words of farewell, and Charlie watched, carving the guilt into his chest with the image of her shrinking form.

He would find Jacob Black, and return every hurt and fear to him, one way, or another.

Bella made it to the car before she let out the first choked sob.
"It's OK," Edward said, putting his arms around her, wishing they were somewhere more private, than Charlie's work doorstep.

The tremble wasn't noticeable to human eyes, but Edward could feel every vibration in her frame. When he asked her again, if she wanted to go home, she only nodded, becoming silent in the car. She kept her good hand to her mouth, half curled, as if to prevent the utterance of more sound.

At the house, she got out of the car, and paced in the garage, arms tight around herself, and then loose, as if she was uncertain of what felt best.

She hadn't noticed Rose, her still form under the Jeep, but Rose had certainly noticed her.

"What do you need, Bella?" Edward asked.

She only shook her head, pacing, heart rate climbing.

"Bella," he tried again, "why don't we go inside?"

"No," she said too quickly, knowing that he wanted her to lay down.

Rose's voice surprised them both.

"Out," she said, scooting out from under the Jeep. "Not you," she said to Bella, gently. "You," she said, jutting her chin at Edward. "Out." She pointed, just to make sure she was clear.

Edward faced her, growling quietly.

Do you want me to help her, or not? Rose asked wordlessly.

He pulled in a reluctant breath, turning to Bella for his answer.

She nodded, still pacing, hands still uncertain, so that when she looked up next, it was Rose who stood before her, Edward gone.

A/N for 2018-06-10 - Always appreciate that you read, and comment.

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

FlamingMaple on FanFiction.net
Rose watched Bella pace. It was no secret where she and Edward had gone.

"Did you tell them everything?" Rose finally asked.

Bella stopped, looking at her.

"Did you?" Rose asked, an eyebrow cocked.

Bella's face crumpled in on itself briefly, then seemed to smooth out tautly, Bella nodding.

"Mmm," Rose said, "crappy."

Rose sat down on the workbench, leaving room for Bella to do so too. Humans, she noticed, like to do things in pairs, or groups. Sitting. Eating. Shopping. Shitting.

As on cue, Bella sat down too.

"I thought it was getting better, Rose," she whispered. "It feels worse today. Now."

"Yes," Rose said sympathetically, "talking about it makes it worse."

"Then why does everyone say talking about stuff like this will make it better?"

"Because it will, eventually." Rose said, "but before that, it just makes you realize how awful it was. Easy not to think about it, when you don't give it words."

And the words had crow-barred open that box of memory, letting all sorts of ugly things come slithering out.

The deputy's questions had been professional: thorough, systematic, and specific.

They'd made her blush with embarrassment, and then blanch with recollection.

He'd used words like force, penetration, and penile.

She blanched, remembering the conversation, and remembering what it had described.

He'd asked her if she'd experienced pain, and where. How much.

If there were bruises still.

If he'd used a condom.

If he'd penetrated her anally.

If he'd used anything beyond his body to do so.

She put her hands to her hair, standing again, pacing.
"I need to go have a shower," she said.

"Oh no," Rose said, blocking her path. "No way."

"Move Rose," Bella said, fighting the urge to start scratching at her own skin again.

"No," Rose said again. "It won't help," knowing it was just as likely to make it worse.

"Please," Bella said, feeling the tears coming.

Emmett was fast-talking Edward in the house. "Just give her a chance, Edward. She knows what she's doing. Please." He was pleading earnestly. "Please. Let her help her. She wants to—and she hasn't been able to yet. C'mon, you know Rose can do this."

Edward knew no such thing, but didn't want to interrupt if it might help.

"Five minutes," he growled, "or less, if she gets worse."

Emmett nodded. His trust in Rose was absolute.

He knew just how shitty it was to be in Edward's shoes.

"He did all the things he did, Bella," Rose said, very carefully putting her hands on her sister's arms. "But he's not doing them now."

Bella was nodding, trying not to cry.

"She's OK," Emmett said again to Edward, his restraining hands becoming embracing ones. "Sometimes it has to be someone else."

Edward's throat was tight and burning, the confused hunger and emotion a thumping mass.

*You're doing everything you can,* Emmett murmured silently. *It's OK.*

Edward nodded, his posture, and Bella's mirrored in his sibling's arms.

"He's not here, and he won't touch you again." Rosalie made her voice low and elastic, stretching over the space around them, imagining it winding Bella up in its compulsion. She kept reiterating these statements, until she could hear her heart-rate slowing.

"Good," she said, tucking her own feelings and memories back into those now foreign places. It wouldn't do to let such things free now.

"Thank you," Bella managed, letting the tears out, finally letting her body soften in Rose's careful embrace.

"No problem," she said, "us girls stick together."

She slowly released the hug, hearing Edward approaching.

"Until husbands interfere," she said softly, but not unkindly. Catching Bella's look, she said, "we can talk more, later, about what to do with husbands." Hers had arrived as well, and her face glowed, finding Emmett in its gaze.

In a voice almost hushed with a emotion, Edward said "thank you," to his sister, taking Bella's hand.
She was pale, all the colour of her emotion retracted, leaving her hands cold and shaky. She murmured, "I think I need to lay down for a bit."

He didn't even ask, just picked her up, the dizzying speed ending in their room, her too tired to say anything about it. She was asleep in minutes, and he frowned, seeing it. It'd been too much today, to do what she'd done.

It was too much for him to have her do it.

He sat, watching her breathing, taking in the slowly tick of her heart, assuring himself of her wellbeing. The burn in his throat was a low hum, but one that was growing louder, thirstier, and he knew he would have to hunt—and soon, if he wanted her safe.

There were other thoughts vying for his attention, though. Anxious ones from Alice, who had been finding Bella's future suddenly inconstant, flickering in and out, like a light whose filament was in its death throes—sometimes there, and sometimes gone.

He listened to her theories, and knowing what Carlisle had asked of the wolves, felt the lumps of worry in his stomach knot together into something greater.

Jasper and Emmett were listening to Alice's now vocal words, moving outside, starting a patrol, scenting for wolves. For Jacob.

It was Carlisle who triggered another theory, arranging for medical supplies on the phone.

"The pregnancy," Edward said to himself. To all of them.

Everyone stopped.

He looked at Bella, sleeping peacefully now, and swallowed.

If Alice couldn't see Bella's future...then he stopped the thought.

The others finished it for him.

**Of course, Alice hushed, with a blossoming horror, searching for a polite phrase...their progeny...but if she wants to terminate anyway...**

"No," he said, "we are not going to put her through that until we know its necessary. It's only a week. We can wait. Jacob would be stupid to try anything on his own. He'd know we were expecting him."

*He hasn't exactly been smart, Edward,* Jasper said. *I wouldn't put anything past him.*

"Then we patrol," Edward said. "And see what Charlie finds, if anything." He'd proved his resourcefulness before. Edward didn't doubt that Charlie would apply himself as tenaciously again.

Alice huffed out a quiet, anxious and almost exasperated breath. She hated being hamstrung this way, but was trying to mentally contain these feelings for Edward's sake.

*Will you at least tell her?* She asked him. *She should know.*

He hated that she was right. His frame fought the notion of sharing this distressing news, and he forced himself to be calm. "Yes," he sighed, "but later."

He slipped into the bed beside her, pulling her form to his, finding peace with this temporary respite
sleep seemed to offer her. When he felt the familiar changing rhythms of her body surface, his own heart lightened, anticipating her waking, their togetherness.

He just didn't expect it to be with tears.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her back to him, "this is my fault. If I hadn't—"

"No, no," he murmured, turning her to face him, his forehead creasing with worry.

"It is," she said, "if I hadn't insisted that I go see him, this never would've happened—"

"Bella—"

Her breathing was hitching upwards, air becoming too precious for all her words. "I knew how he felt, Edward. I knew he wanted more than friendship. I never should've told him I'd be changed—"

"It's not—"

Her hands were shaking now. "I could've just left when he kissed me, Edward. I could've walked away—"

"No," he said, firmly, loudly. "He wouldn't have let you go, Bella."

"You can't know that," she said, shaking her head.

"I do know that, Bella, because I saw what Sam showed me."

She stared at him, all her panic sliding into an oozing dread at her feet. "What?"

"Sam came, and spoke to Carlisle and me. I saw what they'd seen."

Bella's hand went to her mouth, and she stumbled to her feet, moving away from him. "You saw?"

Then her hands were in her hair, pulling at it in distress. "I knew you would hear," she whispered, "today, but..." she looked at him, head shaking, voice horrified, "you saw."

Then she sat down on the couch, curled over, hands locked together, capping her head, as she rocked back and forth.

"Why does it matter to you, Bella?" Edward asked.

"Why?" she asked, incredulous. "How can you even ask that?"

"I love you," he said, "that will never change."

"But you'll see—" she whispered, more tears coming, "you'll see that."

"I see you," he said, "right now," he shook his head. "I see the woman I love."

"You've seen what he's done, Edward," she said, "I know what that means. You can't forget it. It's like he'll touch me every time you will."

The words thudded into his midsection with a weight beyond themselves.

She hadn't even realized what they'd done to him, she was so wrapped in her own distress.

Did she not want him to touch her? At all? Ever?
Because he’d seen?

Crushing Jacob Black slowly would be too kind an end for the creature, Edward thought. He was wrestling with all his own emotions, and the monstrous thirst, that lived hushed and subdued in his throat, rattled its cage, and screamed for release.

He stood slowly, making himself catalogue every whisper of fibre the carpet made to the soles of his feet, then noting the particular diaspora of dust that clouded the space between them. When control was more than an airy concept, he allowed himself to move towards her, kneeling to face her.

"No," he said, taking her hand, not letting her pull it away. "I love you. He will not touch you again, and I am not him, no matter what I've seen in my thoughts."

"Don't," she said, yanking her hand back, and standing, turning, walking out of the room.

Rosalie was doing the mental equivalent of yelling at him. *Don't chase her!*

And Jasper, feeling and smelling the heady mixture of protection and predation, stood between him and the way Bella had gone.

"You need to hunt, Edward."

"I'm fine, move," was the terse reply.

Emmett had joined them now.

Jasper levelled his gaze, and said silently, *Would you ever let me take such risks? Again?* It was painful for him to realize, let alone think so purposefully, and he shared with Edward the anguish he'd carried.

Edward groaned, still straining against the necessity.

"I'll go with you," Jasper said, "she'll be safe."

But she wasn't well.

"Rose is with her," Emmett reminded him. "She knows how to help her."

His hands contorting in frustration, Edward nodded, turning and running, before he could change his mind.

Rose was with Bella, but keeping a wise and wary distance, waiting for Bella to settle.

It was the first time she'd really been left alone—or at least, with the pretense of solitariness. She saw no one on her way out of the house, finding and following the crushed gravel path down to the river.

At the edge, she perched on one of the well washed flat stones, trying to imagine her thoughts and feelings leaving with the water flowing in front of her, wanting to be as mindless and singular as its current.

Or in its current, cold and numb.

No one came.

She sat, the temperature even and cool, despite the grip of mid-July, for sometime.
It was almost an hour before Rose seemed to arrive. "That wasn't fair," she said, making Bella jump.

She didn't apologize for the fright she caused. She knew well enough that it didn't help. How being 'handled' sucked.

"What was?" Bella asked, trying to sift through her thoughts, too upset to recall everything they'd said.

"It's like he'll touch me every time you will," Rose parroted to her.

Bella was shocked. "No," she said, "are you—?"

Rose looked at her witheringly. "Sure?" she snorted, cocking an eyebrow at her, "Yes."

With her head on her knees, Bella whispered "I'm so sorry, Edward," wrapping her hands tightly over her ankles.

"Just give us a minute," Rose muttered, below Bella's hearing, knowing Edward was back, just itching to interrupt. Again.

"You can feel crappy all you want, Bella," Rose said, leaning back on her hands, beside Bella, "but you can't say stuff like that to your mate. Ever." She looked at her, making sure the words had registered. "Because he can't forget it."

Bella had entered that comfortably numb state that seemed to steal over her when the emotions became too much. It was easy to be there, the grey state of things so preferable to the oscillation of fear and rage she otherwise felt she dwelt in.

It was the perfect state to ask the questions she needed to.

"How did you manage?" Bella whispered. "After. To be with Emmett?"

"Sex?" Rose asked, bluntly. Too loudly for Bella's liking.

She cringed a little. It reminded her of the morning. "Yes," she swallowed.

"Slowly," Rose said, flicking a small stone into the water. More quietly, she said, "obviously, I didn't have to worry about being physically hurt again, but I was still nervous. Afraid. Even with Emmett." She watched Bella listening, nodding, "there's no rush, Bella. And it might be better, to wait...until after, anyway."

It was Bella's turn to throw a rock into the water, angrily hurling it so that it landed with a satisfying 'plop.'

"But I understand why you don't want to," she said, sighing.

"No," Bella almost whispered, "I never wanted to wait for that." Then, with a volume and conviction that surprised a admiring smirk from Rose, she threw another, larger rock, shoving out a, "Fuck you, Jacob!"

"Dog," Rose added, for good measure.

Then Bella felt like she wanted to burst into tears again, the taut skin at her face uncomfortably tight. She wanted to see him beaten, and broken, and she simultaneously wanted to cry for the friendship they'd lost. What the hell?
"Sucks, I know," Rose said, "having your feelings all over the place like that."

Bella was throwing more rocks, still seated. When she ran out of the ones close by, Rose handed her more, but her arm tired quickly, and her breathing wasn't so easy. She made herself rest, after a bit.

"What helps?" Bella asked.

*Killing your rapists,* Rosalie thought. *Slowly. Bloodlessly.* "Letting the feelings out," she said instead. "All of them. Reminding yourself that it isn't happening now. That it won't happen again."

*Easy enough for Rose to think,* Bella grumbled mentally.

"It won't, Bella," Rosalie said, catching a glimpse of her face, "you think we'll let him near you?"

"No guarantees," Bella said. "He's smart. We don't know where he is—"

"We'll smell him, Bella. Edward will hear him. No chance. None."

The phrase *pride comes before a fall* rattled through her mind.

Bella mumbled, "if you say so."

"I say so," Edward said softly, some ten feet behind her. He was holding out her sweater, the one Charlie had brought. She was cold, and he was done waiting on Rosalie's notions. They might be doing some good, but his own anxiety for Bella's well being, fuelled by the words she'd thrown, overrode all patience with his sister's intentions.

"Thank you," she said, taking it gingerly. He stepped closer with it, helping her slip it on, coming to sit behind her, wrapping her in his arms. She could feel his breath ruffling her hair, its sweetness drifting downwards.

She felt safe there, utterly untouched by Jacob.

Rose was gone. As if she'd vanished on the spot.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I never should have said that. It isn't true—"

"I know," he said, tightening his arms, "you've been so calm, Bella, through all of this. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Calm? She felt like she'd fallen apart and been reassembled in the wrong order.

"I'm sorry you've been left with this mess."

He snorted. "We get to be together. You have no idea how happy this makes me. Being with you is like...breathing. When you're not there, it hurts. When you are, all is well."

She leaned her cheek against his arm, knowing her own heart to be the same.

He sighed. "I need to tell you something, Bella."

He hated the stiffening the crept into her fingers. "What?" she asked, the pretense of calm slippery over its more substantial worry.

"Alice can't see your future right now."
He had tilted slightly to the side, watching her carefully.

"OK." Her voice quavered. "Does she know why?" Were the wolves...or was Jacob?—No, she told herself. He wouldn't let that happen.

If he could.

"We think it's because of the pregnancy," Edward said quietly.

Standing with Emmett, Rose's face twisted. They'd retreated to the woods, but the conversation by the river was still audible. She wouldn't wish that on anyone.

*Your rapist's leavings."

Dog spawn at that.

Bella swallowed, feeling her gorge rise. She began panting, willing herself not to vomit.

*I am not going to throw up. I am not going to throw up. I am not—*

When her stomach’s volley ended, she wished her body could so easily reject what else it had so unwillingly received.

---

A/N for 2018-06-12 - First up: a lot of you have lately expressed anxiety about Rose's reaction to this pregnancy, and Edward's emotional needs. Hopefully, this chapter began to address some of this. Second: the pace of writing on this story has definitely slowed, so while the updates will be less frequent, they will still be regular. I never leave stories unfinished.

Thank you for reading, and leaving your thoughts.

Cheers,

~ Erin

EAffleck on Twitter

FlamingMaple on Tumblr
On the pretext of removing Bella’s cast, Carlisle discreetly shooed everyone out of the house on Sunday morning, Edward included, before sitting down with Bella.

“Yes,” he said, “definitely ready to come off now,” and neatly cut it, prying open the length of it up her arm.

Bella let out a quiet “whoa,” feeling the strange of sensation of air on her forearm, now freed to move and flex.

“Hold on,” Carlisle said quietly, putting a brace on it. “You can take this off to shower and wash your hands, but you’ll still need it for a few weeks.”

She nodded, but wiggled her fingers, enjoying the greater freedom of movement.

She was still looking at her hand, not really paying attention to Carlisle, when he set a box of condoms on the table in front of her.

Her circulatory system was playing tug of war with where to send her blood—not quite sure if it should go up, or down. In the end, up won, and she was left with her cheeks painted a healthy rose.

“How much do you know about pregnancy?” Carlisle asked, wondering how he could put her at ease.

“Um, the basics, I guess,” Bella said, wondering how condoms related to this—she was pregnant, after all.

“OK,” Carlisle nodded, trying to decide how to phrase his next words. “In any pregnancy, the mother and child are linked, and share a blood supply, food, air—everything.”

Bella nodded.

“This link is most pronounced later on, but it’s still present even in the earliest stages.”

“Sure,” Bella said, still not sure where this was going.

“And Vampire venom,” Carlisle went on, “is poisonous to Werewolves.”

Bella’s eyebrows folded together at this segue.

“But I don’t know what the reaction would be, between the two, in utero, and I would prefer not to experiment.” Then he nudged the box of condoms towards her, an eyebrow raised tellingly.

Her body made some sort of sound, and her mouth the shape of an ‘O’, but the two did not collude to produce the expected iteration.

She was suddenly relieved that she hadn’t eaten yet, as she realized the implications of his statement. What Jacob had left inside her had grown, and become part of her. Not just in her, but a physical
After she found words again, she asked. “And...after I’m not pregnant?”

“It would be wise to wait several weeks, and I’d like to do some blood tests, just to be sure it’s safe.”

He did not add that all pregnancies marked women. That they were literally transformed by the lives they carried, the foetus’ genetic material lingering in their own tissues. She didn’t need to know. Ignorance was a blessing there.

She made herself take several slow, and steady breaths, reminding herself that this was just temporary, that it would be gone, soon enough.

Carlisle asked, as gently as he could, “is there anything else you’re wondering about?”

“Yes,” Bella said, suddenly quiet, and still. “I know there was damage,” she said, thinking of the stitches. She’d been so traumatized by everything, she hadn’t even thought to ask. “Am I OK now?” She was afraid of what the answer would be.

“Yes,” Carlisle said, realizing what she was trying to move towards, “everything should be healed, but use your own comfort as a guide.”

She’d let out the breath she’d been holding in, nodding and frowning simultaneously. “Will it hurt?”

“No,” he said, feeling a pang that she should have to ask this, to be so formed by what had been done to her. “It shouldn’t be,” he said gently, “and if it is, it probably means you’re not ready.” With any human couple, he would’ve added that the boy involved would likely be doing something wrong, if it hurt. He couldn’t imagine Edward being so careless with his mate.

“There’s no rush,” he added, “or proscribed timeline. It’s different for everyone.”

Bella bit her lip, wondering if it was normal to want to, because she found herself conflicted with a heavy mixture of want and nervous trepidation.

“I was also wondering if you’d given any thought to my offer,” Carlisle said quietly.

Bella flicked her gaze up at him, and back down again.

He said nothing, waiting for her answer, quietly putting his supplies away, letting her think in this busy silence.

If she was honest with herself, the notion of speaking with a counsellor terrified her. What, if in letting herself speak of all the things she’d held in, she let something else slip? Made some comment that revealed more than was safe for the Cullens? Or the person she disclosed it to?

Or worse, made them think she was crazy.

Could they commit her? Like Charlie had tried to?

Could Edward keep her safe from that? Would Charlie try again?

Her front tooth cut into her lip.

Carlisle passed her a cotton compress, smelling, more than seeing the blood.
“I’ll take that as a no,” he said. “But if you change your mind--”

She nodded, relieved to have the question pass again.

When the cut had stopped bleeding, she pulled away the compress, her own question ready to be asked.

“When can I have the abortion?”

He didn’t need to ask if she’d started menstruating. They all knew she hadn’t. “Tuesday,” he said, hating to make her wait, but hating more the idea of putting her through the procedure itself. Her body could still reject it by itself.

“And how long will it take to work?” she asked, still so fuzzy on so many details. It was hard to hold onto things she’d been told.

“If nothing’s happened by then,” he said, “I’ll give you the shot that morning. Then you take the follow up medication the next day.”

“And after that?”

“It usually takes a few hours before the bleeding starts, which last a few days.” Seeing her look, he added, “no, not the kind that will be a problem here.”

She sighed her relief. “Tuesday,” she said again, holding onto it like a talisman.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

A/N for 2018-06-13 - Last chapter for a week or two, folks. Need some time to rest and figure out the next parts of this tale. Feel free to leave your ideas via comment, or come chat over on FB @ ErinAffleckTarbuck or on Twitter @EAffleck.

~ Erin
Bella stared at the man. “Your solution is for me to just go ahead and have sex? With my husband? After—?”

“That’s a bit of an oversimplification,” John said gently, “but partly, yes.”

She’d refused to see any kind of counsellor. Flatly.

But Edward had finally asked, his own pain so evident in his soft ‘please’, she couldn’t say no.

So, here she was, looking at the man named John, a psychologist who, Edward assured her, was beyond competent. The best in his field, certainly in the peninsula.

John’s suggestion, some forty minutes into their session, was not bolstering her confidence.

“You’ve said it’s one of your goals, Bella. Doesn’t it make sense to work towards it?”

“I suppose so,” she sighed begrudgingly, thinking of the day before.

Edward had let her slink away after her father had called, purportedly to go read in bed. It was as transparent a lie as any. She’d barely been able to string two sentences of reading together since...well, for a while. She hadn’t even bothered pretending when he came in, but was curled up in the bed, staring at the wall.

He’d had that pinched look between his eyebrows, sitting down carefully beside her.

He always made his footsteps audible for her now. So he wouldn’t startle her.

Then he’d gently brushed his finger tips over her forearm, and she’d yanked herself away, the violent swarm of memory buzzing over her. Jacob over her. In her, his hands smearing her in fresh revulsion.

Edward’s voice could normally call her back, but not this time, and he’d waited the interminable minutes for her to return.

His “please,” deep and urgent, had made her sternum vibrate.

It was as close to tears as he could come.

“Being intimate with your partner isn’t just about sex, Bella. To be intimate is to trust, with our minds, our emotions, and yes, our bodies, too.”

She nodded, seeing the sense here.

But sense and logic weren’t much in the way of friends these days.

As they’d walked towards the office building, a distant figure walking their way had too much resembled a familiar shape, and despite all of Edward’s reassurances, her body had begun its descent
into panic, railing against the logical urgings of her mind.

*Not him*, she’d told herself. *Can’t be. Edward would be ripping him to pieces.*

When the man had passed by, Edward had put himself between them, she trying to hide the shaking of her body behind his solidity.

“It’s not him,” he’d assured her. “You’re safe.” He kept murmuring these soft reassurances, her face buried in his chest.

“I suggest beginning with something small,” he said, “a touch or pattern of physical togetherness that you purposefully practise.”

“Practise?”

“Yes,” he said.

She chewed on the idea for a moment, and then her lip.

The sound of his pen, scratching across the page, made her look up, wondering what he was writing.

“Remember what I told you about the reactions you’ve had, bodily?”

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“Perfectly normal,” he said, “for someone who’s been traumatized. Think of this as rehabilitating your body to the same stimulus.”

Watching the blood drain from her face, he added, quickly, “stimulus that you’re comfortable with, Bella. Something small that you can use to build your trust.”

He waited for this idea to permeate the resistance written in her tense posture.

“Can you think of anything that might be a safe place to start?”

All the blood returned, painting bold strokes of pink up her cheeks.

Other things climbed up with the blood, too.

She closed her eyes, hands tight over the arms of the chair, willing herself to endure the memory.

When she’d walked into the room, fingers aching for the grip she’d kept on Edward’s hand, it had taken a solid five minutes for him to ease her into letting go, he filling in the paperwork she couldn’t even look at.

“I’ll be right outside,” he said softly. “Ear pressed to the door listening to everything, making sure you’re as uncomfortable as possible.”

When she snorted out a laugh at this ridiculousness, he’d grinned back. “Maybe,” she’d said uncertainly, “you could put your ear up against another door, while I’m here?”

He’d understood perfectly.

“Of course.” Then he’d carefully kissed her forehead, murmuring “thank you for doing this,” and left.
Then she’d sat down, a flutter of nervous flapping around her stomach, staring at John. He looked harmless, but so did a lot of people.

Like her Dad.

Or Jacob.

John’s silvered hair was topped with a pair of reading glasses, which he’d tipped onto his nose, reading through the forms Edward had filled in.

“Your husband,” he’d began tentatively, “filled in the paperwork for you?”

She’d nodded.

“Can you tell me, in your own words, why you’re here?”

The anger, a familiar friend, had snapped out a “can you not just read what he wrote?”

“Certainly,” John’d said calmly, and did, aloud, “My wife was violently raped by her best friend, Jacob, a few weeks ago. When she told her father that her friend had hurt her, he didn’t believe her, and forced Bella to see Jacob, where he assaulted her again. After this she left her father’s home for ours, where she became quite ill. Her father used his legal connections to obtain a custody order, and removed her from our care, leaving her where Jacob had access to, and assaulted her again. She recently discovered she’s pregnant from this assault, and is seeking a termination.” He’d pulled the glasses off, sliding them back onto his head, “Is that an accurate description?”

She’d nodded, swallowing, the anger gone.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” John had said softly, watching her eyes flick up at him, and down again. “Were you married after this happened?”

“Yes.” It was a soft whisper.

He’d nodded, as if this made sense.

“How can I help you, then?”

“What?” she’d asked.

“How can I help you?” John had repeated.

“Aren’t you supposed to know how to do that part?” Bella had asked. 

“Well, yes,” he’d said, smiling, “I do, but I need to know what you want to work towards.”

“Not being a nervous freak for starters,” Bella said, still shaky from the encounter outside.

“You think you’re a freak?” he asked, voice still that careful, non judgemental tone.

“I’m practically afraid of my own shadow. Can barely let the man I love touch me.” Damn, if the tears weren’t angling to join the conversation. She stopped, the lump in her throat almost painful.

John had gestured to the tissues beside her, and she’d taken one angrily, twisting it between her fingers.

“Those sound like perfectly normal, healthy reactions to me,” John’d said.
She’d stared at him. *Healthy?*

“Two people you trusted violated that trust quite profoundly, Bella. I’d be surprised to see any other kind of reaction.”

Now she was locked into the remembered grip of one of those violations, but it was loosening—slowly.

“What just happened there?” John asked, trying to bring her back to the present.

She didn’t want to say.

“Were you remembering something?” he asked.

Her head moved in a mechanical nod. That was safe.

“Quite realistic, I’m guessing, from your reaction?”

More nodding.

He didn’t press further, but made another quick scratch over the page. A conversation for another time.

“Any thoughts about moving forward?” he asked. “A small intimacy, something you can assure yourself is manageable—safe?”

Her cheeks flamed, and she mumbled out, “kissing, I guess,” feeling idiotic. Even that had disappeared for them after their wedding night.

She’d continued to retract, pulling inwards all the trust she’d so easily given Edward before. Holding his hand—never him holding hers—was the most constant contact they’d had.

“Alright,” he said, writing this down. His own gaze travelled discreetly to the clock. Still time, and he looked back at the last line Edward had written.

“You’ve had a positive pregnancy test result?”

She hadn’t, but said “Yes,” anyway. She didn’t doubt Carlisle’s knowledge. Or sense of smell. Or Alice’s absent vision.

“And you’re seeking an abortion.”


“Do you want to talk about that?”

“The abortion?” Bella asked, suddenly feeling nervous. A frisson of worry, of fear, that he might be opposed to such a thing shivered up her back.

He caught the pale tightening of her lips.

“If you want to talk about any of your feelings about it,” he clarified.

“I just can’t wait for it to be gone,” Bella said, the words falling out of her mouth in a jumble. Carlisle had given her the shot that morning. She’d been so relieved, she’d burst into a fit of tears, knowing at least this part had a finite end in sight. “It’s like my own body’s betrayed me, keeping
She stopped suddenly, before she could say more.

“Do you think your body betrayed you, Bella?” His face had folded up in genuine curiosity. He knew they’d touched on something deeper.

The mad flutter at her clavicle was as visible to him, as it was audible to Edward.

“During the assault?”

*Was it so obvious?* She wondered. The shame she felt for how her body had reacted to him?

He didn’t press, but commented instead, “many women feel conflicted about what they physically experience during an assault, or take it as some sort of complicity.”

She managed a minute nod of acknowledgement, suddenly wordless.

She hadn’t talked about the specifics of the assaults. They’d danced around those. When it became clear he wouldn’t demand them, she’d been able to relax a little.

“Bella,” he said gently, “did you report the assault?” When she nodded, he went on. “If you consent, I can get a copy of the report. It would mean you not having to recount those details again, and it would help me understand how I can help you.”

Bella wanted to cry with relief for the second time that day.

“She’s wanted,” she said instead, keeping her voice small, not letting it burst the tentative bubble of control in her throat.

Their time was almost done. His hand was moving faster across his notepad.

“Can I ask when your termination is scheduled for?”

“Already started,” she said, “last part is tomorrow.”

He nodded, eyebrows pulling together. “Before we finish today, I want ask that you give yourself permission for something.”

Her expression mirrored his, and she waited.

“I want you to let yourself grieve,” he said gently. “Because you have a lot to grieve for, and,” he paused, “some of it might surprise you. Just be...open to that.”

The sources of her grief seemed so obvious to her, she couldn’t imagine anything disrupting these expectations. She gave a quiet “sure,” and then stood, following his lead.

“I’d like to see you weekly,” he said, “but if you need to talk, or it’s an emergency, call.” He handed her a card, which she took, slipping it into her pocket.

Edward had buried his attention in as many other minds as he could, looking for the grip of the most mundane details in which to lose himself. Her voice, and John’s sharp thoughts sliced through all of it. He dared have hope after this first session. They’d touched on things of substance. It was more than he’d expected.

In the empty lobby, he pulled her into as soft a hug as he could, his own feelings sliding from the
extremes of his love, to the depths of his worry.

“Where to, my love?” he whispered into her hair.

“To find ice cream.”

“Really?” he asked, grinning suddenly, leaning back, looking at her. He was happy to find a small and shy smile on her face.

“Really. I’m hungry. I’m tired, and Carlisle told me I’ll be fairly miserable tomorrow, so ice cream today.”

“Done,” he said, sweeping a gallant hand ahead of him, the other in hers.

She’d surveyed the flavours displayed, picking not one, but two.

Watching him eyeing her, she smiled, “want some?” holding out her cone.

He shook his head, making a face, and sticking out his tongue.

She giggled.

“I think,” he said, “that’s the most enthusiastic I’ve seen you about food in a while.”

“Hard not to be,” she said, “it’s ice cream.”

He tucked away reminder to get some for home.

“Did it help?” he finally asked, after she’d eaten some more.

Her nod was less certain, and he felt a twinge of regret for asking. For interrupting this small happiness.

Then she blushed, adding, “I have homework.”

“Oh?”

The rush of blood was so intense, it perfumed the air around her.

“Kissing,” she mumbled.

He couldn’t help it. He laughed.

“Nice,” she said, still a deep mauve, but chuckled with him. It did sound ridiculous.

He had snuck his hand into hers over the table. “Sounds like the kind of homework I can help with, if you want,” he said much more gently.

“Good,” she said, a playful eyebrow up, “saves me looking for volunteers.”

Smiling, he thought about how much he’d missed her sense of humour.

“Touché, Mrs. Cullen.” Then he took, and kissed her fingers.

She returned his smile, and then wiggled her eyebrows, leaving them both in a fit of giggles.
Jacob had turned into a ghost.

At least, to Charlie it seemed that way.

His car had been found in Wenatchee, a good day's drive away. The broken windows spoke of how long it'd been there, before anyone phoned it in.

But no sign of Jacob himself.

The bulletin he'd put out had returned nothing. He'd phoned every faint contact he'd ever made across the state, and nothing.

It had only been days, but still. There should be something.

Charlie huffed out a frustrated breath, staring at the file on his desk. Bella's file.

Bella Cullen's file, a little voice in his head reminded him.

Beside it was the release she'd signed, faxed in from a psychologist's office in Port Angeles.

At least she was seeing someone, he told himself. That was good.

He'd phoned her just the once since she'd come in, just wanting to talk. To hear her voice. Edward had answered, almost like he knew to expect him. Charlie had sat on the other end, his stomach all knots, wondering if she would take it, listening to their murmured voices, when suddenly it was hers in his ear.

She'd been curt, and he'd melted into a mumbling jumble, asking how she was, not sure how to continue beyond the most basic questions.

Now he stared at her file.

Mike had seen him, and shaken his head before going out on a call. "Don't put yourself through that," he'd said to Charlie, "I'll send it in later."

But Charlie didn't want it to wait, and if anything, he needed to light a fire under his own ass to get something—anything done, with this case that was going nowhere.

So he opened the file, and began reading.

The impression Jacob Black's fist left was anything but ghostly, and the creature on its receiving end roared, swinging back an arm in defense.

He didn't break it, but caught it instead, flipping the man around and stuffing his bleeding face into the alley's receptive brick wall.

"Think she said no," Jacob said again, flicking his gaze back at the woman some ways to his left. She was stepping backwards, wondering if this intervenor was better or worse than what she'd been dealing with.
"She's a whore, idiot!" the squashed face said, then grunted as the pressure renewed itself.

Jacob looked back at the woman again, "you wanna deal with this guy?"

She shook her head, still taking steps away.

Jacob could hear other footsteps though, and despite his strength, knew the number of footfalls he was hearing were beyond what he could manage alone.

"Leave her be," he said to the creature he was holding, releasing him.

With a vicious curse, the man spat, then wisely turned and disappeared around the corner.

The new footsteps were behind Jacob, circling around the woman.

There was a man there, hand on her cheek, turning her face as though to inspect it, like one would check a peach for bruises. "He hurt you?" he asked, voice all business.

She shook her head.

"You're good then, off you go."

She nodded, retreating, the click of her shoes fast, gait curtailed by the tight stricture of her small skirt.

"Thanks," this newcomer said evenly, eyeing Jacob. The man with him stood, arms loose, feet spread apart. Ready, Jacob recognized.

He shrugged. He understood what he'd interrupted. Payment didn't ugly it less.

"I could use someone with your skills," the man went on.

Jacob snorted. Skills.

"I pay well."

This tugged, in a way he wished it didn't. He needed money, if he was going to accomplish what he needed to. Short of stealing it—

The man started throwing out jobs and numbers. They straddled opposite extremes in and morals and remuneration.

"No one gets hurt?" Jacob asked.

"'Course not," the man smiled. "Least no one who doesn't ask for it."

"Sure," Jacob said, extending a hand, letting his grip demonstrate what the man already suspected.

Charlie wiped his hand across his face again.

He was not crying.

He wanted to lose himself in all the anger he could find, and then use it to locate Jacob Black.

Then he'd deal with the guilt that was ravaging him.

He'd assaulted her multiple times.
Mul-ti-ple times.

Because of what he'd done.

When Mark and the receptionist had returned from lunch, he'd told them to head right back out again while he cleaned up the mess he'd made.

It was time for a new coffee maker anyway.

And the carpet was due to be cleaned, too.

"Back in half an hour boss," Marjorie had said, guiding Mark outside by the arm.

What the heck had he been thinking, reading his daughter's file?

*Lighting a fire under my ass, for sure. Nearly burned the whole damn place down.*

He pounded on the desk again.

Sweeping up the worst of the mess he'd made, he shuffled the paperwork into order, and pounded in the fax number for Bella's psychologist.

It was likely the most useful thing he could do that day, but tomorrow was a whole different ball game.

---

A/N for 2018-06-16: The stats page tells me that people are reading this - and a few of you do comment. Would love to hear from the rest of you what your thoughts are on this tale.

~ Erin

FB: AT ErinAffleckTarbuck

Twitter: AT EAffleck
Carlisle had not been exaggerating.

Miserable was an apt description for how she felt.

"No," she'd told Edward, hand out, as she headed towards the bathroom again. There were limits on what she wanted him to see.

The bleeding, she'd expected, but the other bodily purgings, she'd hoped to be spared.

No such luck.

It was the tears that had been the surprise.

That she should feel something….for this thing, and its leaving her. A strange commingling of revulsion and...pity? Sadness?

She didn't prod at those emotions too much.

"Heat," Carlisle had reminded her, after she'd taken the pill he'd given her, "massage, hot baths, walking, and lots of fluids."

She'd already refused any pain medication with a quick shake of her head. "No, I want to know it's working."

Edward had looked nervously at Carlisle, who'd simply nodded, adding silently, Respect her choices. She knows what she needs.

Several hours in to the effects of the abortion, Bella was seriously reconsidering that choice.

Emerging from the bathroom again, she returned to the bed, curling up with a stifled groan as another contraction gripped her.

Edward had learned not to talk when these were happening, but put the heating pad on her back, massaging her muscles through it. He'd taken issue with Carlisle's description of what she would experience. Severe cramping was a nice way of saying a-lot-like-labour-pains, but his father's curt thoughts had stopped him from rephrasing it for her. You'll only frighten her. Focus on helping her get through it.

He could feel the pull of the muscles under his hands, and the squeezing band that was expunging the pregnancy from her body.

She was at the worst of it so far, in terms of the contractions, hands tight into the pillow, blowing out steady breaths.

He was worried that she hadn't had anything to drink, but Carlisle was reassuring him from a distance. Give her time. It's only been a few hours. She'll be turning the corner soon.

Watching her suffer through it, he had some inkling of what father's felt, seeing the women they loved hurt for their progeny.
But this was just the last of Jacob Black, being chemically stripped from her body.

He had no sympathy for the thing that had gained purchase inside her.

The latest contraction had passed, and setting the heated blanket over himself, scooped her up to rest on him. She moaned against the movement, thoroughly lost in the misery of her body.

"I love you," he said. "And I wish you weren't so miserable."

"It's not so bad," she lied.

He chuckled, the sound rocking her, setting off her own bubbling of laughter.

"So convincing," he whispered into her hair, rubbing her back.

"Totally," she mumbled. Then she surprised him by turning her face upwards, finding his lips with hers.

It was hard for him to kiss her, he was smiling so much at this easy touch—this distilled happiness.

When it ended, he let his smile blossom fully. "So diligent with your homework."

"I'm a keener," she grinned back.

Then the next contraction gripped her, and she blew out a groaning breath, hands looking for give in his marble form.

"Careful," he said, hearing her grinding her teeth.

She made an unintelligible sound, but it was enough to silence him, settling his lips into her hair again.

Safe to talk again, he ventured a quiet, "what do you want to do this week?"

"Not feel like I'm dying," she mumbled.

"OK," Edward said, forcing his face to remain neutral. He knew it was just a turn of phrase, but still. "And after that?"

She thought for a moment. "Go see Angela." She'd missed her gentle friendship.

"Together, or on your own?"

"You'd stay close by?" she asked, her grip tightening again.

"Of course," he said.

"On my own, I think," she said, "I'd like to just spend some time with her. Being normal."

Normal, he thought. Just living as a human should. How much his world had robbed that from her.

The guilt, never far, twisted in his gut.

Another pain began at her hips, and she moved away, pushing herself onto all fours, trying to arch her back through it.

By the late afternoon, the worst of the pain had passed, and she fell into a disgruntled half sleep,
disrupted by the milder, but still continued discomfort.

The ringer on the house phone had been set to a low purr, enough for everyone but Bella to hear it. It sounded now, and Edward flicked his attention to Alice's mind, silent with possibilities.

"Hello?" Carlisle said, picking it up. "Hi Sam," he murmured politely, alerting the rest of the family. "Thank you for letting me know," he continued on. "She's fine," he added more tersely. "I think we're clear that she isn't your concern anymore." There was a brief moment of listening, and a patient but authoritatively dismissive, "goodbye."

"The council's approved our request. All except Billy Black," Carlisle said, his thoughts an equal mixture of miserable empathy, and anger.

"Good," Edward whispered, thinking how fitting it was to have the news today. That Jacob Black could be ended, along with his progeny.

Jasper and Emmett had been searching in the last weeks, without success, trying to follow Jacob's trail. He'd looped back on himself, his scent lost in the water off the Canadian coast, just south of Vancouver. They hadn't found where his trail emerged again.

"He could have left," Jasper'd said. "Gone somewhere by ship."

Edward had simply shaken his head. "No," remembering his thoughts that day on the mountain. "He'll come back for her. He isn't far. We just need to look slightly further afield for him."

Emmett had snorted at this. "Kinda hard, in July." The Eastern stretches of the state were closed to them outside of night, washed as they were in steady sun, rather than the sturdy cloud cover of the West.

"Then we go at night," Edward had gritted back.

"Not you, lover boy," Emmett grinned. "Go be with your wife. She needs you."

His wife, Edward thought, would be happier if he could assure her of Jacob's permanent absence from her life. He had growled as much to Emmett.

Emmett had looked at him, in all seriousness, "trust me, Edward. She needs you here. Leave the hunting to us."

But they hadn't found anything, and Edward's patience for Jacob's continued living was a thin thing indeed.

Now they could hunt with impunity.

"The outcome is what matters," Carlisle had said. "That Bella is safe. That our family is safe." There were other implications to what Jacob had done, his thoughts reminded Edward.

That he should be robbed of the visceral satisfaction of paying Jacob Black back pain for pain, every single piece he'd visited on Bella, made Edward vibrate with frustrated rage.

"That is he is ended, is the only material thing," Carlisle'd repeated.

The weight of his family's assembled thoughts, heavy with violent imaginings, would have to be enough for him. They would end him. Bella would be safe.

_Bella would be happy_, he told himself. _Not just safe._
"Agreed," he'd finally said. It hurt to produce the word, to release the right to personally execute vengeance, but he couldn't dispute their logic. The creature was a danger to all of them. The first to have the opportunity to do so was to dispense justice.

He just hoped they would carry his enthusiasm for inflicting appropriate misery with them.

A/N for 2018-06-17: Your words feed my spirit people. Thank you for leaving them.

~ Erin

FB: AT EriAffleckTarbuck

TWITTER: AT EAffleck
Pragma, Philia, Eros

Pragma, Philia, Eros

It was one of the most awkward interviews Charlie’d ever conducted.

Interviewing Billy Black.

Trying to find out where Jacob might be.

The...man? boy?...that had raped his daughter.

Mike had offered to go and ask the questions, but Charlie’d refused. He’d made this mess, and he’d clean it up himself.

“You want me to help you find Jake, so you can put him in jail.” Billy had stared at him like he was nuts.

“She said he raped her, Billy,” Charlie said softly.

Billy’s paternal loyalty wanted to deny it, still, but didn’t. The pack had spoken, with a squeamish level of detail that skewered the last possibilities of denial.

Jacob’d done it. Not a question there. Billy just couldn’t quite understand it.

His son loved Bella.

The pack had understood that too.

That’s what made the assault even more horrific.

“Think you got a case?” Billy asked, knowing just how small the possibility was. Just how dangerous it would be for Charlie to get involved in this.

Charlie thought before answering this, speaking softly, “he needs to face what he did, Billy.”

Billy wasn’t so kind in his own response. “Or you need a way to redeem yourself? Kinda fucked up on that front, huh?”

Charlie’s expression hardened. “You wanna help, or go sit in a cell on obstruction charges?”

Billy snorted. “You ain’t got nothing on me Charlie Swann, and you know it. You won’t find Jake, for all the names I give ya, so leave and save yourself the paperwork.”

He was partially right. Charlie had the flimsiest of pretexts to take Billy in, and knew it wouldn’t help find Jacob.

They sat, staring at the table, each stymied by the other’s intent.

“I’m sorry for it, Charlie,” Billy said quietly. “I really am.” His voice shook here, “it’s...hard to believe.”
“Tell me about it,” Charlie said, just as subdued.

“You want answers about where Jacob might be, ask Sam.”

“Sam Uley?” Charlie asked, reaching for his notepad.

Billy nodded. “They’re...close. He’d know better than me.” He knew it wouldn’t hurt his friend to ask, and that Sam would have few answers. It might keep Charlie out of trouble though.

They made their stilted farewells, each wondering if there would be a friendship to resurrect when this was all settled.

Or if there would just be bodies to bury.

Bella was sitting in Angela’s living room, playing with her much younger siblings. Mrs. Webber’d had to run out, apologizing profusely to the girls as she did, thanking them too, for taking the twins so she could help the parishioner who’d called.

Angela hadn’t said anything, but she’d noticed the ring on Bella’s finger, the thinness of the hand that it protruded from, and the shrunken posture Bella held.

She’d brought out tea, and cookies, swatting small and sticky hands away, trying to save some for Bella, who’d giggled, watching her efforts.

Angela was helping her parents at the church over the summer, enjoying her last one doing so. She’d be off to college in the fall, excited and nervous for being away for home.

When Bella had finally eaten something, Angela’s curiosity had exhausted her patience.

“That’s a beautiful ring,” she offered mildly, refilling Bella’s cup.

The answering blush confirmed Angela’s suspicions.

“Do you have a date yet?” she went on, just as softly.

The intensifying of the colour in Bella’s cheeks was confusing.

Oh, she thought... oh no. Was she pregnant? Her own face paled with regret and remorse for asking.

“Um,” Bella said, “no date, because we already got married.”

“Oh!” Angela said, an excited and clearly relieved breath escaping her, “Oh, that’s wonderful! Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” Bella said, having read, in Angela’s face, exactly what she had thought. “It’s OK,” she said, “I get that most people are going to assume I’m pregnant.”

Angela blushed herself, feeling badly for thinking as much.

“Really,” Bella said, “it’s OK.”

“It isn’t,” Angela said, “but thank you. I’m glad for you. Surprised, though.”
“Yeah,” Bella said, wondering how much to say.

What would it hurt? She asked herself, to tell her. Really?

The sudden blankness, and then sadness on Bella’s face was alarming to Angela.

“Bella? What’s wrong?” She reached out a hand to pull apart the twins, handing them each a toy.

Bella shook her head a little. “A friend of mine, he um,” she didn’t want to say the word, so husked out, “he hurt me.”

Angela’s eyebrows pinched together, and she went still, watching, nodding for her to go on.

Bella was almost embarrassed to continue, “my Dad,” she swallowed, “he didn’t believe me, and he made me go see him.”

Her friend’s eyes widened at this, but her lips were tight. She’d seen enough of her parents to know how to walk through such a disclosure.

“He hurt me again.” Bella’s intonation was all wrong. It sounded like a half-bred question, uncertain and dangling. “So I moved out after that. With Edward. I got really sick, was really out of it, and my Dad,” she cleared her throat. “He got a court order, and took me, and put me right back with the guy that hurt me.” Her throat closed up there, and Angela pulled her into a hug.

“I’m so sorry, Bella,” she whispered.

Bella was trying really hard not to cry.

Angela scrounged around on a side table, coming up with a container of diaper wipes, frowning at them, and Bella laughed, seeing what she was being offered.

“Thanks,” she managed, taking one, making her face only more evenly wet with it.

“He thought Edward was hurting me,” she explained. “He knows now he wasn’t.” She shrugged, “I was afraid he would try something like that again, so we got married. He can’t.” More shrugging.

Angela took her hand, and so much like Edward, rubbed it with her own. “Gotcha,” she said. “Still, congratulations. No doubt you two are meant for each other.”

Bella allowed a small smile to form on her lips, and they both turned, watching the twins at their play again, letting the stretch of their feelings subside, and relax into easier shapes.

“Sorry,” Bella said, feeling like she was wading through an emotional swamp, “I didn’t meant to come and bring you down.”

“No, no,” Angela said, shaking her head, “I’m glad you told me. Friends do that for each other, Bella.” She squeezed her hand. “What’s it like, being married?” She asked this softly, her open curiosity on her face.

“Wonderful,” Bella said, her face transformed with a smile.

Outside, a short distance away, Edward smiled with her. Yes, he thought, it is.

“Must change your student housing plans for the fall,” Angela added, more practically.

Bella hadn’t even considered the fall. “Hadn’t gotten that far ahead,” she said honestly. Would she
even be human then?

That thought came with a cold dose of fear.

And would the Volturi come to check again?

Perhaps.

“Not that you need to worry about it, I’m sure,” Angela said, slipping another cookie onto Bella’s plate. “Where did you get married?” she asked, trying to redirect her friend to happier topics.

Later, at home, she and Edward were outside, enjoying the warmth of the grass, his body a perfect compliment to heat of the day.

“I’m glad you saw a friend,” he said, swirling his fingers through her hair.

“Me too,” she sighed. She was playing with his other hand, a neglected book beside her.

“I was wondering,” he said, “if you had given any thought to the fall. What classes you’d like to take.”

Her fingers stopped moving, and she looked at him. “I didn’t think....I’d be taking any,” she answered, frowning a little. Had he changed his mind? About changing her? “Do you,” she struggled, unwanted tears brewing, “not want me to—?”

“No, no,” he said quickly, “you misunderstand. Whenever you’re ready. I just...I thought you might want to go to college. Do the things you wanted to. Be...human, a little longer.” He didn’t name the thing she’d very much wanted to do, that he’d offered with such poor and ignorant timing in the meadow.

“Oh,” she said, relieved, and then silently, oh, understanding. “Being human,” she said, with voice. After a moment she whispered, “Yes, I still want that. With you. While I’m human.”

“OK,” he murmured, wanting to show her that he did too, but not certain how.

But she turned to him instead, saving him the worry, her hand curved to his cheek, and kissed him. The heat that stole up from her lips and fingers flared indiscriminately, and he fought to make his touch gentle and light, still tangling with her hair, but wanting to go elsewhere. Evoke in her what she did in him.

Then she moved her fingers from his cheek to his arms, lips still exploring the space of the kiss.

Edward let his own touch slide to her back, where he made it rest, exploring the wings of her scapula.

She found the curve of his breast bone, so their digits touched, on the other’s body, the mirrored places of their hearts—his silent, and hers frantic.

His question to her had already let loose his memory of their wedding night. The beauty of her bare form, delicate over his, and her soft flesh pressed to his firm one, made suppressing his own body’s wants almost impossible. Their positions didn’t allow her to ignore this, and when she continued with the kiss, opening her mouth to let his tongue trace her lips, he growled in pleasure.
He fingers melted down the shifting heat of her back, curling into an embrace at her hips, digits spread out, massaging the larger muscles there, wanting to wake in her the sensations brewing in himself.

It was working.

Like his, her hands were sovereign in their reign, now pulling at the tails of his shirt, claiming the geography of his hips, and that unnamed space between navel and beltline.

He didn’t risk reciprocation, afraid he would knock some memory loose. Then she took his hand, and slid it under her shirt, invitation most precise.

Leaving his fingers where she’d planted them, he moved his lips to her neck, tracing, with his kisses, the vein that ran the length of it, to the exquisite velvet just behind her ear. Hearing the pleased gasp this elicited, he freed his hands, letting them make space between the soft texture of her bra, and the softer touch of her breasts.

Her reassuring sounds continued, as did the brave reach of her fingers, sitting just below his belt line, whispering tender promises to the extraordinarily sensitive skin there.

He didn’t even realize he was growling, a low roiling, purr that grew in tandem with their proximity. It was only when it mated with a sharp movement, rolling her over onto her back that her own defensive sensibilities were woken.

He stopped, immediately, feeling her startle.

Her soft, “I’m OK,” did nothing to reassure him, and he rolled slowly to the side, carrying the worry of her fear and potential hurt with him.

When he said, “I’m sorry,” he’d already chastised himself silently, “I need to be more careful.”

“No,” she pouted, coming to rest her arm on his chest, frowning. She looked almost petulant. Childlike.

Almost.

“I’m fine. Why’d you stop?” she asked.

“I wasn’t,” he said, allowing himself to flutter his fingers through her hair again. He smiled apologetically. “It’s...new,” he said, angling his chest to face her more directly. “To be with you this way. I’m still figuring out how to…steer this desire for you.”

She blushed.

He grinned, seeing it.

“Just like you are,” he went on. “I suspect it’s a bit more...consuming, for vampires, than humans.”

“Cute,” she said, rolling her eyes at the unintended pun.

“Hardly,” he said dryly, but smiled.

“Practise does make perfect,” she reminded him, tracing her finger over his chest, letting him appreciate her eyes through their half-dropped lids.

“Hmm,” he said, interrupting her hand with his own.
“Practise,” she said again.

The grin stretched wide. “Positively lascivious...I love it.” Then he kissed her again, and they continued to exchange these small touches of their lips, the day winding on into this blossoming trust.

A/N for 2018-06-19 - The title references three of the types of love - longstanding, brotherly, and romantic, and their appearance in this chapter. I know, the first part - a bit hard to see, but there.

Folks, your words sustain me with the writing of this story - thank you.

~Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FaceBook

AT EAffleck on Twitter
"Self defense?" John asked.

"Mm-hmm," Bella said, wondering if that term was misleading.

Rosalie had come back from a shopping trip, throwing a large plastic bag onto the couch. It'd landed with a hefty thump.

Edward's eyes had narrowed, mouth opening to say something when Rose interrupted him.

"Please," she'd said curtly, "trust me." Clearly, she'd thought something at him, because he closed his mouth again.

"Let's go outside, Bella. I want to show you something."

Giving Edward a curious look—and receiving an encouraging nod in Rose's direction—she'd followed.

In the wide space of the lawn, Rose'd said, "I want to teach you how to fight."

"OK," Bella said, swallowing nervously, and wondering why.

"Not that I think you'll ever need it, but I think it'll help you feel less anxious."

Then she'd made a quick step closer, startling Bella's hands up, and grabbed them with her own.

Bella's resulting panic was instant.

All of them knew not to do this—that it was an absolute trigger.

One of the worst.

Emmett had followed Edward outside, and was running verbal and physical interference. "Relax, she won't hurt her."

"No, she's upsetting her!" Edward hissed, trying to keep his voice low, so he didn't add to it.

"She's teaching her," Emmett countered. "She knows. Give her a minute."

The logical part of Edward's mind knew this was true, but the part that saw his mate in distress was scrambled with anxiety and anger.

In her panic, Bella was trying—fruitlessly—to fight Rose's grip.

"What would an attacker expect?" Rose kept calmly asking her.

Bella wasn't answering, struggling mindlessly still. The effort was exhausting her though, and the adrenaline's departure left her shakily resigned.

"What would an attacker expect?" Rose asked again. "This, right? You fighting?"
Bella nodded, trembling.

"What wouldn't an attacker expect?"

After a moment, Bella said, "to not fight."

"Exactly. What else?"

"For me to stay calm."

"Yes, and?"

"To let them do what they want to?"

"Keep going."

"To drop."

Rose nodded, and then let go.

Edward moved to come forward.

"Oh no," Rose said, "we're just getting started. Let her learn." She looked at Bella. "I know this is hard," she said facing her, "but there are things you can do. You won't be able to overpower Jacob, but you can absolutely outsmart him."

Bella swallowed again. They rarely named him, but Rose was right. She was still afraid she'd find herself face to face with Jacob, haunted by the helplessness she'd experienced that last time.

"Show me," Bella said, with more bravado than she felt, trying to let Edward know she was OK.

So, Rose had shown her. Simple things. A round slap to the ears was effective. Hitting the top of an unguarded foot—crushing toes. Small movements with large effect. All of them designed to inflict maximum pain with little effort.

"And," John asked Bella, "is it helping?"

"Yes," she said, "definitely."

"And how are things going on the intimacy front?" he asked next, shifting in his seat, tilting his head forward.

He watched the blush blossom on her face, taking it as a positive sign.

"Good," she said, much more shyly.

"I'm glad," he said softly, and then, pivoting on that positive moment, steered the conversation into harder places. "I received the complaint you made." He said this quietly, watching her carefully. "You've been through an immense amount of trauma."

"I don't want to talk about what happened," Bella said, forcing the words out.

"Of course, as you said. But, I did want to ask one question, if that's alright?" Seeing her wary look, he added, "it's one the police aren't allowed to ask, not anymore."

"OK," she said, heart fluttering with nerves.
"Was this your first sexual experience?"

It threw her. She'd been expecting something detailed. Embarrassing. Graphic. Something that he would attach some mysterious significance to.

She nodded, her confusion worn in the wrinkled wedge between her eyes.

"I ask because it helps me understand your circumstances," John said. "It can be frightening to have an assault as your only sexual reference point."

No shit.

"Why can't the police ask that?"

"Past sexual experience is irrelevant to the commission of a crime," John said, "and you don't want a police officer's moral sensibilities determining whose case is, or isn't worth pursuing."

No worry there, Bella thought, remembering Charlie's haggard look as they left the station. Not that his efforts were worth much.

"For instance, it would be perfectly normal to worry about sexual intimacy being painful," John said.

Bella nodded, remembering her conversation with Carlisle. Despite his reassurances, she was still afraid.

And she knew Edward was too.

"And it shouldn't be, when it's consensual, and when you're ready."

She hated that she was blushing.

"Have you made any progress, do you feel, in terms of building some of that trust around intimacy again?"

"Yes," she made herself say, through the growing bloom in her cheeks.

"Good," John said. "Do you think you're ready to add something to that?"

They already had, Bella thought, remembering the other day in the garden.

Watching her carefully, John asked, "or perhaps you already have?"

She nodded.

"That's good," he smiled at her, scribbling something onto his notepad. "Any thing that's been concerning since last week?"

Just my vampire husband, learning to manage his desire.

My father pursuing a werewolf. Or trying to.

And my sister in law, bringing home a giant bag of knives.

"No," she said.

"Knives?" Edward had said, with alarm, when Emmett had brought out Rose's purchases.
Bella had thought the same thing.

"Not like she can hurt us with them," Rosalie'd muttered, rolling her eyes at him.

"No," Edward had spat out, "she can hurt herself."

Bella was all for his loving concern, but she and Rose turned to him as one, frowns worn differently in each face.

Edward, Emmett thought, sometimes, it's just better to keep your mouth shut.

So he did, jaw clenched, when he saw the collection of blades Rosalie had acquired. Each of them came with a sheath, and a set of straps, so they could be worn in various concealed locations on the body.

On his wife's fragile, human body.

It was a test to remain silent when he saw what kind they were.

"They're switchblades," Rosalie explained, demonstrating the action. "You can't open them accidently, don't worry." She said this more for Edward's sake, than Bella's, "but you do need to be careful when you do open them. Always away from yourself."

Handing one to Bella, she had her practise opening and closing it several times before she showed her any offensive, or defensive movements.

"Alright, Emmett?" Rosalie asked.

He'd grinned at Bella, who had smiled back at him, until she realized what he was going to do.

When she'd come back to herself, she was in Edward's arms, still outside, Rose and Emmett standing several yards away, looking on worriedly.

Edward was growling, a low burr that Bella couldn't hear, but could feel vibrating against her chest.

"Sorry," she said, "I don't—"

"You don't have anything to be sorry for, Love," Edward said, and then pointed a dirty look in the direction of his siblings.

"They're trying to help, Edward," Bella said, "it just," she sighed, squiggling out of his arms, "caught me off guard."

"Kinda the point, Bella," Rose called, walking closer at a measured pace, eyes on Edward. "Most attackers don't give you advance notice."

"And there won't be any attacks," Edward said, "because they would happen over my broken body."

Rosalie sighed. "If this is going to help, it needs to be real, Bella. Do you want to try again? Maybe with Jasper?"

A shiver'd ridden up her spine, remembering her prior birthday. "Maybe tomorrow," she'd mumbled.

The tap of John's pen, a sign of his own thoughtful ruminations, interrupted Bella's remembering. "Can I ask you what will seem like a silly question?"
"Uh, sure?"

"You're familiar with the baseball metaphor for sexual intimacy?"

Who wasn't?

"First base, kissing, second base, heavy petting, third base, etc.?"

"Yes," she said, allowing herself to smile.

"I know this is tricky for you to talk about in explicit terms. Where are you, baseball wise, in your comfort level?"

Ah.

"Somewhere between first and second, I guess," Bella mumbled, simultaneously embarrassed, and relieved to not have to be so specific.

"I'm going to guess that some touches might be quite alarming, for you, having read the report."

The art of sliding his clients from ease to discomfort was clearly one John clearly had experience with, and Bella felt like a fish, hooked and teased—and ultimately doomed to face things she had no interest in seeing again.

"Yes," she said, not wanting to elaborate.

His nod acknowledged her, mouth silent against the noisy scratch of his pen.

Bella's fingers twitched, arm flexing with the still unaccustomed feeling of the knife that was strapped to her forearm.

"You remember what we talked about with stimulus?" John finally said, looking up, clearing his throat. Catching her nod, he continued. "As you go back and forth between bases, keep in mind that it's about retraining your response—and that it will take time."

She nodded, understanding what he was suggesting, frustrated by the extraordinary blush that was painting her cheeks.

And it was frustrating. She wanted to be with Edward. To be pleased by his touch. But, riding close up under that was the fear of feeling what Jacob had done. Remembering, as she now discovered she was able, the almost palpable substance of her memories.

"Reducing similarities in experience can be helpful, too," John said softly. "Putting yourself in a different kind of space. Different textures, clothes, lighting—anything that allows your mind to accept that this is different."

Like body temperature.

No problem there.

"Bodily position, too, has a lot to do with comfort."

At this, she looked up at him.

He made another note on his paper.
Man that was annoying.

Transparent as always, Bella's face registered her displeasure.

"You're welcome to read my notes, Bella, if you like," John said, holding out the pad of paper.

"It's OK," she said, shaking her head, then smiling a little. "Just—"

"Feels like someone's taking notes about you?" he grinned.

"Yeah." It was silly, she knew, but it felt better for having it out in the open.

She felt better for having a lot of other things out in the open, too.

"I um, told a friend, about what happened," she said. "In very vague terms."

"And how was that?"

"Good," she sighed, "really good, actually. A relief."

"Why do you think it was a relief?"

She paused, thinking about it. "I haven't really told anyone…" then she trailed off. She had. They just hadn't believed her.

The tears made her eyes itch, and she wiped at them.

"She believed me," she whispered. "I didn't tell her exactly what had happened, but she believed me."

The wave of anger that rippled up and over her was a surprise, and this blush was as singular as the emotion that produced it.

Her father had not believed her.

"Can you tell me what you're thinking of, Bella?" John pried gently.

"Angela believed me. Right away. He didn't."

"Your Dad?"

It was too hard to speak, so she nodded.

"Mm," he said sympathetically. "That must evoke some strong feeling."

Damn right it did.

"Are you still talking with him?" John asked.

Bella shrugged. "Kind of." Charlie had called, twice now, a few days between them. She could barely make herself offer him the most basic courtesies, and her answers to his questions had been almost entirely monosyllabic.

"Forgiveness is a long road," John said, glancing at the clock, "with large pot holes."

Gigantic craters.
"It's OK to grieve that, Bella."

That list felt long enough already.

"Same time next week?" John asked.

"Yes," Bella said, standing.

He kept a respectful distance, walking her to the door. Along with the weight of all the grief she carried, she contemplated the small, but sturdy piece of confidence she now held too, this emboldened by the several pieces of purposed metal strapped to her body.

A/N for 2018-06-21 - Thank you all, for your comments. I'm hammering away towards the end of the school year. Busy times. Writing continues. Your thoughts and ideas most welcome.

~ Erin

AT EAffleck on Twitter

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FaceBook
Edward had caught Bella staring at the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall. He couldn't tell the precise location of her gaze, but he had a pretty good guess.

It had been precisely a month since the attack.

She was standing, breakfast dishes ready for the dishwasher, engaged in some silent calculation he was not privy to.

"Oh," she said, when he took the dishes from her hands, "I can—"

"I know," he said, putting them in the machine.

They looked lonely there, and he frowned, thinking of the larger significance.

"Want to go out for dinner tonight?" he asked, taking his time turning around, giving her space to consider it.

That got her attention, and she flicked her eyes to the dishwasher, and then to his gaze, now meeting hers.

"Worried I'm turning into a hermit?"

For a woman who couldn't read thoughts, she was remarkably perceptive.

"Want to make sure you aren't," he said, taking her hand, grinning a little.

"Lots of people here," she reminded him, playing with his hands, swinging them back and forth.

"Lots of vampires here," he countered, raising his eyebrows, and glancing back at the dishwasher.

"Yes, including the one who counts most to me. I'm good. No going out required." She leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips.

From a distance, Rosalie's "good!" sounded musical. "Because we have training in ten minutes."

Edward wanted to roll his eyes. But didn't.

Rose hadn't so much been pushing, as taking a sledge hammer to any boundaries she sensed with Bella.

The latest one had been Emmett.

When Rose had called him over one day to help, Bella had frozen in place, staring at him.

"He would never hurt you, Bella," Rose had reminded her. "You know that, right?" She'd tapped her head to illustrate where she wanted Bella's thinking coming from.

"Sure," Bella'd said, making herself not step back in fear. "I also know Edward wouldn't hurt me."
That hasn't exactly made everything go away."

Emmett had raised an eyebrow at Bella, nodding, conceding her point.

But Rose had been clear: "next time, you try with Emmett. Don't just confront that wall, knock it down."

The idea of confronting an Emmett sized wall didn't sit very well with Bella, and her stomach burbled nervously.

"You don't have to," Edward reminded her, "Rose is trying to do right by you, but that doesn't mean she's right."

Bella squished her eyebrows together, considering it, but came out with a resolute, "No. It helps. It's hard, but it helps."

Tentatively—always tentatively—he slid his hands up her forearms, taking note of where the knife was today. She'd not found the optimal spot yet, and their positions shifted with the training. The one near her shoulder made him the most nervous. It was too easy to imagine the trigger malfunctioning —improbable, he knew, but easy to imagine.

The weather had bettered itself, and so they went outside to the north side of the property, where the morning sun shone least. Bella had had her fair share of being dazzled—literally—by Rose's exposed flesh, and training was hard enough without the added visual impediment.

They'd practised various grips, positions and scenarios, rotating through them regularly. Today, they were back to the attacks that proved most difficult: those that came from the front.

The family had chipped in with all manner of suggestions for things that would catch an attacker off guard. Emmett, watching from the sidelines, tried to be helpful, throwing these out—often wedged between a joke or two. He was doing that today, and Bella was struggling to focus.

An hour in, she was getting flustered, and Rose's sudden grip at her forearms made her startle fully. All her collected frustrations seemed to coagulate, solidifying into a nice ball of rage.

"C'mon Bella, you can do better!" Rose chided her.

So Bella did.

As she threw her head forward, Edward gasped, thinking she was trying to head butt Rosalie, terrified visions of brain damage making him jump into a sprint towards them before Bella's head—

But the resulting crack didn't come.

Bella's lips landed silently on Rose's in a well planted kiss.

Edward stopped.

Emmett's jaw fell open.

After a startled moment, Rose was gone.

Vanished.

So, suddenly, was Emmett.
Edward doubled over in laughter, letting himself sit, and then lay down, the sound of it rocking his body in rippling waves.

Bella walked over, a wide grin on her face, and cleared her throat. "Care to let me in on the joke?"

Edward wondered if he'd be crying if he was still human.

"I'm so glad I'm never going to forget that. I just wish you could have heard—"

Then he stopped himself. No, he wasn't sure he wanted her to know what _all_ their thoughts had been.

His wife raised her eyebrows expectantly, face upside down as she looked over him.

"That was amazing," he finished, instead.

"And it worked," Bella smiled. "Emmett's not going anywhere near me."

No, Edward thought. Emmett wasn't. He was going near his own wife. Somewhere private. For a good long while.

He said nothing about it, standing, taking her hands. "No," he said, "he isn't. Good work."

"Unexpected," she said, grinning widely, tapping her head. "Sadly, I think I'll need to face the music soon enough."

Edward's face fell only momentarily, he scooping it back up, realizing she meant avoiding practising with Emmett.

Seeing it, her own smile melted. "What?" she asked, suddenly nervous.

"Nothing," he said, trying to smile apologetically. "I'm told I'm a bit paranoid sometimes. Especially about you."

Her forehead crinkled in confusion.

"I thought you were saying you wanted to face your attacker," Edward said quietly. "Face Jacob."

"Oh," she said, trying to make her blood stay put. It was stubbornly trying sink to her feet.

His hands were in hers now, "that won't happen, Bella. I meant it, when I said that you wouldn't face him again. We will dispose of him."

She nodded, breakfast wobbling in her stomach. "I know."

He'd told her as soon as she was well enough to hear it, and she'd gone a grey ashy colour, nodding then too, accepting Jacob's fate.

That grief was buried too deeply under all the other wreckage he'd caused.

"I just meant Emmett," she said, voice small, a corner of her lip lifting upwards.

His smile returned. "Good work," he said, and then dared to kiss her in a way that was most definitely meant for the woman he loved.

"So," he said, "now that you've chased your training session away, what's next?"
He thought he saw a spark of something. "The meadow?" she asked.

"The meadow," he nodded, tugging at her hand to take her inside to get ready.

They spent the better part of the day there, enjoying its warmth and beauty, exchanging and making happy memories, along with small touches, and soft kisses.

When they came home, Bella looked at the fading light with a sigh. "Thank you," she said, "that was exactly what I needed today."

"Good," he said, and, his smile widening, asked, "you up for a little bit more time outside?"

"Sure?" she said, a little uncertainly.

"Give me a few minutes then." He didn't wait for a reply, and was gone, leaving Bella bewildered.

When he returned a little while after, it was with an uncharacteristic smudge of dirt on the knee of his trousers.

It made him look...human.

He a bag of marshmallows in one hand, and her light jacket in another.

He raised an eyebrow, holding the marshmallows out in front of him.

"Am I supposed to guess?" she asked.

"I don't think it will take too many," he said.

"You want to toast marshmallows?"

He nodded.

When she still stared, a wrinkled wedge in her forehead, he said, "you did tell me you liked doing that."

"When I was ten, yeah," Bella said, laughing a little.

He grinned. "That sounds like a yes to me."

She rolled her eyes just a little, slipping her shoes and coat on, and followed him out the door, one of his hands in hers.

They settled close to the river in one of the wide gravel patches, conveniently circled by larger rocks that made for good perching. She realized he'd moved some of them to make this space. Settling onto one of the flatter ones, she watched him build and start a tidy fire.

"Boy scout much?"

"Good to have such skills," he countered, then frowned, looking at the bag of marshmallows.

"Sticks," Bella said, seeing his confusion.

"But they'll burn," he said, lips still pouting, contemplating this.

It was novel to be able to explain something to him. "You don't stick them in the fire, you hold them over it. Otherwise, yes, they burn."
She demonstrated, hissing a bit at the heat when she tried pull off the outer layer of the marshmallow.

He gripped her fingers, cooling them in his own, blowing a cold breath onto the sticky tips.

"It's fine," she said, going back to the marshmallow, giving a satisfied, "mmm," swallowing the caramelized sugar. "Best part," she said through her mouthful.

She repeated this process, still flicking her fingers up and down from the heat's sting.

He pulled the next layer off, not wanting her to burn herself, holding it up for her to eat.

She licked his fingers, sucking the sugar off of them one by one, and he raised a playful eyebrow. Then she put her stick down, and slid onto his lap, continuing the action of her lips, but over his.

She smelled of her own sweetness—of fire, of sugar curled up into itself—and of want.

He allowed his hands to slide down her back, and find a comfortable resting place below her hips, massaging the flesh there, then trailing down her outer thighs, repeating the movement.

She had maneuvered her own hands up under his shirt, letting her fingers admire the distinct curves of his chest, and its hard velvet. He was aroused, and it pleased her that this elicited no fear, or worry, just a fuelling of her own desire.

"You smell like fire and smoke," he said softly, kissing her behind her ear. "I like it."

Bella chuckled. "You do too," she said, "but I prefer your real smell."

"Well then," he said, "let's go fix that," and picked her up, moving at a decidedly unhurried pace, his lips still involved with hers, towards the house.

"The fire," Bella murmured, worried about leaving it.

"Someone will take care of it," he mumbled back, not stopping his kisses.

Emmett muttered, with a snicker, "I'll handle that one, you go douse the other one in the shower."

Edward smiled, knowing Bella hadn't heard the comment, and hearing his family making their subtle exits from the house.

Privacy here was a gift, and not one to go uncherished.

Then his features pinched together, hearing other, more pointed thoughts meant for him.

Carlisle's were filled with gentle confidence, you love her, you'll be fine, and so will she. I have every confidence in you both.

Esme's were just a wordless happiness.

Alice was glad she couldn't see anything, for once.

And Emmett, he was repeating 'go team!' good naturally, with a quiet chuckle.

Rosalie was thinking something far more disparate, and unsettling.

If she can't talk, she's either having a flashback or an orgasm—don't get the two confused.

"What?" Bella asked, watching his face transform.
"Nothing," he said. They'd reached the bathroom, and there wasn't a lot of space for talk.

His fingers and hers were busy, unlocking buttons and zippers and inhibitions.

It was a wonder to feel the absence of clothing, to be so lost in herself that the fear quivered in the periphery, unwelcome and unwanted.

He pulled her into the shower with him, trying not to think of the last time he'd done so.

She stayed facing him, kept at a small distance by what protruded between them. Pulling the shampoo from the nook, she lathered his hair, and he repeated the gesture, letting the bubbles slide down them, following these trails with their hands.

When he felt her fingertips beginning to prune, he raised his hand to tap, lifting his eyebrows, questioning. She nodded, hands and lips too intent on him to care where they were, as long as they were together.

She giggled when he towelled her off, faster than human hands could possibly accomplish, and more when he blew a raspberry on her belly. The laughter became a pleasured gasp when his lips turned to kisses, these worshipping the soft skin between her navel and the flurry of hair below it.

Then he stood, and picked her up, carrying her to the bed, returning his kisses to more traditional territory.

She'd explained what Carlisle had told her, but it was still a shock when he reached into the drawer by the bed, and pulled out a condom.

"Just being careful," he said, "it doesn't mean anything."

It doesn't mean anything, Bella thought.

It just means we might have sex.

Maybe.

Her heart rate doubled.

Then he kissed her again, and laying on his side, pressed the condom into her hand.

She turned to him, flushing a beautiful shade of magenta. She hadn't touched him, and had only shyly glanced in that direction on their wedding night.

He was brushing her inflamed cheeks with his fingers, softly moving her hair from her face. "Still so shy, Mrs. Cullen?"

The blush deepened impossibly.

He took the package from her, opening it, "touch me, Bella," he whispered, and kissed her.

She did, with nervous fingers, which he covered with his own, stilling the small tremor, still kissing her, hiding his own reaction. The touch of her heat left him airless. He felt like he was almost beyond himself by the time the condom was on.

Then he moved his hand to touch her as intimately, and her knuckles were tight and white over his wrist. He moved it back to her hip, taking her other hand, putting it over his, whispering "show me where it's OK."
So, with his hand under her guidance, she returned his hand to her torso, releasing it to explore the soft shapes it presented.

"So beautiful," he whispered, his fingers finding hers again, kissing them.

"Can I touch you?" he asked, putting his hand back under hers.

She nodded, and guided his hand there, gentle and cold, making her breathe in sharply.

It felt good.

So surprisingly good.

She let go of his hand, trusting him.

She was trying not to think about how different it was from what Jacob had done.

His touch was delicate, featherlight.

Exquisite.

He found, with tender alacrity, the small point of nerves there and teased it with the mere suggestion of his presence.

It felt like much more than a suggestion to Bella, who fought for breath, hands forgetting themselves, gripping at his shoulders, then his chest.

He smiled.

Then she touched him, and his hands flew away from her, reaching for the safety of his head, trying to stay in control.

"You OK?" she asked, alarmed by the sudden movement, the absence of his touch.

"Oh yes," he breathed out. "Very." Her hands safely away from his sensitive flesh, he returned his to hers, "but maybe warn me," he breathed, "I don't want to hurt you by accident."

"You won't," she said, kissing him.

He was terrified of that very possibility, but held it tightly to himself, knowing that she had known enough fear. He wouldn't bring more of it to their bed.

"No," he said, hoping to will it so, "I won't."

Because he couldn't live with himself if he did.

He turned her, sliding her leg over his, bringing her very tender flesh to touch his own.

She began to tremble.

"It's OK," he murmured, "nothing happens unless you say so." He kissed her, and very carefully moved his hands to her back, her sides, her breasts, slow enough that she could stop him, if she wanted.

She didn't.

The way their bodies were oriented, this movement pressed him to her, and she tensed.
"Nothing," he said again, "unless you ask." Then he grinned, "and nothing without the magic word to go with it, too."

She giggled, breaking all the tension between them.

She liked how it felt, both their bodies rocked by this small laughter.

He thought she was beautiful, but all she could do was admire the perfect lines before her, running in their cold shapes from the disordered and beautiful tangle of his hair, to the more minutely curled wisps at his groin.

"Yes," she said, "I want you."

This was not what he was expecting to hear.

At all.

His hands felt strangely numb, and he kept them away from her, just hovering, until he was certain of himself again.

"Magic word," he chuckled, pressing his lips to her neck.

"Please," she said, letting a low rumble of laughter jostle her again.

"In a bit," he promised her, feeling the nerves in her body, the want and the anxiety all tied up together.

She welcomed the touch of his hand again, soft still, but one that gently explored and teased at this sensitive flesh.

Edward was fending off his own wants and desires, so stirred by her reaction to him. The sounds she was making tugged at these wants, and he didn't make her wait long, sliding her form closer to his. He lifted her lightly, angling her hips to match his own, pressing himself just inside, commanding his body to obey, to not follow the compulsion to find the ends of these depths.

Their kisses hadn't stopped, but they did now, Bella's hands suddenly tight at his shoulders, her heartbeat galloping in her chest.

"Bella," he asked, "do you need me to stop?"

She was trying to breathe normally, to remember where she was, to not think about what Jacob had done.

And she was failing miserably at all three.

She didn't answer.

Edward pulled away, a panicked concern erasing all his body's virile notions.

"Bella?"

Still no answer.

He sat up and flipped the comforter over her, lifting her up into his lap. "Hey," he said, "you're here, with me, remember?"
She nodded, still not speaking.

When she did, it was to whisper, "I'm sorry, I really thought—"

"Oh no," he interrupted, "no way. I'm so happy we had what we did tonight. No apologizing for that."

She pressed her hand to his cheek, her own wet with tears, "I want to, I just—"

"No apologizing," he said, shaking his head. "I love you." Then he leaned in to kiss her again, smoothing the tears from her cheeks with his fingers.

"I like what we did," she said shyly.

"Good," Edward said, "because I did too."

---

A/N for 2018-06-23: I had so much fun writing this chapter together. My favourite line: "His fingers and hers were busy, unlocking buttons and zippers and inhibitions."

We're moving steadily closure to the resolution of this tale. If you have a specific request for something to happen between now and the end, I would love to hear it.

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

AT EAffleck on Twitter
"All your take, on that?" Pete asked.

"Yup," Jacob said, sighing a bit, resigning himself to the incredulous look.

"Sure," he shrugged, looking at him. "Your dough."

Jacob nodded, this business done. Heading out of the dingy backroom that served as Pete's office, he spotted Amanda, stuffing the last bites of a hasty dinner into her mouth. She raised a hand in greeting, quickly returning it to her practical use.

Jacob waited until she was done, folding his arms, smiling softly. She reminded him of Bella, in some ways.

"What's up Jake?" she asked, putting down her bowl on the counter.

"I was wondering if I could ask a favour?" he said softly, eyebrows up hopefully.

"Oh, yeah," she said, "um, somewhere here? Or, you have somewhere else in mind?"

Jacob's eyebrows pushed together in confusion, and then lifted in troubled understanding. "Oh, no," he said, shaking his head quickly. "I need some help...not that. No."

She blushed, grasping her misapprehension. "Sure," she mumbled.

"I have a friend," Jacob started, "she's in trouble. With some bad people."

The fear was so easy to read on Amanda's face.

"Nothing like that," he said softly, "But I need some help convincing her to leave. To come with me."

"'K," Amanda said, not so certainly.

"I was wondering if you would talk to her."

"That's it?" she asked.

"Pretty much."

"Sure," she shrugged. "When?"

"A week or so?" Jacob said, scratching the back of his head. "Still putting a few things together."

From the office, Pete called out, "Yeah, you can use it," to Jacob, who nodded.

"Thanks," he called back.

"Not doin' it for thanks," Pete yelled, going back to the phone call.

Jacob nodded to Amanda, "'K, I'll let you know when."
He turned and walked outside, skirting the puddle of suspect near liquid by the door. Using the phone Pete had given him, he punched in the familiar combination of numbers.

"Hey," he said, "Good to hear you too...Yeah, I'm good...Any news?...Well, that's good, I guess...No. I'm not talking about that again....You know my answer....Well, he can go stuff himself....Uh-huh...Really? Copesis?...Didn't know. Thanks for telling me....I know. You too. Talk when I can...Yeah....Bye."

Tucking the phone back into his pocket, he made a fist in excitement, the pieces of his plan coming together.

- 0 -

Charlie put down the receiver, trying to keep his excitement from showing, not that he needed to try too hard with Mark. The boy was off his game these days, as tired and cranky as his toddler was, fighting the eruption of her new tooth.

"I think," he said aloud, "I'm going to book off for next week, see if Darcy'll spare us someone to cover me."

"Sure," Mike said, rubbing his face with his hands. "Mentioned they'd have some people free."

"OK," Charlie said, sitting back, hands together, thinking.

"Who was that?" Mike yawned.

"Just an old friend," Charlie mumbled, slipping a file back into the cabinet. The corners on it were well worn.

Mike didn't have to look to know whose file it was.

"Think I'm gonna head home," Charlie said, standing, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He looked at Mike, checking to see how he was holding up.

"Sure," Mike waved airily at him. "I'm good." He wasn't, but he'd manage, better than Charlie anyway.

Nodding, Charlie grabbed his jacket, and walked outside to his car.

An old contact from training days had called—one Roy Whittaker—now a senior detective in Spokane. He'd always had a sharp eye, and had filed away Charlie's phone call, and bulletin in the back of his mind. When the piece of crap he'd been interviewing had told he'd been roughed up by some giant shirtless brown dude, it'd jiggled the memory of the bulletin. The picture Charlie had sent showed Jacob shirtless.

"Said it was him," Roy had huffed into the phone, "told me they'd had their run in a few weeks ago."

The file was being FedExed over to Charlie's house for tomorrow.

He was going hunting.

- 0 -

Bella was trying to convince Edward that he should go hunting too.

"I'll be fine," she said. "It's just for a day." She'd watched his eyes go dark, peppered with flecks of
lighter colours from inadequate hunts.

Edward remained unconvinced of the need. "And I'm fine too," he said, "no need to be apart."

Alice had made her own concerns known at this point. She'd been able to see flickers of Bella's future again—just wisps here and there, really, but enough to know that Edward should hunt. It only took showing him these, to make him stiffen with concern.

"We were thinking of a girls only trip," Bella said softly, almost apologetically, "but if you're not OK with it—"

"No," Edward said, feeling guilty at the thought of endangering her to fulfill his desire for hoarding her company, "you're right. I should go. It's only a day."

"We'll keep her safe, Edward," Rosalie said, "and she might even have some fun too." Then she winked at Bella.

Resigning himself to the time apart, he resolved to miser the remainder of it between now, and when they would travel to their separate destinations.

Her dinner finished, Bella put her knife and fork down, only to blink and have them vanish from in front of her.

They'd started gathering around the dining room table at dinner time, trying to maintain this small human ritual for her. She ate more when they were all together, and it helped mark the rhythm of her day.

It'd become something of a running joke, that one of them would snatch away her dish as soon as she was done.

"Bella," Jasper said, sitting kitty corner to her, sliding a chair over so they could talk more easily. "You mentioned wanting to sell your truck?"

"Yes," she replied, making herself feel resolved on this.

"I have a buyer, if you're still interested in selling," Jasper said softly. "A good price, too. I can close tonight. They'll be in the area."

It seemed so fast. But what use would she have for it? Be practical, she chided herself. Billy could use the money.

"That's great," she made herself say, "thank you."

Edward squeezed her hand. He knew what it meant, that it was more than a truck she was selling.

Jasper nodded tersely, slipping away, pulling out his phone.

"Maybe we should go car shopping?" Edward murmured beside her, "Find something you're comfortable driving?"

Still a little subdued, she managed to smirk at this notion. "Really?" she asked, "you, letting me drive?"

He tilted his head towards her, eyebrows up, challenging this accusation. "I have, and I do."

Her own eyebrows rose higher.
"Perhaps not lately," he admitted.

"I don't need a new car," she said, "besides, I think there are enough in the garage already."

There were multiple snorts in response to this.

"But I accept that I may be the lone opinion in that camp." She laughed, and so did Edward, not pressing this point.

It was strange, but not troubling, parting ways in the morning, he with his brothers and Carlisle, she with his sisters and Esme.

The space where her truck had been was a noticeable emptiness.

"Here," Jasper said, pulling an envelope from his pocket, "I had a money order made out for you."

"Thank you for managing this," Bella said, taking it.

Jasper's face registered his confusion over her mixed feelings, but he didn't address it. "You're welcome," he said instead. "The collector was happy with his purchase—don't worry, it went to a good home." He gave her a small smile, trying to offer some comfort with his words.

She tried to smile back, but it was fleeting. Her attention had been caught by the amount on the order. "Wait, this can't be right, can it?"

Edward peered over, and nodded. "Yes, for a collector."

"Thank you," she said more earnestly to Jasper. "I really appreciate it." The money would help Billy substantially.

"Come on lover boy," Jasper called to Edward. "She'll be here when you get back."

Edward leaned over Bella, kissing her forehead, and then taking the lips that were offered to him.

"I'll see you tonight," he said, making his voice light. "Have fun."

She watched him turn and walk away, feeling the tug of some invisible string, stretched too tight, strung between her heart and him.

He didn't look back, despite a mutual pull in his own chest.

Jasper's influence was wide, slipping over Bella and Edward. Soothing.

"Come on," Rosalie said, physically tugging at Bella's hand.

"Sure," she said, turning. "Just need to make a stop on the way." She waved the money order.

Rose shrugged. "No problem."

At Charlie's door, Bella hesitated before knocking. She contemplated leaving the order with a note, but then scolded herself for being a chicken. She could talk to her Dad.

Right?

She raised her hand, knocking firmly.

When Charlie opened the door, he stood there a moment, staring.
"Bella," he managed.

"Hi Dad," she said awkwardly.

They stared a bit longer.

"I was um, wondering if you could give this to Billy." She held out the envelope.

"Yeah," Charlie said, "I can do that. You wanna come in for a minute?"

From the door, though, Bella could see the dining room table.

She swallowed, remembering the dull smack of it against her face, and the pain of her arm, twisted up behind her back.

The feeling of her heart lodged in her throat.

"No." She held her arm out straighter, wanting him to take the trembling envelope.

He did, holding it between his hands, trying to occupy them, to keep himself from reaching out to touch her.

"It's the money from my truck. Figured he could use it." She stood a moment longer, then no longer able to keep her feelings in check, said, "bye, Dad," turning and almost running back to the car.

"Let's go," she said to Rose, as soon as she was inside.

Rose didn't ask, but hit the accelerator, swinging them out and back onto the road in one smooth motion.

"I think I need to go see John," Bella pushed out next.

Rose only nodded, signalling and turning.

Bella rummaged for her phone.

"Let me," Esme said, pulling out hers, dialing and purring into it. "He'll see you when we get there."

In her fresh distress, Bella had the cognition to wonder at the pull money could get you.

Cullen sized money.

The Cullen women were less than enthused by her request to see John alone—and out of their earshot.

"Really," Bella said, "what do you think will happen?"

They looked nervously at each other, but nodded. "We'll be outside," Esme said. "Just out of earshot. We'll hear you if you raise your voice though, OK?"

Nodding, Bella breathed out a distressed lungful of air, fidgeting in the waiting room chair.

"Hi Bella," John called, motioning her to follow him. She nearly tripped, doing so.

"This isn't your usual appointment time," he commented, taking stock of her hands, pressed too tightly around her arms.
"No," she said, "I just saw my Dad." She wished this could explain everything.

John wasn't lacking in insight. He understood the significance of such physical proximity.

"I see."

Did he?

"Where did you see him?"

"At his house."

John said nothing, waiting. Giving her space. They were seated in his office, the door now closed.

"I went to drop off a cheque for Billy. Jacob's dad."

John's eyebrows went up.

"He's in a wheelchair," she mumbled. "He sold my dad his truck, and I don't need it—anyway, with his kids gone, he doesn't have any help. I wanted him to have the money from the car." She felt like she was rambling. Her voice rose in pitch. "I saw the dining room table from the door. When he made me see—when he forced me—" She stopped, taking in a deep breath. "He put my head down on the table, pulled my arm up my back—" Her supply of air was up, and he throat too tight to ask for more.

The oxygen was squeaking in, and whistling out.

Her hands were shaking.

After a moment, John was confident her respiration was normalizing. "He betrayed you, Bella. He's your father. He's not supposed to harm you, or put you in its way. This a perfectly normal reaction to seeing him, to seeing where that betrayal happened."

She'd smushed four tissues into her hand, too distraught to only be able manage the taking of only one.

"I thought—" she started. "I could forgive him. I haven't wanted to see him, but I thought I could just let this go." Here she stopped, silently berating herself for such a notion.

John's forehead crinkled as he smiled a little. "You strike me as a very loving person, Bella. Very forgiving. Some hurts take longer for our bodies, or minds, or hearts to let go of."

The shaking had lessened, but a small tremble still clung to her fingers.

He let her think while he made some notes on a large piece of chart paper.

"Triggers," he said, pointing to one side, "and plans," gesturing to the other. Walking her through the sights, sounds, smells and situations that seemed most potent, they concocted a variety of possible remedies she might draw from.

At the end of the hour, she was calmer, and feeling more hopeful in general, as well about salvaging the remainder of the day.

Alice was just walking into the waiting area when she emerged.

"Better?" she asked, squinting in worry at her sister.
"Yes," Bella replied. "Sorry. I really didn't expect that today."

Alice was already shaking her head. "Nothing to apologize for. You're doing so well. I'm glad he's helping." She lifted her chin in the direction of John's office. "But if you're ready for some fun?" She raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"Fun it is," Bella said, tucking her hair out of her face, determined to resurrect the intended spirit of the day.

A/N for 2018-06-26 - Thanks for all the commentary folks. I'll admit, I'm finding it less instinctual to write these chapters. A few of you have made some very specific suggestions - thank you. They're really helpful.

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck (FlamingMaple) on FB

AT EAffleck on Twitter
A/N for 2018-06-29: It's Friday...and the last day of the school year for this teacher (phew!).

If you're enjoying this tale, would you leave me a word or two letting me know? It makes the writing of it so much easier.

~ Erin

"She's still afraid of me," Jasper said aloud.

They were perched on a dusty outcropping, sated from their hunt, enjoying the sensation of the sun.

Edward didn't disagree. It was apparent enough in her body language.

"Not that she hasn't had cause," he said, "but I don't want her to be." He looked at his brother. "Any advice on that front?"

Edward actually smirked, in spite of the seriousness of the conversation. "Well," he began, "you could try talking to her."

The notion of an emotional conversation with a...girl...was more upsetting to Jasper than he cared to admit. Not that he had any such leeway in keeping it from Edward.

"She isn't a girl, Jasper," he said, serious again. "You know that."

He did, on some levels. On others…

"She's my wife, Jasper," Edward said in all seriousness, "I haven't married a child."

Jasper tried to reconcile all this in his mind. She was so young to him, still. Conversations with women...about feelings, aren't exactly my strong suit.

"Rather ironic, all things considered," Edward murmured.

Jasper elbowed him playfully.

"I'm not suggesting you try to jump directly into a conversation like that," Edward said, "but maybe you could augment some of Rosalie's training, with a little strategic theory? Build some ease that way?"

He turned his head towards Edward, considering this, nodding. He was already following threads of thought on what strategic attack and defense theories she might find useful.

"There you are," Edward said, grinning. "You're welcome." He ducked Jasper's punch. "And thank you," he added. "For trying to make her feel welcome. Comfortable." He didn't add how hard he
knew it'd been, having her in the house. How much of a struggle it been for Jasper to control his own urges. How grateful he was that he had done so much to be careful.

Emmett and Carlisle had joined them, their thoughts indicating their readiness to return home.

"Come on," Emmett said, stretching his arms up, "let's reunite the lovebirds."

Carlisle smiled at this. It still made him happy to see Edward and Bella simply together, despite the many difficulties they'd had to wrestle with. Murmuring in the background of his own mind was the reminder to check Bella's blood again.

Edward's face did not betray the inward squirm he felt, knowing Carlisle's reasoning.

"If you can leave me a few minutes, I need to take a blood sample at home," he said to Emmett and Jasper.

When he met Bella, and the female members of his family at the house, he shooed most of them away. Edward ignored the directive, his hand in Bella's.

"I'd like to run that test we talked about, if that's alright," he said softly to Bella.

She hadn't forgotten the reasoning, and her face paled slightly hearing him speak it aloud. She hadn't expected this, not today.

"I think everything will be fine," Carlisle tried to reassure her, "I'm just being cautious."

She nodded silently, swallowing. Nervous.

Jacob had done so much. The insidiousness of it lingered in corners she wanted dusted and forgotten.

The unusual genetic markers were ones he couldn't risk sending to a lab, so Carlisle was doctor, lab technician, and geneticist all in one, sending machines whirring and ticking as he ran the sample.

By the time the results were available, the rest of the family had arrived, and Edward had finally convinced Bella to relax with him on the couch. She could feel the minute softening of his posture. A tiny exhale.

"What?" she asked.

"All clear," he murmured into her hair, squeezing her with his arm.

The salt of her tears reached him with the sound of her quickened breathing.

She saw his look. "I'm just...relieved," she said, "that's all."

He said nothing, but renewed his embrace, and kissed the top of her head. He'd heard, in the substance of his mother and siblings' thoughts, about what had happened with Charlie, that she'd needed to go see John. She hadn't told him, though, and this small occlusion troubled him.

She didn't talk much more as the evening wore on, apologetic when she needed to go to bed earlier than usual.

When he asked if she wanted him to lay down with her, she nodded eagerly, but nervously.

Her bodily anxiousness, which she tried desperately to conceal, was so apparent, it pained him to witness it. Knowing it would only distress her more to discuss it, he kept silent, slipping into the bed
with her, tucking the blanket around her carefully.

It was normal for her to move. Her ambulatory sleep patterns left a trail of wrinkled blankets and wedged sheets on the most innocuous of nights. Tonight her thrashing made angry origami shapes of them.

It was when the familiar contortion of her body appeared, stretched and taut in distress, that Edward tried to wake her.

He couldn't know that her dreams had morphed, that it was Charlie's betrayal she felt again, this now squeezed into the one wrought by Jacob.

"Bella," he whispered, fingers in her hair, trying to stimulate wakefulness gently—safely. He lived in fear of giving her nightmares a touchable weight. "It's a dream, Bella. Not real. Come back to me."

It wasn't long, and she did, a choked sob thrown from her throat.

"It's you," she hushed, reaching for his hand.

"Yes."

Another sigh, her eyes closing again.

He was beside her, a careful few inches away, giving her the space she often needed. He let his fingers play over hers

She wasn't relaxed though, despite the relief of knowing it had been a dream.

She was angry. Shaking with it. She'd had enough of these betrayals' constant reach—tangling even her sleep with their complicity.

It was her life to have. Dreams or nightmares of her own making.

Not anyone else's.

The urge to control it was loud.

And misplaced.

When she sat up, Edward's forehead widened with surprise. These episodes normally left her exhausted, and falling back into sleep.

Then she slid herself over top of him, straddling his midsection.

There was nothing between them, her long t-shirt hitched up by his form, and he reached a tentative hand to her cheek, wondering at her choice.

Her thumbs hooked the waistband of his pajamas down, revealing the aroused flesh she sought.

Then, rising up, she impaled herself on it, taking short, managed, and small gasping breaths, feeling him inside her.

He was cold, as the rest of him was cold.

And very hard.
He wasn't shaking, but he would have been if he were human. His hands had flown over his head, too terrified to be near her. The closest description his mind could approximate for the sensations rippling over him was that of electrocution. He was rigid—everywhere—with shock. With desire. With unprecedented sensation.

"Bella," he finally breathed out—this sound horrified, enervated, lusting, worshipful.

She didn't answer, too busy coping with her own shock.

It was painful. Her body fought the invasion of this foreign substance, the memory of the trauma vital and real. Her flesh twitched and spasmed, protesting the flagrant distension.

Edward was swallowing his own venom, trying not to breathe. Trying not to move.

It had only been a few seconds, but Bella's face was beyond holding the transformations of pain from it. Or making herself endure anymore, either.

With a stifled cry that was only a sounded breath, she pulled herself off of him, the burst of wetness inside her disturbing her dismount.

The simultaneous and disquieting crunch of Edward's hands, cracking through the metal headboard made her awkward landing on the bed even moreso.

His face, which she could see only dimly in the darkness, had registered a wide swath of expressions in sudden succession.

Both of them breathed heavily with the shock of what had happened.

She broke the silence with a whispered, "I'm sorry."

Edward's "no," was instant, reaching for her, sprinkling metallic dust across the bed. "I'm sorry—"

"For what?" Bella asked. "Being attacked by your wife?" The enormity of what she'd done hit her, and her hand flew to her mouth, "Oh God," she said, and stood, mumbling a horrified "I'm sorry," running to the bathroom.

He was up and at the door slamming in his face, perplexed by the click of the lock.

"Bella, it's OK," he said, hearing her crying.

The spray of the shower was next, the momentary disruption telling him she was under it.

"Bella?" he tried again.

No answer.

She was crouched, rocking back and forth, hands in her hair, feeling the ooze of something cold and viscous leaving her.

Between bouts of berating herself for her horrific stupidity, she was trying to throw off the weight of memory, but it was a cloying, sticky thing, gnarled into her hair, her hands, and the sensitive flesh at her thighs.

She let out an angry howl, fingers shaking and useless to dislodge the betrayals she carried.

"Bella!"
This time his anxiety reached her vocally.

"I just need a few minutes," she croaked out.

_What were you thinking?_ The voice of doubt hissed. _How stupid can you be? He won't ever want to after that move._

It was right, she knew. He wouldn't so much as breathe on her while she was human. Not after her reaction.

There was a soft rattling at the door, and she heard the quiet ping of the lock springing, and then the door opening.

"Bella?" he said softly, hands gently reaching around her in the bath, as he squatted beside her.

She squeezed her eyes together, barely able to tolerate even looking at him for the shame of what she'd done.

"Are you hurt?" he asked softly.

"No." This was choked out, a sob crawling after it.

"Will you tell me why you're so upset?"

Everything seemed to be running with something: eyes, nose, chest—this bleeding with a rush feeling. She sniffed in some of this wetness, rubbing her hand under her nose. "I didn't even ask you, Edward. I'm so sorry—I just—"

"No, no, no," he said. "No Bella, I knew—I could have stopped you. Easily. I was as willing as you were."

She shook her head. "It wasn't OK, and it wasn't for the right reasons—"

"I'm fine," he said, "I love you. You didn't do anything wrong." He shifted his arms, lifting her into his lap, the spray now drenching both of them.

They sat together for some time, the water gurgling from their clothes before he spoke again.

"What do you mean, it wasn't for the right reasons?"

She blew out a breath, slightly calmer now. "I just—I want to be in control of my life. I feel like I'm...falling, being shoved around by what I remember." A shiver rattled up her back.

He felt it, but listening, didn't suggest leaving. "How can I help you then?"

Her heart rate doubled, and her breathing became shallow again.

"Make love to me," she said quietly.

His sudden stillness, and the pause before he answered told her he hadn't expected this.

Or that he didn't want to.

He was wondering if she'd seen the destruction his hands and mouth had left on the bed.

It had been so close.
Too close.

What if he—?

He'd waited too long to speak, though, and his silence was answer enough for Bella.

"It's OK if you don't—"

"No," he made himself breathe through his terror, "I want to," kissing her cheek softly. "But you're too cold here."

She didn't object when he turned off the water, snapping a towel from the rack as he carried her back to their bed.

Flicking off the worst of the dust with his hand, he laid her under the covers, and slid in beside her, the contact of their lips unbroken.

She wasn't hesitant about touching him this time, her leg curled comfortably over his hip, her fingers exploring.

His kisses followed the lines of her blood, slowly trailing down to the beating chambers of her heart. From there he let them mount the curve of first one, and then the other breast, tasting the tips of them with his tongue.

Satisfied with the sounds these explorations elicited, he continued onwards.

He relaxed his hands, running them up and down her back, sliding over the curvature presented by her spine, and its luscious blossoming into roundness.

She captured one of his hands, and placed it most precisely on herself, inviting his intimate touch.

When he slipped his finger inside, she started, and he stopped, immediately.

"Is this OK?" he asked.

She nodded, making herself relax, reminding herself who she was with.

It wasn't hard, because other sensations were curling up around his touch, gripping tighter, inviting other things to loosen.

She shifted herself to be closer, pulling at his low back, feeling a larger coldness pressed intimately to herself.

He moved his lips from hers, tracing the elegance of her clavicle with his tongue, turning her over onto her back.

Their hips had met, he resting against her, sliding gently back and forth, continuing the work his fingers had begun.

She flexed her knees back, and pulling his head down to hers, kissed him, whispering, "I want you."

The trembling in her body wasn't just from nerves, and he continued with his soft movements, letting her hands roam over his back, brushing down to his hips, curling into his navel, and then lower.

With a deep kiss that planted her head into the softness of the pillow, he finally let the angle of their bodies align, slipping himself just inside of her.
He could feel half of her body fighting it, flesh twitching, nervous, anxious. He rested there, still busying his lips with hers, one hand teasing her softly, an invitation to pleasure.

When the resistance began to slip away, he moved ever so slightly forward, feeling the tension return with a choked cry from Bella.

He became perfectly still.

"Bella," he said softly, "am I hurting you?"

"No," she whispered, shaking her head adamantly. She was trying to move his frozen stance, pushing with her hands for him to continue. "I'm OK."

_Control_, the voice in his head said, _let her have the control._

"OK," he whispered back, and continued the touch of his fingers, nudging himself slightly forward.

These small negotiations between their bodies continued, until she felt him inside her, fully pressed there, an unnatural tremble rippling through him at the sensation he was trying to tolerate, and control.

The sting remained, though, and she breathed out a frustrated, "not so far," relaxing as he moved back a bit.

"Is this OK?" he asked, watching her carefully, amazed she'd said anything. A spasm of worry fluttered in his chest. Was she in pain, and he'd caused so much she couldn't help but ask him to stop? Was she being honest—?

"No," she said, kissing him, "it's beautiful."

His own breath out was part relief, and part a laugh. How she surprised him.

"Good," he said, returning the kiss, tasting her lips with this tongue. "Because I want it to be exquisite for you."

Knowing her limits now, he found a soft rhythm, listening to the beat of her heart, twirling his fingers in the soft hair below her navel. When he felt the tension return to her body it was with gasps that had nothing to do with fear, and everything to do with the grip of a pleasure she hadn't known before.

Feeling the rippling of this release, he allowed his own, moving his hands to the safety of the bed, where he compressed the blanket into hard pucks.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped again, feeling the sensation of his pleasure inside her.

The sound of fabric, tearing, brought her back to herself.

Both pillows bore signs of distress, their casings torn and shredded, innards protruding from them.

His hands were not still. Rather, they were slipping over her, lips over hers again. She realized the touch wasn't intimate. It was clinical.

He was checking her, making sure he hadn't hurt her.

"I'm fine," she said, "don't ruin this with worrying."
His smile was small, and barely rueful. "Am I so transparent?"

"Yes," she said, smiling too, but widely.

Laying side to side on the bed, he pulled her to him, slipping his arms around her.

She could feel him, still aroused, barring the proximity he sought.

Her eyebrows folded together. "Didn't you—?" Then she blushed. She was still shy of such vocabulary.

"Orgasm?" he asked softly, not wanting to embarrass her.

She nodded.

"Yes."

She flicked her eyes in the direction she was wondering about.

"Not human," he smiled.

She nodded. "Is it uncomfortable?"

"No," he said, kissing her. "Not at all." He continued with the trail of kisses, his hands moving more softly now.

Bella was still, though. Thinking. "Do you want to—again?"

It was his turn to stop. "I think," he said carefully, tucking a piece of her hair behind her ear, "that it shouldn't be me setting the pace."

"Good," she said, and leaned over, sliding herself on top of him.

He stopped her with his hands. "Bella," he said, trying to think of how to stop her without hurting her feelings. "It's OK to go slowly."

The tears were a surprise to both of them.

"What?" he said, feeling her come to rest on his navel. "What is it?"

"I'm afraid," she said, "that I'll be...frightened again. That I won't be able to be with you again—that I'll wake up, and I'll be back to square one."

"I don't think you will."

"There are no guarantees, Edward."

"No," he said, "there aren't. And if we're at square one, we know how to get where we want to go. And if that doesn't work, we'll just take it easy. There's no rush."

"Then be with me," she said, "now. While I can."

He nodded, and felt her take possession of his body again, so differently than she had before, this time with the taste and sound of pleasure on both their lips.
She'd been thoroughly chilled by the time she went back to sleep, and had been glad of the pajamas Edward had brought her, and with gentle touches, helped her put on.

In the morning, he was less glad of them—worried at what they hid.

He couldn't see any marks, and she didn't seem to be hurting; her sleep had been placid too.

These things did nothing to assuage his mounting concern, though.

Still, he said nothing, refusing to bring his worry to their bed. He wouldn't taint what they'd had with his fear.

He kept telling himself this. The resolve lasted a solid twenty minutes after she'd woken up.

She'd just emerged from the bathroom, and started, met with his sudden appearance.

"Sorry," he murmured, putting his hands in hers. "Are you feeling OK?"

"Yeah," she said, pushing her eyebrows together, "why?"

He frowned. "Nothing hurts?"

Her features darkened, and she answered firmly. "No."

"Are there any bruises?"

Her eyebrows shot up at this.

"Are there?"

She pulled her hands away from his. "Don't."

"How can I not, Bella?" He gestured to himself, to the headboard, and the pillows, now sitting dispiritedly beside the bed.

She was frustrated now. "I didn't check because I feel fine."

"Can you, please?" He asked softly, "save me from my imagination?"

She softened at this, turning around. "Alright."

He waited nervously at the ensuite door.

"Bella?" he asked, after a few minutes.

"Yeah." Her voice sounded uncertain to him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, opening the door.
The lie was so plainly written on her face, his own scrambled with distress. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Really."

"I'm getting Carlisle."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he was gone, and then back, Carlisle following only slightly behind him.

He took one look at Bella's face, now a flagrant red, and said, "perhaps we can have a moment in private?" He looked at her, eyebrows raised, and then at Edward, clearly thinking something to him.

Bella shot Edward her own angry and hurt look before he disappeared.

After a few seconds, Carlisle nodded, "we're alone. Can I show you something in my study?"

She'd expected the third degree, or pills, or worried insistence on an examination, but not this.

In his office, he pulled out several large texts—medical reference books—opening them to various pages, laying them out on his desk. Then he pointed to the first of the illustrations. "I know you're used to bruises, Bella, but they're a sign of damage." Catching her look, he went on. "Not always severe, but, here," he explained, "kidney damage, caused by bruising to the back, and damage here," pointing to the next page, "can lead to more serious internal bleeding, which is hard to see, even for me." He paused, letting all this sink in. "I've never encountered a pair like yourselves, and I'd rather you be careful. So, any bruises?"

She looked down, and to the side, but the dusky flush was impossible to hide.

Carlisle read her expression, and flipped through the book, giving her a moment.

"Can you show me what severity, and where?" He tapped the page, showing her the chart.

Blowing out an embarrassed breath, she pointed to the topmost part of the page, and then to her arm, and more intimate places.

"Any discomfort?" Carlisle asked, relieved.

She shook her head.

"Nothing medically concerning, then," he said softly, pulling a tube of ointment from a drawer, handing it to her. "Can I offer some advice though?"

"Sure."

"Be entirely honest with him."

The idea of being dishonest didn't sit well, but neither did Edward's anticipated overreaction.

She nodded, pulling out her phone, and calling him.

His arrival coincided with Carlisle's subtle departure.

"Are you OK?" he asked, slipping his hands around her back, almost not touching, just lightly resting on the surface of her clothes.

Frowning, she said, "I need you not to freak out."
She could almost see the fear blossoming in his face.

"And to understand that I am fine...and that there are some bruises—that I can barely feel."

His face was making elaborate shapes on itself, as the emotions played over it.

He was struggling to stay calm. He had hurt her.

That was Jacob's move.

Not his.

Watching this, she put a hand to his face. "You didn't hurt me, Edward." Then, with a crack in her voice, "please don't do it now by saying you did."

The breath he took in was audible to her. "OK," he said, trying to think how he could stand to be in his own skin.

The others were returning, having given them some time.

Exasperated by the timing, Edward growled out a "not now!" to Jasper, as he approached.

"I'm just the messenger," he drawled, "Esme has breakfast for you, Bella." He didn't add that he had something to show her after.

"Thank you," she said softly, and to Edward. "I'm fine, remember?" She was pleading with her eyes. "It was a good thing." The tears she'd been managing to hold back were truly threatening now.

"I'm sorry," he said, "you're right." He pulled her into a real hug, "I'm just…"

"Paranoid."

They both chuckled a little, foreheads pressed together, small smiles mirrored in each other.

After breakfast, Jasper came and sat down at the table, a box and board in hand.

Bella watched him set up the chess pieces, her curiosity growing. Edward had showed her the most rudimentary game play, but she wasn't very good. This set featured clocks.

Edward nodded as if approving.

"Timed chess," Jasper said. "Teaches you to strategize while dealing with stress." He explained the rudiments to Bella, who agreed to play.

Two rounds in, she was flustered and losing badly—again. "Don't worry about winning," Jasper coaxed her. "Just focus on making a strategic, but quick move."

"Isn't winning kinda the whole point, in a fight?"

"Yes," Jasper said, making his move, and tapping the clock. "But right now, I want you to feel mildly stressed, while working to think clearly."

They played on. By the fourth round, it was easier.

"Good," he said, "you're doing very well." He could feel her warmer emotions shrinking, cooled by the logic of her thoughts.
By the fifth round, she was doing even better, but getting tired.

"Enough for today," Jasper said. "Tomorrow?"

"Sure," Bella said, still not so certain of him, but less intimidated. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Ma'am," he smiled, tipping an imaginary hat to her as he left.

She giggled, and Jasper chuckled in reply.

Edward was bristling, sensing Rose's idea of what was next in the queue of activities. "Not today," he murmured, knowing she was tired, worried about her getting hurt.

Emmett snorted out, in a voice that Bella couldn't catch, "well, if you'd let the girl sleep, she'd be up for it lover-boy!"

Edward ignored him.

Shifting in his seat so he could be closer to Bella, he asked, "what do you think about going away for a few days? Just us?"

"I'd like that," she said. After a bit she added, "but not too far away. And maybe after I see John this week?" This last bit was added tentatively, as if it was asking too much.

"Of course." He kissed her. "We have a place south of here, near Ocean city. That close enough?"

"That sounds perfect," she said, smiling. "Just us."

Alice still wasn't seeing Bella's future with any predictability, and she huffed, and then hummed, as Bella packed, uncertain of outcomes.

"Alice, what I wear is not going to make a material difference. Trust me."

Alice rolled her eyes. "Trust me. Clothes make a difference. Especially when it comes to taking them off."

If her blood wasn't so occupied in making her blush, Bella would have been able to open her mouth again, but Alice let out a long, "oooh! Good!" Then she disappeared from the room, and reappeared with a bundle in her hands, saying "no peeking!" as she stuffed it into Bella's bag.

Bella rolled her eyes instead, tucking the rest of her clothes into the small case.

"Ready?" Edward asked, picking up his own suitcase, hand hovering over hers.

"Yes, think so," she sighed, running through her mental checklist.

"Have fun you two," Alice winked. She'd caught enough to know they would.

The other family members called out their farewells for the next few days. They were taking advantage of Bella's absence to do their own hunting, Jasper and Emmett heading East. Rose and Alice were going North, investigating some stray leads there.

Carlisle and Esme were staying to keep up the family appearances in town, and to be close by, just in case.
Bella's eyebrows rose at the choice of vehicle.

"No?" Edward asked, pausing before he opened the trunk.

"Oh no, it's fine, just...surprised," Bella said. "Um...we're not in a rush, are we?"

"No," Edward smiled, "no rush."

"Good," Bella smiled back, sliding into the sculpted leather seat. It felt like it was hugging her.

The drive was scenic, but otherwise unremarkable. Edward made sure it passed by at a pleasing pace for Bella.

When they hooked back around the sign for Ocean City, Bella looked at Edward, "wait, wasn't that __"

"Our turn's up here," he said, "technically, the house is in Ocean City limits, but right at the edge of Copalis."

The roads diminished as they went. First from the highway to the main roads, and then to a long and winding side road that led to a obscure driveway.

The house was a stately arts and crafts style, a dark dusky blue set into the deeper greens of the forest. The ocean moaned in its background, unseen but its wash heard over the rocky breakwater.

"How many houses do you have here?" Bella asked Edward, stepping out, letting him take her hand in his.

"We, Mrs. Cullen," he said, smiling at her as he said the word, "have six in washington state. One in the middle, one in Seattle, and four in other corners.

"Six," she whispered, "wow."

He chuckled, opening the door.

"Let me give you the tour," he said, watching her take in the space. It was beautifully appointed, the angles of the space complemented by soft furniture, and softer lighting. Someone had clearly been here to turn them on.

But it was a house, beautiful as houses went, and its primary benefit was its privacy.

And a hot tub.

"Oh," Bella said, spotting it. "Perfect."

"Thought you'd like that," Edward said. "Maybe we can head in after dinner?"

"Sure," Bella said, wondering if they'd need to drive out to get food.

"Let's go see what's in the kitchen," he said, leaning down to kiss her.

She almost dismissed the idea of dinner, thinking of other ways to fill their time, but her stomach grumbled, loudly, derailing her other ideas.

They hadn't been intimate since that night, almost a week before, Edward insistent they wait until the bruises had healed. Bella had been less than thrilled with this plan, but John had cautioned her,
concerned about triggers and relapse.

Edward wouldn't hear talk of her cooking, pulling things out of the fridge, then pouring her a small glass of wine.

"Wow," she said, "wine. Pretty sure that's not legal."

He grinned. "Well, if you insist on being law-abiding—" and reached to pick it up.

"Oh no, I'm good, just saying, I like this law-breaking side of you." She took another sip. It was cool, and white, and delicious.

It reminded her of Edward.

Dinner pleasantly dispensed with, she was mildly euphoric, and more pleasantly anticipating watching the sunset play out from the hot tub.

"The water beckoning?" he asked, catching her glance.

She blushed out a "yes."

Still shy about changing in front of him, she disappeared into the washroom with her bag.

She discovered the item that Alice had packed, laughing. It evaded traditional description, two pieces at the front and back that laced together with criss-crossing ties—one at the shoulder, and the other at the corresponding hip.

It was easy to appreciate Alice's comment about the way clothes might come off.

Edward's stare, as she came into view of the hot tub was worth all the frustrated moments she'd had in putting it on.

He held out his hand, helping her into the water, the foamy bubbles leaving Edward's swimsuit a mystery. There was no need of words, as they sat beside each other, this morphing easily into Bella sitting over him, legs straddling his.

The sunset was spectacular.

Neither of them noticed it.

Edward's flesh was pink with the reflected light of the sky, while Bella's was a heat-inspired rose from the water. They clung together in a tight embrace.

It didn't take long for Bella to tug the string at her hip, feeling Edward's lips pull out a giggle as he undid the one at her shoulder. Removing his swimsuit was a simple push of her fingers, hooked at the waistband.

They were both far warmer than usual from the water, aroused and eager from their days of waiting. Laid out on the deck, Bella pulled Edward over her, lips insistent at his own neck and mouth. She made the arch of her back an explicit invitation, trying to angle herself to find him.

He was as wanting as she was, but for all his care, not careful enough. As their bodies became one, he missed the abrupt widening of her eyes, and the momentary stillness that was not wrought by pleasure.

She'd been sucked deep into the grip of a memory, not able to wrench free from it—or to move out
from him, and it was Jacob she was remembering, all the phantom pain repeating itself in Edward's movements.

It was only a few seconds, but when it released its hold, she panicked, pushing frantically at him, voice distressed in breathy and inarticulate cries.

He back away immediately, horrified.

"Bella?" he said, hands out as he watched her breathe too fast, curl up into herself on her side, fingers digging into her arms. When he laid a towel out over her, and tried to pick her up, she screamed "no!" at him, and huddled further into herself on the deck.

He waited, watching and worrying, as she began to shiver.

"Bella," he tried again, "let me take you inside."

She nodded, and he did, laying her as gently as he could on the bed.

When he laid his hand on her hair, she started again, another "no," whispered out.

So he waited, two handwidths apart from her, watching her wrestle with this insistent iteration of memory.

"Sorry," she finally said, when her breathing had slowed, "I don't know—"

"Don't apologize," he said, shaking his head. "I did something—"

"No." The word was fierce, all her air behind it. She took a long breath in. "Jacob did this."

His eyebrows wedged together. He wouldn't disagree with her, but he knew he'd done something to unearth the monster's memory.

"Can I hold you?"

"No," she said, the word rising in pitch as she tried not to cry.

"Are you afraid of me?"

"No, I'm just afraid."

He wanted to go break something. Pretend it was Jacob, and reduce it to its molecular pieces.

"Can you hold my hand instead, please?"

The uneven squeak of her voice made the anger crumble, and he put his cupped hand under hers, curling it around as she did. Not long after, she went to asleep, tumbling into the dark places where he wished he could follow.

A/N for 2018-06-30 - Alright. After we deal with Jacob, and Bella is fully on the road to recovery, I could wrap this tale up real quick-like, or throw another plot complication in there and keep on running. What is your will, dear readers?

Hope this story is still satisfying...

~ Erin
1. I posted this chapter last night, and then woke up to all your reviews - which is like Christmas morning for a writer - tx!

2. Some on FF commented, querying the nature of the trigger: sometimes, it's something, and sometimes, it's just nothing. Flashbacks happen - and they suck. Recovery is not a straight line. Considering this one happened during sex, not a hard stretch to imagine it was the act itself. No, not the heat. Even all warm from a hot tub, Edward would still feel relatively cool in comparison to Bella's body temperature.
"Is it private enough here?" Bella asked, looking nervously around the deck, sunglasses protecting her from the dazzling sight of Edward under the broken sunlight—stray rays illuminating him between the moving patchwork of clouds.

"Very," he said. "The property is large, so unless someone's gotten lost, we won't see anyone but a deliberate visitor. And," he tapped his head, "I'd hear them long before they saw me."

Her shoulders uncurled themselves. She was trying her best to appear calm, but the bubbling stew of anxiety hadn't subsided since last night.

"Recovery isn't a straight line," John had warned her earlier in the week.

She'd made a comment about 'two steps forward, one step back,' and he'd shaken his head.

"No," he'd said, "more like a tango with the stray zig-zag thrown in."

She'd swallowed, praying her recovery was more progressively linear.

It didn't feel much like it today.

Hoping the feelings were just temporary, she was holding off on calling him—or letting Edward know just bad it was. There was no fooling him entirely, but she could keep the worst hidden. Try to enjoy their time together.

He nudged the cup towards her. Noisette. Against his better judgement, he'd served it to her. She rarely drank coffee, and he didn't think she needed to be anymore jittery than she was. Her book was vibrating in her hand, and he could hear her heartbeat jumping along with the rest of her.

She took a small sip, setting the cup down and putting her hand over his.

He squeezed it softly, watching the breeze lift her hair and float, and then return it to her neck.

Beautiful.

Alice had wormed her way into Bella's wardrobe in dribs and drabs, and today's outfit was the product of this jointure. Soft suede boots hugged her calves and met the curl of a flared skirt, this blossoming tucked under a cotton ivory sweater. She'd normally avoid Alice's choices, but this particular ensemble allowed for the knives to be worn without notice.

Edward, of course, had heard the straps as she'd slipped them on, perturbed at this regression.

Then he'd chided himself. If they helped her feel safe, then all the better.

"Want to go to the boardwalk later?" he asked, watching her pretend to eat. She normally liked eggs, but she was picking at them today.

"Sure," she said absentmindedly, putting her book down, taking the most miniscule bite of her breakfast.
“Sure’, she says, with the enthusiasm of someone being lead to the gallows.” He captured her hand in both of his, bringing to his lips. "Only if you want to. Or we can watch a movie, or you can take a nap. Or do nothing. Whatever you want."

Her smile was wide and genuine. "That obvious, huh?"

"Mm-hmm," he said, putting her hand down, his hand resting under it again.

She sighed. "We've barely talked about school, and it starts in a few weeks. I know I registered for courses, but I can barely remember which ones."

"Do you not want to go for the fall?"

"No, no, I do, I just…" she breathed out loudly again. "I just barely know if I'm coming or going somedays. Not sure I'll be able to focus."

"Nothing more human than going to college and failing a few courses," he joked.

She laughed, a hand to her mouth, "maybe for some," she admitted, "I think I'd prefer to pass."

"You would," he assured her. "But more importantly, I think you'd like college—like the classes, meeting new people who are actually interested in school." High school was no comparison.

"Won't you find it boring?" she asked, "Going through all the same courses again?"

"Not at all," he said, smiling, "I'll be with you, and you're never boring."

"Flatterer," she mumbled, blushing a little.

"Flattery is disingenuous praise. There's nothing artificial about what I'm saying, Bella." He stared at her, listening intently to all the sounds her beautiful self made. The intensity of his gaze was made all the more noticeable by the alarmed transformation that washed over it.

Without asking, he picked her up, carrying her inside at a dizzying speed to their bedroom.

When he set her down, she shook visibly.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "but I need you to listen very carefully to me."

She nodded, mute with fear. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

"Jacob is nearby."

She wanted to be brave. To simply nod. But her throat choked out a cry, her hand flying to her mouth.

"He will not go near you, Bella," Edward said, his hand now wrapping around hers. "I'm going to go and finish this, and then you will never need to worry about him again. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

He pulled his phone out, dialing Carlisle's number, murmuring into the phone, and snapping it shut.

"Bella," he said, again, daring to slip his arms around her, "Stay here. Don't come outside." He remembered the horrific thing she'd done, thinking him in danger. He wouldn't risk her again this way. "Promise me."
"I promise," she whispered, shaking still.

"No matter what you think is happening. Stay inside."

She nodded more quickly. Terrified.

"I love you," he whispered, and leaned down to kiss her forehead.

Then he was gone, and she pressed her hand to her palm to her mouth, eyes closing, trying to not imagine all that could go wrong.

Loud, snarling growls travelled from the lower reaches of the property, and she sank to her knees, not even daring to look at the window.

She didn't hear the other footsteps behind her, but she felt the soft hand on her shoulder.

"Are you Bella?"

She jumped, crawling up to a stand, and turning to face the voice.

An unassuming young woman, dark haired and pale skinned, stood in front of her. Her t-shirt and jeans had seen better days, and she looked almost as terrified as Bella felt.

"A friend sent me," she whispered, "to help you. Come with me. I'll get you somewhere safe." She looked in the direction of the noises coming from the windows. The snarls and snaps were louder now.

Bella understood that some of them were trees, freed from their standing places.

"Come on, I don't know what's going on out there, but it doesn't sound good."

"Who sent you?" Bella asked, knowing it wasn't the Cullens.

"Jake did," Amanda said. "Come on!" She was panicked now, the screech of shearing metal reaching their ears.

"Edward!" Bella yelled. She knew what that sound meant.

Amanda was calling other names now, and as Bella moved towards the windows, too terrified by what she imagined to not actually see what was happening, she felt other sets of hands on her.

"No!" she shrieked, trying to dislodge them, kicking as they tackled her to the ground. She made out three bodies in the scramble, Amanda's one of them, as someone pinned her head down, twisting it awkwardly to the side.

"Hold still," a man's voice called. "We're here to help you. Just—"

Bella had freed her fist, and it silenced his next words.

She knew she'd caught a target with her foot when another voice swore.

The hands were predominant again, and all her struggling was fastened into the scratch of the carpet beneath her.

There was a sharp pain jabbed into her arm, and then a creeping blackness that swallowed her whole.
Awake

Coming to consciousness was like rising in the ocean: full of things that brushed by her in the dark.

There were sounds that left their slimy tendrils sliding over her feet. Sensations that blubbered softly over her arms, and her back, and her legs.

Then a firmness beneath her. Wood, she thought. It smelled of salt and seaweed too, like the driftwood coffee table Billy had in his living room.

Finally, there was the surge of memory—of grief, hearing again the final sounds she'd known. She almost vomited with it, but silenced the volley, clamping down on her body's urges.

*Be calm,* she told herself. *You don't know for sure.* She suppressed the metallic wail echoing in her mind. It lashed at her heart. *No, you can't know for sure.*

The grief locked up, she turned her mind to the physical present.

She hadn't moved yet, but knew she was capable of it.

She busied herself with listening, and feeling.

There was a murmuring, and then a snap of a phone shutting. The low rumble was familiar.

Jacob.

She didn't doubt her recognition.

After that, she let herself simply breathe for a while.

When the panic had subsided again, she flexed her wrists in the tiniest movement possible, and found them constrained. Tied.

The insistent and growing panic would be very easy to succumb to.

She stopped it, mid-chest.

*No,* she told herself. *Stay calm. Remember what Rose taught you. You can outsmart him, and give the Cullens time to get to you.*

Next she tried moving her ankles a smidgen. These too were somehow bound together.

If he was going to untie her, she needed to make him trust her.

She took her time, considering the many ways she could accomplish this, before she purposefully opened her eyes.

"Hey," he said, taking in a careful breath. He was seated across from her.

She was lying on a table. Trussed like a bird.

It would have been laughable, if it wasn't so terrifying.
They were in a small cabin—rough wood walls, and a ceiling hung with well stocked rafters and hooks. A fishing cabin, she guessed. Then she caught sight of guns, these too hooked to the ceiling, and boxes of ammunition stacked nearby. No, not a fishing cabin. Just a good approximation of one.

"I'm sorry I couldn't find a nicer way to get you here." He lifted his chin to her wrists, tight together.

"That's OK," she said, closing her eyes, sighing. "thank you for coming to get me." She made her voice warble. It wasn't hard to make the tears come. "Can you take them off now?"

He looked like he wanted to, his face making a series of uncertain expressions.

She didn't try to convince him of the need for her free hands. "Can you get us away? Safe?" she asked instead.

"Yes."

"Thank God," she whispered. The tears were easier now. She had to control them. It would do no good to give way entirely.

"Hey, hey, it's OK," he said, standing, undoing the knot there, and then the one at her feet.

She made herself not flinch at his touch.

"Thank you," she said, wiping her eyes freely.

He stood only a foot from her, watching her massage her wrist and hands, and then her booted calves, legs dangling off the table.

"How'd you find me?" she asked.

Jacob swallowed, looking uneasy, and then looking around uneasily. "The people who came for you, they're not exactly above board."

Bella nodded, feeling her hands and feet smarting with pins and needles. *Keep him talking,* she thought.

"With enough connections, and money, you can find anyone's property, their holdings."

"What sort of connections?"

"You don't want to know," he said, shaking his head, frowning as he watched her continue to rub her hands together. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "How did you figure out when we'd be there?"

"My cousin," Jacob said, "works for the company that manages that house." Still not convinced that she was OK, he asked again, more insistently. "Did he hurt you?"

It took her a moment to realize what he was asking, as she pretended to look at him, but letting her eyes rest on the large window, and the door beside it. Exits.

When she didn't answer right away, he asked again, this time, putting his hand gently on her arm. "Bella, did he?"

He thought...this too would be hideously, and darkly comic….if she hadn't recalled again what she'd heard at the house.
Oh God, Edward…

Then she burst into tears.

"He can't hurt you anymore," Jacob said, and then launched into a volley of apologies. "I'm so sorry, I had to wait until I could come—" he babbled on, arms now secure around her, squeezing in a way he thought was gentle.

He didn't realize the tears had stopped. That her face held the shape of careful concentration.

"It's OK," she finally said, pushing her hands to his cheeks. "You're here." Then she let some deliberate tears slide down her face again. "When do we need to go?"

"Soon," he said. "The boat'll be here in an hour. They'll call."

"OK," she whispered, calculating.

She had time.

Then he leaned down and kissed her, his hands curling around her skull.

It hurt.

But she was prepared.

As he let go, she put her hands on his chest, spreading her fingers outward, as if measuring the spanse there, the shake in her voice convincing, because it was real. "Take away what he did, Jacob. Make love to me."

A/N for 2018-07-03 - Big shout out to catharticone for pre-reading and proofreading.

For the rest of you: thank you, as always, for reading, reacting, and then reviewing!

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
It was his last check of the day. All the others had been fruitless, and Charlie expected this one would be too. Sometimes, police work was just that—futile. The methodical elimination of possibilities.

He used this bland reminder to prepare himself for another disappointment. Then he saw the disturbed dirt on the path that led from the dock. Someone had been here recently.

Securing his own boat, he set the oars down quietly. The small uncharted cove had made it impossible to motor in, and he’d had to row, rather than risk the hull in such unfamiliar waters.

The whisper of voices, carried by the breeze, made him stop. He could have sworn they were familiar. Stepping lightly, he followed the path, feet silent in the August dust.

“Make love to me, Jacob,” Bella whispered, pulling his hand closer in hers. Pulling him closer.

He needed little convincing, but those bruises he’d seen, the hurts she’d worn when she was at Emily’s—those still lingered in his mind. “You OK?” he asked. “Did he hurt you?”

She swallowed, and he could see the tension there.

“I’m fine,” she said, struggling to find her voice.

“Good,” he breathed out, relieved, and then pulled her to the edge of the table, her legs sliding around his. Holding her head with his hands, he kissed her, tasting the sweetness of her lips, her mouth, her tongue. He released his fingers to fall to her waist where they slipped under her shirt.

She stopped his left hand immediately, redirecting it to her skirt waistband.

He skipped her directive, and went under the flare of the fabric, massaging her inner thigh. His thumb swirled into the soft skin there, as if testing it, assessing its qualities. This became a more substantial pressure that crept higher to the jointure of her legs.

His other hand trapped itself in the cup of her bra, wedged between the wire and the pooling of her flesh.

Lifting one of her legs up, she slid the zipper down her left boot, and then her right, kicking them off. He didn’t notice her palming the knife that had been hidden there. She kept her other hand on his back, trying to make convincing motions as he kissed her.

Jacob’s fingers teased their way into the side of her panties, his erection pressed into her leg.

The memory of him inside her rippled up from this touch, and she stopped her hands, stilling the shake that was growing there.

Stay calm, she told herself. This isn’t then.

Her hands were sweaty. The grips on the knives held, as Rose had promised they would.
“Bella,” Jacob whispered into her mouth, “I want you.”

With Jacob’s own hands now occupied in two intimate places, she put both her hands behind his back, and silently removed the second knife from the straps on her forearm.

His teeth were making claim on her lips, small nips that would otherwise have terrified her, but now only sharpened her purpose. He was breathing hard, blood appropriated for purposes other than respiration.

The knives were weighty twins in each of her hands, and she rubbed the heels of her fists into his back, needing to convince him of an enthusiasm equal to his own.

Charlie had reached the stairs of the small cabin, and from the foot of them, the picture in the window was clear enough: Bella legs astride, with Jacob arched over her. There was no room to imagine something innocent.

When Jacob’s fingers yanked and ripped through the lace of her underwear, and his other pulled down the front of his shorts, Bella clicked the release on the blades.

He didn’t hear it, thoroughly preoccupied with shifting her hips towards his, one hand guiding himself towards the softness between her legs.

It was Bella who entered him, both knives finding their fleshy targets, angled up and into his lower back.

There was a fractured moment, where the knowledge registered before the pain. As it slivered up to his senses, his hand, resting again on her breast, squeezed through the growing agony, cracking Bella’s ribs.

The sound obscured the cocking of Charlie’s gun, as he levelled it at Jacob, and yelled, “Get off of her!”

He turned and roared, leaping towards Charlie, and phasing mid air. The kick of his feet, now tipped with lethal claws, sliced up her legs and forearms as she threw them up in front of herself.

The repeated report of the gun was deafening in the small space, and Bella watched, with deadened ears, the sight of Jacob’s wolf form collapsing directly over Charlie.

She knew she screamed out a panicked “Dad!” but she couldn’t hear it.

The moment between her scrambling from the table to the steps, where the two forms lay seemed interminable. Charlie was breathing heavily, his body shaking under the weight and shock of Jacob’s form. Her hands were covered in Jacob’s blood, and she wiped at her clothes, trying to dry them enough to be able to pull Charlie out from under Jacob.

But Jacob was starting to move again, and as he stood, he growled and snarled, shoving Bella away to the side of the door with a push of his head. She scrambled back, scanning the floor for her knives, or anything else that would serve as a weapon, watching Charlie, still on the floor, struggling to get up.

Jacob’s paw shoved the fallen gun away, and he renewed his growl at Charlie, looming over him.

It was then that Bella saw the pool of blood seeping out from under her father. Its circumference was a morphing obscenity. His lips were moving, saying the same thing over and over again. She couldn't hear it, but knew the sight of her name there.
Her own voice was silent to her, and she wondered if it would be to Charlie too. “I’m here, Dad. I love you.”

He blinked, and then blinked again, and tried to smile and nod.

Then the tone in his neck and face melted away.

“NO!” she shrieked, watching more blood emigrating from his prone form. Throwing herself forward against Jacob’s vibrating growl, she landed on Charlie, pressing into his stomach, trying to stop the bleeding.

She fought the push of Jacob’s body, shoving her back. Her face was wet with tears, and her arms and legs and were beginning to sting wickedly. She pressed her toes into the floorboards, trying to gain traction.

There was just too much blood, and not enough of it staying where it needed to.

“Don’t go Dad, please,” she whispered. “It’s not time yet. Please just stay.”

The ringing in her ears muted everything, but the growl in Jacob’s chest made her own vibrate.

She was so focused on Charlie, that she only understood Jacob’s absence when she slumped forward further over her father, her wolf shaped counterpressure gone. The sound of shattering glass didn’t reach her stunned ears.

It was the cold hand on her shoulder that made her head start up, away from her father.

“Carlisle,” she croaked, staring. “My dad!”

She couldn’t bring herself to think, let alone say anything about Edward.

Carlisle knelt over Charlie, pulling things from his bag, flicking his gaze up to Bella, speaking.

When she didn’t respond, he looked again, a pinched frown taking in her appearance.

“I can’t hear you,” Bella said, “the gunshots.” Her voice was cracking she knew, pained and awkward as it left her throat.

Carlisle took her hands, pushing them into a spot on Charlie’s abdomen. He was working on the other side, fingers too fast for Bella to make sense of, his mouth still moving.

When he pulled her fingers away, Bella had difficulty letting them go. They felt stiff. They were covered in her father’s blood. And her own. And Jacob’s too, she thought.

Where was Jacob? She looked around nervously, wondering.

Then there were other cold arms, these ones circling her familiarly.

“Edward!” He was there, his face perfect but for the panicked worry it wore.

She couldn’t hold back the flood of tears. Grasping at him, she took in too many details: the disorder of his clothes, the smears of blood her hands had left, and the tremble that had claimed them.

“You’re OK,” she said, again and again and again.

Everything became a wobbling mirage, Edward, Charlie and Carlisle distorted into watery images.
Edward pulled her away from himself, looking at her arms and legs, careful fingers running down her side, checking for other injuries. His touch made her smart, and twitch. Things were hurting, but she didn’t care.

He was here, and he was alive. She tried raising her own hand, but it was suddenly too heavy—too sore to respond, and it was her eyes that trailed down his form, ensuring he was whole and present.

“You’re safe,” she rasped. “You’re OK.” Then she swallowed. “Charlie—my Dad, is he OK?”

She could barely see now, the tears replenishing themselves, the room starting to tremble with them.

Edward said nothing, but picked her up, Carlisle mirroring the same action with Charlie. They were moving, and it was becoming too much to hold on to the present. To seeing. Her eyes were closing, fighting her body’s purposeful escape. There were flickers of things: Water spraying, and the thunk of waves painful at her chest, cold air and colder hands. Finally, her mind released itself from the hold of consciousness, and there was the blessing of nothingness.
A/N for 2018-07-05: Have to admit, I had some serious head scratching as the comments came in on the last chapter, thinking, "wait, aren't these the same readers who, twenty chapters back, were screaming that death wasn't good enough for Charlie Swan?" Apparently, you're all very forgiving people.

Really appreciate the emotional response, feedback, and questions - it's all enormously helpful in seeing what needs to be addressed.

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleck Tarbuck on FB; AT EAffleck on Twitter

The world was beeping when she woke up, a constant and syncopated set of 'blips'. She felt like she was breaking a rule, opening her eyes against their proscribed rhythm.

He was there.

"Edward!"

It was instinctual to move towards him, lifting her arm.

His quick "don't move!" wasn't fast enough.

She was stopped by the pain in her chest, and then the other ones that spidered down her arm and leg. Her mouth produced a garbled sound through an 'O' shaped mouth.

He put his hands to her face, willing them to absorb the pain she was bearing.

After a moment, she whispered, "I'm OK." Then, "You're here—"

"I am."

"I thought—" she started, but had to stop, "I thought you were dead."

"I'm so sorry," he said, swallowing. The distraught look on his face only grew.

She reached out her hands, hissing in air at the pain that came with the gesture. "You're OK."

He moved closer, but oh so carefully, slipping his hands behind her back, this all conducted awkwardly over a hospital bed rail.

His lips in her hair, he whispered, "he's dead, Bella. He can't hurt you."

She waited for the relief, but all that came was a choked sob.

Edward said nothing more, simply holding her.

When her breathing told him the embrace was hurting her, he slowly released it, helping her rest
back against her pillow.

Her heart rate picked up again, culminating in a question she'd dreaded asking. "My Dad?"

"He's alive," Edward said. For now, he thought.

Her face puckered with worry. "How is he? How long have I been out—?"

"You've been out almost a day, and Charlie got out of surgery a few hours ago. Carlisle's sure they've stopped the intestinal bleeding."

A gut wound. Bleeding could be the least of his problems. She swallowed, nodding, then shifted in the bed.

"Try not to move too much right now."

She looked down. Her right forearm, and her thighs were heavily bandaged. She knew from the sting of them, that the damage there was still fresh.

"I'm so sorry, Bella," Edward said, his voice rich with emotion, "I promised you he'd never come near you again. I never should have left you. I heard them coming, and he used the distraction to keep me from getting to you."

She could well imagine what Jacob had done. She knew nothing, barring bodily destruction, would keep Edward from her.

"We're here," she said, "we're OK. That's all that matters."

He wished this was true.

Charlie's thoughts had been almost worn to nothing by the time he and Carlisle'd reached them, but what he'd seen, and stopped, had been in the flickers Edward had caught.

She'd stunk of him.

His scent was curled around her intimate places. Her stomach. Her neck. Her breasts. Her hair reeked of his touch.

He was terrified to ask her what had happened.

He was afraid of what he might do. Because, what was there left to do, really?

He'd already expunged Jacob Black from the earth.

That just left himself for these debts to his wife.

Perhaps he could dismember himself again. Jacob had done such a neat job of it once. He could do it on his own again, he was fairly sure. He doubted Bella would let him.

Jacob had thrown his leg over the bank into the sea, preventing his following them. It'd taken Carlisle precious time retrieving it. His arm was more easily located in the woods, but the pieces of his neck were harder to locate. Costly time lost, assembling him again.

It had been that split second, when he heard the approach of other minds, their focus intent on Bella's image that had given Jacob the opportunity to wound him so efficiently.
He'd left her—and just as she'd said, their being apart was what had nearly destroyed them. She tried moving again, and her face became a white, tight mask, the machines blipping to life again.

"Bella? What's wrong?"

She shook her head minutely. "Just moved—the wrong way," she gasped out, growing paler with the breath in.

"Your ribs," he said, feeling the squeeze of guilt. Jacob had cracked them on one side. His hand mark lived there still, a purpling bruise that was his only memorial.

His body was only pieces now, and these consigned to the deep waters of the sound.

"Yes," she whispered, panting carefully.

He winced, seeing it. "You should have something for the pain," he murmured.

"No," she got out quickly. "I want to see my Dad first."

"He's not awake, Bella."

"Don't care," she said, gasping at the end, taking too much air in.

He couldn't stand it anymore.

"Bella, did Jacob hurt you beyond what I can see?"

Her "No" was clear, and there was a look in her eye that made him pull back, studying her response.

"Rose was right," she said shakily, and raising her good arm very slowly and carefully to her head, tapped it. "Outsmart."

He couldn't help but smile. Of course she had. The corners of this expression melted, knowing what he'd left her to face.

Her features had stiffened, as she prepared words for what she'd done. "I let him think I was glad he'd found me." She paused, a bitter look stealing across her features. "And then I asked him to make love to me."

The bedrail shrieked under Edward's hands, and he moved them away slowly, nodding for her to continue.

"When he was…" she paused, thinking of how to word this, "close enough, I stabbed him in the back. That's when my Dad came, and Jacob turned, and phased, and then Charlie shot him—" She stopped, realizing what her father had seen. "I need to go see him, Edward. Now." She was struggling to get up.

"Stop," he said, "we'll get you there, but you're not leaving your bed." He pressed the call button, and after a few minutes of arguing with the nurse, and then the doctor, began preparing everything to move himself. After more arguing, they finally acquiesced, the nurse following as Edward rolled Bella's bed down the hall to Charlie's room.

"We'll be fine alone," Edward said, blocking the nurse's way in, closing the door. He parked Bella's bed beside Charlie's, head to head, so she could see him, and reach him with her good hand.
"Dad, you awake?" she asked.

No reply.

His bandaging was more profound than Bella's—arms, legs, and stomach covered thickly. Multiple lines ran from his arms, and something sinister snaked out of his side. A cannula was tucked under his nostrils.

She squeezed his hand.

"He can hear you," Edward said.

"Good," Bella whispered. "I love you, Dad. And I forgive you." She had to pause to recover from the deep breath she'd tried to take. "When you wake up, we're going to have a talk. OK? So make sure you get better soon."

She was crying, and not just from her fear of what would happen to Charlie. The pain was morphing, moving beyond its allocated spaces, and creeping into the other places of her flesh.

"OK," Edward said, "you need to rest. Let's go."

"Can't I stay here?" she asked. "By my Dad?"

"Is that what you want?"

She nodded.

"OK," he said, opening the door, murmuring to the nurse. "now you need to take something for the pain, and rest." The nurse was at the bedside, a syringe in hand.

Bella gripped his hand too hard. "Help my Dad," she whispered, before the blackness took her again.

---

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
It was another day before Charlie was fully awake himself, only to find Bella fast asleep.


Charlie didn't quite know how to react to Edward, squinting, wondering what the hell had happened that Bella had wound up with Jacob again.

And Jacob.

Jesus.

He'd turned into a dog. A giant fricking—

"Charlie?"

"Yep, here," he croaked out.

Edward brought over a glass of water and a straw, holding it to him. "Not too much," he said, pulling it away after Charlie had a sip.

"What happened?"

"Bella used your phone to call us," Edward said.

"And Jacob?"

Edward shook his head. "He wasn't there," he lied smoothly.

Charlie, though, had had enough of his world view jarred that he wasn't quite so willing to accept this.

"There was no reception on that island."

"She called us." Edward shrugged.

Charlie looked at the bandages and tubes in himself, then at the ones on Bella's sleeping form, and said, "very much doubt either of us would be here, if she'd left me to do that." He reached over and gripped Edward's wrist with a ferocity that surprised his son-in-law. "Don't lie to me."

Edward pulled his hand away, gently enough so he wouldn't hurt Charlie, but it was still enough of a hard yank to be felt. "How else would we have found you?"

Swallowing, Charlie said, "I haven't got a clue, but I don't buy the bull you're trying to sell me."

The persistent image of Jacob morphing into a wolf, mid jump, was clear to Edward from Charlie's mind.

"Jacob was there," Charlie said.

"I believe you."
"And I put at least five shots into him at point-blank range. People don't get up and walk away from that."

"No," Edward agreed, "people don't."

Werewolves did.

They stared at each other, stubbornly refusing to give the other ground.

It was at this point that Bella woke, their voices having roused her.

"Dad?" she hushed out, not sure she'd heard him.

"Hey," he said, voice suddenly soft, reaching over with his hand. "You OK?"

"I am," she said, "and I'm way better now that you're awake." Her voice was small with near tears. His face was shadowed with so many worries. "He didn't—" then he flushed angrily, "it looked—"

"I'm fine, Dad," she said, "I had to get him close enough to knife him."

Charlie stared, swallowing.

"Rose's been teaching her self-defense," Edward explained, wanting to shove Charlie away from this line of questioning.

He took the hint, sliding his eyes over her bandages.

"Cuts," she said, "I slipped with the knife, after."

Charlie's eyebrows went up, and he looked at Edward. "You give us a minute?"

Edward returned his look with a wary one, moving his gaze to Bella for an answer.

"S'OK," she said.

"I'll be just outside," he murmured, kissing her forehead, slipping out the door.

"Those aren't knife cuts," Charlie said. He kept eye contact, watching her flush, knowing it was lie.

She'd tried, working with Edward, to come up with a convincing lie. Rehearsed it even. They'd agreed that Jacob disappearing—and he had, for all intensive purposes, into the ocean—was better than burdening the chief of police with the knowledge of dead body.

A wolfy one.

That he might be tempted to go look for.

"I saw something—" he stopped, "that I can't explain. But I don't doubt what I saw. Maybe you can tell me what you saw."

She swallowed, heart rate ticking up.

"What did you see, Dad?" throwing it back at him.

"I saw Jacob Black turn into a giant dog."
She burst into a fit of laughter, regretting it almost immediately, hand at her ribs.

The ridiculousness of his wording kept dancing across her mind.

A dog.

Charlie's face was flushed, but still utterly serious, and it chilled her, seeing the resolution there.

Her own features melted back into a stony silence.

"And you saw it too," he went on, lifting his eyebrows, seeing her swallow nervously.

Outside, Edward's alarm only grew. Flagging a passing nurse, he told her Charlie was awake, and she dropped her chart on a gurney, rushing into the room.

"Mr. Swan, you're up," she huffed, "how're you feeling?"

"I'm fine," he blurted out, "if you could—"

"I'm just going to page the doctor," she said, "and we need to do a few tests." She pulled the curtain between the two beds, cutting off his visual access to Bella, and Edward slipped his hand into hers, eyebrows raised meaningfully.

"Thank you," she mouthed to him.

He nodded. Now that Charlie was awake, he knew he'd have a better chance of convincing Bella to go home. They could take care of her there, just as well as here. He doubted she'd want to leave her father though.

Charlie's doctor provided the saving grace.

"I'd like you and your daughter in separate rooms, Mr. Swan," he said, almost apologetically. "You need rest, and the fewer intrusions, the better. Visits are OK, but only for short periods."

"I'll come by tomorrow, Dad, OK?" Bella said.

He grimaced, but nodded, not disagreeing with the doctor's verdict. He felt like crap. But he would get his answers. Soon.

In her own room, Bella looked worriedly at Edward. "He knows, Edward. You heard him—"

Edward held a cold finger to her lips. "Yes," he said, "he saw Jacob phase. I doubt very much, that the chief of police for Forks will advertise that much."

"No," she breathed. "But he knows. And if he saw that—"

"He will not go looking for other holes in his reality. Trust me." He hadn't so much as flinched at the icy temperature of his arm. No, their secret was safe. For now.

"OK," she said, letting it go for the moment.

Edward was rummaging around on a side table, where Alice had left the food Esme had made.

Bella made a face, seeing it.

"You wouldn't dare hurt your mother-in-law's feelings, would you?" Edward teased.
"No, I wouldn't. And you wouldn't hurt her feelings by telling her."

"Please?" he tried again, holding out the bowl of soup, letting its fragrance waft in her direction.

Food had largely lost its appeal, and while she would eat when pressed, her appetite had taken a nosedive in the last few weeks.

She soldiered through half of what he'd served, shaking her head at the cookies he waved in front of her.

"I thought you liked chocolate chip," he murmured, putting them aside.

She shrugged minutely. "The pain medication isn't helping."

There was no way he was letting her forego that.

She could practically see the way his thoughts were running, saying, "I know, I need it to prevent pneumonia, yada, yada, yada."

"Yada," he said, rolling his eyes, taking her hand and kissing it.

"That I'll take more of though."

"No problem," he whispered, running the kisses further up her arm, flipping the switch off on her heart monitor alarm when he reached her elbow, and then continuing his work up towards her lips.

His touch supplanted all the other sensations competing for feeling in her body. The ache at her ribs evaporated, and the sting of flesh, trying to knit itself together, were banished, only the ripple of his cold presence wafting over her.

He was better than any balm, or drug she'd ever felt.

So when she felt him pulling away, she groaned.

He flicked the heart monitor back on as a nurse hip checked the door to her room open. Trailing after he was Bella's own doctor.

He was noting how well Bella looked, and thinking she could probably be discharged in the next day or so. When he told her as much, she frowned.

"Like it here that much, huh?" he joked, catching the look.

"No," she murmured, "it's just my Dad, he's here. And—"

"Yes," he said, "I understand. We're not kicking you out by any means, but patients tend to do better at home, all things considered. No rush on our end."

When they were alone again, Edward said, "I'd rather you were home, Bella. He's right, and you'd be much more comfortable."

"But, Charlie—"

"We can come see him whenever you want." Once a day, with Edward present. So that she wasn't bothered by questions she clearly couldn't handle.

She'd been sleeping in fits and starts during the days and nights, and this night was no exception.
Trying to get comfortable again, she held out her good hand to Edward, who came to stand by her.

"Come lay down with me?" she asked.

"No way," he said, shaking his head, smiling. He knew the look on her face. "Aside from you being barely well enough to let me kiss you, there isn't enough room."

She frowned. He was right. The bed felt narrow with the things she was attached to.

Her sigh was tiny, not because the emotions were, but because moving air hurt far too much.

"OK," she said, "let's go home then."

In the morning, Charlie was surprised to see Edward bring Bella into his room in a wheelchair.

"Where are you headed, all dressed up?" he asked, looking pale, and wan, but trying to appear otherwise for Bella.

"Heading home," she said softly. "But I'll be back to visit every day, OK? And you can call me if you need anything."

"I'll look forward to it," he said, "but you are the last person I'll be calling if I need anything."

Edward chuckled, and Charlie glanced at him.

Alice knocked at this point, slipping into the room with a rustling shopping bag.

"Hey," she said to Charlie, "Esme wanted me to drop a few things off for you."

"Oh," Charlie said, frowning a little, "that was really nice, she didn't—"

"She was happy to," Alice said, giving a small smile. "Please let us know if you need anything." She looked at Bella, whose expression mirrored her own. "Ready?" she asked.

"Sure," Bella said, waiting on Edward.

"Can I borrow your husband for a minute, Bella?" Charlie asked.

It was the first time she'd heard him use the term, and she nodded, her throat suddenly tight. "Sure, Dad. I'll come to see you tomorrow, OK?"

"Love you," he husked out.

"You too."

Alice wheeled her out of the room, leaving Charlie to fix Edward with a purposeful stare.

"Tell me again, what happened," he said.

Edward did, explaining how Bella had called them, and that Jacob hadn't been there.

"And you have no idea where Jacob might be?"

He did. Precisely. In waterlogged pieces.

"No." His features were impeccably controlled. Just like the movements he'd used to rend the creature's limbs. And other bodily pieces.
"Bullshit." Charlie grimaced, feeling pains twitch where they had no right to be. An alarm started blipping in the background, and he began to pale. "I know when I'm being lied to."

"Charlie," Edward said, worried about his health, already precarious, "what do you expect me to tell you?"

"The truth," he growled out.

Then there were more alarms, and more people in the room, and Edward watched the nurse begin murmuring to him, seeing his distress, trying to find out where and how much the pain was.

She was injecting something into his IV line, but Charlie's eyes were fixed on Edward still, letting him know this conversation was only paused, and most certainly not over.

"He needs to rest," the nurse was saying to Edward now, "come back later, after he's rested, alright?"

He nodded, watching Charlie being pulled reluctantly back under by the drugs flooding his system. When he was certain of his well being, he turned and left, going to take his wife home.

---

A/N for 2018-07-07: Thanks for all the questions / comments folks. They've been helpful in writing. A few people have expressed concern that I'm going to abruptly end this tale here - no, no such intentions. It will be nicely wrapped up, with some more smoochy bits for you to all swoon over (I hope). And yes, there will be more to come on how Jacob died.

On an unrelated topic, I'm dreaming up my next story - which I'm thinking will fall into the romance / supernatural / AH category. I would *love* to hear from you about what you consider to be the specific hallmarks of a good ExB romance.

With thanks in advance for you reading, reacting, and reviewing!

~ Erin
A/N for 2018-07-08: Thanks folks, for all the adds, and comments - really appreciated. I have now caught up with posting all my chapters so far, so it will take a few days for the next one. If you have a specific request for a particular scene or plot action between now and the end of this tale, I am most open to suggestions.

Thanks!

~ Erin

Charlie didn't press Bella for questions, too worried about straining her, and their already strained relationship. He let their visits be just that, visits, absorbing the minute news of her day, sharing the equally trivial minutiae of his own.

She was healing well, much faster than expected. He let himself grumble a little at the injustice of age, but was glad her youth served her well. Her bandages were off, and the long slices in her legs and arm visible. He didn't challenge her story again, but knew claw marks when he saw them.

He hadn't challenged Edward either, on the inadequate answers he'd given him, though not for lack of want, simply for there being no opportunity. He arrived with Bella, and left with her too, never staying to give Charlie the chance to verbally dissect the load of bullcrap he'd tried to sell him.

That was fine, Charlie thought. He could wait. He'd pull through this.

He had apologized over and over again, for what he'd done, to such an extent, that Bella had told him she'd stop coming if he kept bringing it up.

His own recovery was slower, a postoperative infection leaving him weak and wobbly.

The doctors were hopeful, but warned him he was months—not weeks—away from a return to full health.

He accepted this with as good grace as he could, focusing on the physiotherapy, and trying to be positive.

The visitor he wasn't expecting, a solid ten days in, was Billy Black.

His eyes widened, watching him be pushed into the room by Sam Uley.

Billy looked like hell.

Charlie imagined he did too.

He couldn't fathom what would make Billy come see him. Things had been left awkward and ugly the last time they'd seen each other.

"Hey," Billy ventured.

"Hey," Charlie gave him back.
"Heard you were in here."

"Yep."

If he had something to say, Charlie hoped he would just come out and say it.

He was surprised when Sam spoke up.

"What happened?" he asked, bluntly.

Charlie gave him the version of the story he'd heard from Edward, along with the lead he'd gotten from his friend. "Jacob's been mixed up with some sort of criminal activity. A pretty well organized gang. He and some thugs abducted Bella. I'd had a lead, and was checking out some of their suspected locations, and found them."

He had to pause, gathering more air before he went. It wasn't so easy to move his lungs, with the wobbling jointure of his gut still so tenuously strung together. It didn't help that he was about to tell Billy that he'd shot his son. Five times.

"When I found them, it looked like—it looked like he was hurting her." He paused again, his voice having slipped upwards, refusing the level path he'd planned for it. "I told him to get off of her. Then he turned on me."

He looked down at his midsection, and his legs, and then back at them. "I shot him, point blank, five times."

Sam's and Billy's faces were impassive. They nodded together.

Charlie went on. "So I'm told, Bella got up, took my phone, and found a cell signal, and called for help. All this with giant cuts down her arms and legs, and me bleeding out to the point where I needed an emergency transfusion. Then surgery to repair my innards." His own disbelief in this story could not be more apparent.

Billy glanced nervously at Sam.

"Bella said that her cuts were from the knives she had. That she used on Jacob. That she must have slipped with them."

Billy swallowed. Sam still looked on stony faced.

"Guess Jacob must have grabbed one and stabbed and sliced me up after I shot him five times."

Frustrated by their silence, and tested by the pain he was in, he threw out one last line. "Course, it could've been the giant dog that he turned into that did it to me, too. But hey, that would be fucking nuts, wouldn't it?"

After Sam finally turned to look at Billy, there was a pregnant moment.

"Not a dog," Sam said. "A wolf."

Charlie didn't bat an eyelash, instead asking, "what else do you know?"

"More than you need to," he said. "What happened to Jacob?"

Charlie snorted. "Bella and Edward said he disappeared. That he wasn't there. Must've run off."
Billy's face collapsed at the edges, just briefly, he smoothing it out with his hands, wiping away the moisture everyone else in the room didn't know how to acknowledge.

Sam nodded, as though he accepted this answer, but understood it to mean something entirely different.

"Wanna tell me what the hell you mean by Jacob turning into a wolf, not a dog?"

"Think you've figured out the salient part, Charlie."

Alice's small form appeared at the door, a quiet rap there.

Sam's face, so impassive before, twisted now, his nose wrinkling. Charlie watched, taking in every transformation on the visages before him. He didn't miss the matching expression on Alice's.

"Hey Alice," he said, wondering at the collision of their visits. "Sam was just telling me that Jacob turns into a wolf."

Everyone except Charlie became very, very still, and he watched carefully, absorbing every single shifting twitch of the facial muscles present.

"We'll leave you to your company," Sam said, going to grab the handles of Billy's chair.

"No!" Charlie said forcefully, immediately regretting it.

Everyone stopped, watching him pale at the exertion.

"It's OK, Charlie," Alice said softly. "We're not going anywhere." Then she looked at Sam.

"Good," Charlie breathed out. "Because I want answers."

- 0 -

"Oh no," Edward said, feeling Bella's hands slip up under his shirt. "No way. You're not well enough yet."

She huffed out a breath. "I'm fine," she said, kissing him again, feeling the pleasant sensations such activities provided ripple over her.

"You're not."

"I'm on so many pain meds, I feel amazing. I don't feel any pain."

He grinned, "yes, I know...and that's exactly why we're not doing what you're trying to get me to do."

She laid back on the bed, a frustrated sigh fluttering out of her lips.

"Carlisle said I was fine to go about my daily activities, as long as I felt fine."

"You know, technically, Carlisle isn't your doctor."

She and Charlie sounded almost exactly the same when they snorted.

She demonstrated this now.

"I feel fine."
Edward trailed his finger up the skin of her leg, just adjacent to the gash that had been stitched together. He continued his tracing, just lightly brushing her arm, where another wound ran its long way up the underside of her forearm. The soft flesh there puckered around the tentative, black threaded jointures the doctor had made.

In these small moments, he remembered, with perfect clarity, his last encounter with Jacob Black. He wished he'd been moments earlier. It would have spared her so much.

Bella was watching him, seeing the look on his face, knowing him lost to something ugly.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

He shook his head.

"Don't shut me out," she breathed. It was what he'd told her over and over again.

When he said nothing, she touched her fingertips to his face. "What is it?"

"I should have been there earlier."

Her eyebrows pulled together. "You came. I'm OK. My Dad's going to be OK."

His hand gestured to her body.

"I'm fine."

He made an uncertain sound in his throat. A wobbling "tch."

His humanity had evaporated. Disappeared with the breeze that had brought him the scent of his wife's blood. Of Jacob's scent.

He hadn't even stopped to see her. He'd snatched Jacob's form through the cabin window and thrown him to the ground. Jacob's mind had been full of his wife's body, and other thoughts he had no right too.

Edward had sunk his teeth into a foreleg first, removing it and tossing it into the water. Then he'd taken the other, the resulting snarls and howls a music that made him tremble with visceral pleasure.

Jacob's last thoughts were a deliberate taunting, and he capitulated to them, snarling and shredding until there was nothing left to rend. He threw the larger pieces into the ocean, flung far, and landing deep.

Only then, had he returned to himself, going to find Carlisle frantically trying to save Charlie, Bella oozing at the unnatural seams his fingers now brushed by.

Her hand rested more solidly on his cheek.

"Come back to me," she said. She knew this look, and the faraway stare. Knew them because she'd worn them so often herself.

"I'm here," he said, voice wooden.

"No, you're not." Both hands rested on his face. "Come back. Don't pretend you're OK. I know you're not."

He leaned down and kissed her. "I'm here."
"Don't," she said, pushing him back, struggling to sit up. "Don't you dare."

He knew he'd been caught in his disingenuousness. "I'm sorry." He frowned.

After a moment, she said, "dare I suggest you might benefit from talking to someone like John?"

His laugh was a bark. "I think that might prove...difficult. All things considered."

"Yes," she said, "it is." Then she looked at him meaningfully.

He curled his hand around hers. "I didn't mean to diminish the work you've done there."

"No, you're just trying to pretend you don't need the help."

He wasn't supposed to need help. He was immortal. Unchanging. Immutable.

Except when it came to her.

He was as vulnerable as an open wound there.

"I've failed you, Bella. Repeatedly. I'm terrified I will continue to. That you will realize, someday, the utter inequity of the bargain you've made."

"I won the lottery, Edward." She smiled. "Trust me."

He let himself have a small, small grin. "I would say the feeling is mutual, but it's weighted so much more in my favour, there's no comparison. I am the luckiest vampire ever."

"There's my vampire," she said. "Welcome back."

He took her hand and kissed it.

He wasn't home by a long stretch, but he'd take her welcome any day.

- 0 -

Charlie stared at all three of them.

He repeated the words in his mind.

Alice was saying nothing. Sitting far too still for a normal person.

"Wolves," he said again.

Sam and Charlie nodded.

"You knew?" he said to Alice.

She nodded.

"Shit."

The keener ears in the room were taking in Charlie's elevated heart rate, and the shallow breathing wasn't enough.

Then the alarm went off.
"Charlie!" Billy called, straining forward in his chair.

The nurse and doctors that rushed in shoved them aside.

Outside, Alice hissed at Sam. "What were you thinking? Haven't you all done enough?"

"Well clearly, you hadn't done a good enough job of managing him!" Sam shot back.

"We didn't cause this!" she yelled. She could hear them using chest compressions. "At least leave, so I can see what's happening!"

Billy looked distraught at this-and shot Sam a frantic look. He wouldn't, would he? Leave the man to die with one of these by his side? She might-he could barely sanction the thought.

Sam didn't say anything, but gripped the handles of the chair, pushing Billy down the hall.

Alice pulled out her phone, and called home.

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No Copyright infringement intended.
Developments

Developments

It was a long drive to the hospital in Port Angeles. Longer, when you knew your Dad was having a heart attack.

She'd sanctioned speeds that would leave her green and uncertainly stomached.

Alice stayed on the phone, giving her a running commentary as Edward drove.

He kept glancing at Bella, worried by the tight set of her jaw.

"Please, just focus on driving. Faster, if you can." She closed her eyes as they rounded a particularly vicious curve.

He really couldn't. Not during daylight hours. Not without drawing attention that would delay them.

"He's stable, Bella," Alice breathed out.

"Is he awake?"

"No, they've sedated him. Everything seems to be OK right now, from what I can see."

"What you can see, or what you can see?"

"Both," she said.

Bella was only marginally calmer by the time they arrived, moving to sit by the bed, her own worried hands over Charlie's limp one.

The doctor had met them outside the room, explaining what the implications of Charlie's heart attack were.

"He has a long recovery as it is, and I'm afraid this has added to it. I can't stress how important it is that he stays calm." He looked at Bella, and then Edward and Alice, particularly. He'd heard, from the nurses, something about a visit that had gone sideways, and probably triggered the distress.

"Of course," Bella said softly. "Understood."

It'd been late afternoon when they'd gotten there, and it was almost midnight before Charlie woke again, grey and pasty looking.

He made an indistinct sound.

"Don't move," Bella said, squeezing his fingers, pressing the call button with her other hand.


Even more like crap than when Billy and Sam had come.

The contents of that conversation came flying back to him, and the alarm on his heart monitor began to beep.
"Hey," she said, "I'm here. Just try to relax, OK?"

"Those are claw marks," he said gruffly, looking at her arm, and then her legs. He brought his eyes back up to meet his. "And Alice knew." The beeping on the monitor was getting faster. "And so did you."

"Yes," she said, glancing at Edward, hoping her acknowledgement would calm Charlie down.

It did, and when the nurse stepped in quietly, she didn't interrupt their conversation, but politely nodded, murmuring to Charlie, taking his vital readings.

When the door clicked shut again, Charlie rounded back on Bella, and then Edward. "What happened to Jacob?"

Bella's face folded around the edges, uncertainty, worry and fear for her father all melding together with concern for keeping the Cullen's secret safe.

*Her* secret safe.

If the Volturi found out he knew…

"He's dead, Charlie," Edward said softly.

"How?"

Edward stared at him, letting just enough of his human facade to slip away in the curl of his lip, as he growled out, "at my hands." Then, just as subtlety, he let his face resume its expected form.

Charlie looked at Bella, and then Edward, and swallowed. He was more white than grey now.

"There are some questions better not asked," Edward said, standing up from his leaning position, moving too gracefully towards one of the machines that was not properly calibrated. He tapped at the casing, and then, with a speed and knowledge his human, teenage self could not possibly possess, adjusted the settings.

It was Bella's turn to stare at Edward. Had he just—?

Yes, the little voice in her mind said, he had.

"Did you," Charlie started, looking at Edward, and then Bella, "did you know?" It was whispered out.

She nodded.

"What is, what are—?"

"No," Edward said. "Some questions are not safe." He locked his eyes on Charlie again. "Do you trust me, and my family, with Bella?"

There was now delay in the reply. "Yes."

"Good. Then don't ask. We'll tell you what you need to know."

Charlie sucked on his lower lip, clearly considering whether to abide by this, or push further.

"Bella?" Charlie asked. "You got a say in this?"

She blew out a shaky breath. "I love you, Dad. And I love Edward. Everyone is OK. Let's
just...keep it that way."

"And me asking questions will not make things OK?"

"Very much," Edward said.

The conversation was interrupted by a warning rap at the door. An small assortment of doctors came in, one Bella recognized as Charlie's, and several more behind him who looked young and weary.

Edward and Bella were pushed aside by this crowd of people, Charlie becoming the focus of much more unwanted attention. As he answered questions, and suffered their prodding touches, his eyes stayed on Bella, watching her reactions, gauging her facial expressions.

It was exhausting, and he was trembling by the time the doctors left again, en masse. He held on tenaciously to his wakefulness.

"Are you safe?" he asked her.

"Yes."

He nodded. His eyes were drooping. Then they were simply closed, and Bella squeezed her hand into Edward's, all the worry plain and open on her face.

"It'll be alright, Bella."

"Will it?" she asked. "He won't let go of this, Edward."

"He won't, no," Edward admitted, "but he won't ask questions, not out loud anyway."

"The Volturi—"

"Will not be a danger to him," he said, now taking both her hands. "I promise."

She leaned her head into his chest. "You can't know that."

"He doesn't know what we are, Bella. He knows what the wolves are. He only suspects we are something different."

She pulled back, looking up at him quizzically. "Could you hear?" She knew that Charlie's thoughts were largely muted to Edward.

"Enough," he said, stroking her hair back behind her ear.

She yawned, snatching a hand back to stifle it.

"You should sleep," he said, "it's late."

She shook her head, looking at Charlie.

"He's OK," Edward assured her, "and I'll wake you up if anything happens." His fingers fluttered over her ribs. "You're still recovering."

There was a chair that extended into something bedlike, and kissing her, he pulled it out, setting a pillow and blanket on it for her.

When she finally slept, Edward opened up his phone and called Alice, murmuring quietly with her.
Bella slept through the whole night, as did Charlie, and when she began to wake, he let his fingers play through her hair.

"Morning, love," he whispered. "Your Dad's still sleeping."

"Good," she yawned, stretching.

He waited to see her wince. In their rush, they'd not brought anything for an overnight stay, and she was long overdue for her pain medication. Her stretch was painless, though, and he cocked his head, listening, wondering if he'd missed something.

"You OK?" he asked, knowing where she'd slept couldn't have been all that comfortable.

"Fine, actually," she said, standing, rotating her back, hands at her hips.

He put out a hand to her shoulder. "Wait," he said, "your ribs haven't fully healed."

"They feel fine," she murmured, stopping.

He was running his fingers over them, looking for the remembered feel of the fissures there, but he couldn't find them. His frown deepened in confusion.

"Your ribs are healed," he murmured. He sounded almost disappointed to Bella.

"Seems to me that's a good thing," Bella said, raising her eyebrows at him.

"It is," Edward said, forehead squished together. "It's just—I've never seen ribs heal so quickly."

Both Bella's eyebrows went up. "It felt long enough to me."

"Sorry, I know, I'm just—"

"Worried that I feel better?" Her voice sat somewhere between incredulity, and humour. "No," he smiled, chuckling, "just surprised."

She slid her hands to his waist, whispering into his lips, "maybe your immortality is rubbing off on me."

Charlie made a sort of huffing grunt, shifting in the bed, effectively interrupting this almost kiss.

"Dad?" Bella asked softly, turning away from Edward.

"Hey," he murmured, seeing her there, then frowning at Edward.

Coming forward, Edward said to Bella, "I'm going to go get you something to eat, OK? I'll be right back."

"OK," she murmured, squeezing his hand.

She didn't see him pull out his phone as he left, calling Carlisle as he went.

It didn't escape Charlie's notice, that this was the first time Edward had left Bella alone with him.

"How are things with you two?" Charlie asked, not sitting up, but laying back against the pillow. Talking felt exhausting.
"Really good. Normal, even." She smiled. "Classes start in a few weeks. I'm kinda excited, and nervous too."

Charlie's smile was small, but genuine. The thought of her going off to college still seemed surreal.

As did the idea of her being married.

And the reason for it.

"I'm so sorry, Bella, for what I put you through."

"Oh, Dad, don't start with it again. You've already apologized, and I've already accepted it."

"I know, but...it seemed worth repeating, knowing that things are...weird."

She snorted out a laugh. "Yeah, weird. That about sums it up, hey?"

He smiled, squeezing her hand, paling more. "You OK with that level of weird?"

"I am, very."

"Then I'm OK with it too."

She could see Charlie was tiring again, and his breathing was laboured. She pressed the call button, murmuring softly to him, asking him to just rest, and not talk.

The nurse only had to take one look at him before bringing out the oxygen cannula, Edward slipping into the room as she paged Charlie's doctor.

"I think it might be best, if he could rest right now," she said to Bella.

Charlie nodded, waving Bella away with his hands. "Go home," he hushed out. "I'll be fine."

She didn't believe it for a moment, and both Charlie and Edward could see it.

"Can we see about having you moved closer to home?" Edward asked him. "Then Bella could see you more frequently, for shorter visits."

Charlie nodded, eyes closing, slipping into an unwilling, and exhausted sleep.

Outside the room, Bella paused, shaky hands on Edward's chest. "Is he well enough, to be moved?"

"By ambulance, yes," Edward said. "He will get better, Bella, but he needs to rest. That's all. Shorter, and more frequent visits will help."

"OK," she breathed out.

He made her eat before they got back into the car, worried now far more for her, than he wanted to admit, and eager to get her home to Carlisle.

A/N for 2018-07-12: Thanks you everyone for the adds, comments, and PMs. It's so lovely to hear from you, and it really does spur the writing on to hear your reactions, thoughts and questions.

~ Erin
The drive back home was as fast as the one there.

"Edward," Bella said, swallowing, feeling greener by the minute. "Please. Slow. Down."

He did, minutely.

She closed her eyes, trying to breathe through the nausea.

"I want Carlisle to look at you," he said, without preamble, as they parked in the garage.

"To make sure I'm feeling fine? Because you don't believe me?" She was frowning at him, annoyed at his rushing home, more annoyed that he was fretting needlessly.

He moved at his full speed, making her jump as he stood in front of her, cold hands pressed to her flushed cheeks. "Please," he whispered. "For me?"

As if she could say no, his breath washing over her, lips brushing up her neck.

"Do I get more of this after?" she asked, eyebrows taking a lazy ride up her forehead.

"Absolutely," he whispered, "I just want to make sure you're OK."

The last part held only tenuously to the truth, but he was desperate to have Carlisle examine her.

Back from his shift at the hospital, Carlisle had heard them come in, and Edward's request, and began pulling out the things he would need. When Edward knocked at his study door, Bella's hand locked in his, Carlisle welcomed them with a smile.

"Shall I shoo your husband away?" he asked, good naturedly, eyeing Edward, who looked on, the worry all over his face.

"It's OK," she said, "I think this is just confirming good news." Her comfort could not have contrasted more with Edward's mute distress.

"Please be thorough," Edward said.

"Alright," Carlisle nodded, and pulled out his blood pressure cuff.

He meandered through his regular checks, not having gotten to her ribs yet.

"Can you check her iron?" Edward asked, and then, knowing she very likely wouldn't understand the significance of it, "and her HCG levels too?"

To his credit, Carlisle didn't so much as blink irregularly.

"Sounds prudent," he murmured. "Perhaps everyone can step out while I do that."

The family members who were home, were only glad to. They'd been hunting regularly, but it was better to be safe than risk anything.
"I can run the blood," Edward said, holding out his hand for the vial.

"Certainly," Carlisle answered him, their gaze held a little too long.

Busied with the machines that bordered the window counter, Edward set to work running the sample, an uncertain lump sitting in his stomach.

"Those are completely healed," Carlisle said, after palpating her ribs. Wrinkling his forehead a little, he asked Bella to push up her sleeve. The cut on her forearm had become a bright red line, sutures still there, but well buried in healed flesh. When she pulled up the fabric of her jeans, the same sight greeted him there. He'd checked her just a few days ago, the wounds then only just scabbed shut.

"Well," he said, straining for a sense of calm, flicking his gaze to Edward's hunched back, "your stitches are ready to come out, if that's alright?"

"Sure," Bella shrugged. She was better. Awesome. She just wished Edward wasn't freaking out about it.

Then an unhappy thought sunk its claws into her chest.

What if—No, she tried to tell herself, but that other voice, the insidious one that wouldn't be silenced, whispered silently, he would've heard all of Jacob's thoughts. Seen them.

Perhaps her injuries had been convenient. A barrier to intimacy.

No, she told herself. He'd accepted her before. He couldn't possibly—but you didn't ask Jacob to make love to you, before, the voice hissed. And then tell your husband about it.

She swallowed, feeling inexplicably numb.

"You feeling OK, Bella?" Carlisle asked, alarmed by the sudden paling of her skin.

"Yes, just...not a fan of stitches coming or going." She smiled weakly.

"It won't hurt," he said. "I'll be as quick as I can." He patted her arm, more to reassure himself, than her.

Bella was asking herself questions. Ugly ones.

Her stomach twisted painfully, and she started as Carlisle pulled the first stitch.

"Did that hurt?"

"No," she said, tears beginning abruptly.

Carlisle stopped, a gentle hand on hers.

"Edward," she said, "could you come here?"

Edward was stock still, eyes locked over the microscope, lost to what he'd seen.

"Edward," Carlisle said, reaching out, touching his arm.

"Sorry," he murmured, coming and sitting by her, taking her hand, sliding his other around her. "What's up?"
She shook her head. "Just…” and searching for something plausible, said, "memories—stitches," she mumbled, shaking her head, flinching internally at the lie.

"Of course, I'm sorry. I didn't think," Carlisle murmured. "Are you alright to continue?"

"I am," she said, squeezing Edward's hand. He didn't return the pressure, staring blankly ahead.

The minute sounds of Carlisle's work were all that filled the space. That, and Bella's breathing, which sounded loud to her. Too fast.

Edward's hand remained in hers, cold and lifeless. When she pressed her fingers around his, he didn't reciprocate.

As Carlisle finished, setting aside his tools with a small clatter, Bella looked at Edward, too afraid to ask what was wrong.

"Did you finish?" Carlisle asked his son instead.

"Yes," he said. "Iron levels are fine."

Finding her voice, Bella asked, "and the other test? For HC—?"

"HCG," Carlisle said, "Human chorionic gonadotropin."

"What's that for?"

"It's just a hormone in the blood," Carlisle said. "Good to know its level."

"Why would you need to know it?" Her worry shifted, sensing his evasion, giving her some hope. Maybe this was what Edward was worried about?

Neither of them answered her, Carlisle looking at Edward, still statue-like beside her.

"What?" she asked, more insistently to both of them. "Why aren't you saying anything?"

Finally, Edward turned his head to show her his eyes. They were dark with the beginnings of hunger, and blacker with something else. Something she couldn't name.

"You're pregnant, Bella," he said, "the test tells us how far along."

A/N for 2018-07-14: I know. Short chapter. AND another cliff for you to dangle over. Sorry. I'm posting as soon as chapters are ready, often with my mind only in the earliest stages of labour, birthing that next chapter. Would you all prefer to have me wait until there's more to post over a few days, or have what you can when it's ready? Your thoughts in response to this, or anything else with the story, are always most welcome.

Many thanks for your adds, reading, reactions, and reviews.

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
"But," Bella blurted out, definitely breathing too fast now, "but you said the test was clear—you said —"

"It was," Carlisle said. Then he looked at Edward, and Bella, and raised his eyebrows. There were questions you just didn't ask a pregnant woman in the presence of her husband. Vampire or otherwise.

"It's not Jacob's," Edward said, his eyebrows working together, pulled by the ridged flex of his forehead.

Bella looked at Edward. "Is that—is that even possible?" She turned from Edward to Carlisle. Edward looked at his father, shaking his head at the indecent question Carlisle had been silenting mulling over.

"I need to run some more tests," Carlisle said. He'd never thought it could be. Ever.

But here they were. With her pregnant. And not by Jacob.

"I thought Vampires couldn't—"

"We all did," Carlisle murmured.

Then Edward asked Carlisle a question, with the only words recognizable to Bella, being "could it be" and "if". Carlisle responded in this vein, and the conversation continued, every glob of consonanted vowel unfamiliar. They spoke in English, but the words were issued with such rapidity, she could barely grasp at even their basic forms.

After a few minutes, she put up her hand. "Please stop."

They both turned to look at her.

"What are you talking about?"

Edward still looked like he had solidified, face taut with worry—or something else.

"How much do you know about genetics?" Carlisle asked.

"The very basics."

Nodding, Carlisle thought for a moment. "You remember why I wanted to test your blood before?"

"Yes." She felt a shiver ripple up her spine.

Edward seemed to become even more tense, turning away, moving to the window again, hands braced on the counter.

She held back the pained transformation that wanted to sprawl over her own face.
"Humans have twenty-three pairs of Chromosomes. Vampires have twenty-five."

"OK." She was trying to ascertain the significance of these numbers.

"We're not genetically compatible. Theoretically. But," here he paused, knowing what he was unleashng, "werewolves have twenty-four."

"And?"

"With any pregnancy, genetic material passes both ways through placenta."

"In the blood," she nodded, "which is why you wanted to make sure it was all gone." This made sense. Why did it matter now?

"It never leaves, Bella. It becomes part of the mother. It alters them. Permanently."

The words hit her like a punch to the gut, and she turned, aiming towards the waste-paper basket, body rejecting the remains of her last meal.

When the final spasms passed, she wiped her shaking sleeve across her mouth. "Never?"

"No," Carlisle said, moving his gaze briefly to Edward, who remained rigidly planted by the window.

The tears were moving freely now.

No wonder Edward didn't want to touch her. She barely wanted to be in her own skin.

"I think," Carlisle went on, wishing Edward would come back to his wife, "that this change made you...compatible."

She didn't even say anything, but walked, then ran. Down the stairs, out the front door. Slipping on the gravel, she recovered and made her way down to the river, breaths coming fast and angry.

At the water's edge, she found the largest stones she could handle, and began hurling them in.

The river wasn't wide, and as she chucked the stones there, some glanced off trees, making small but satisfying divets in their bark. It wasn't enough though, and the frustrated sobs made throwing them harder.

"Want a hand with that?" Emmett's voice called.

"Sure," she said, rubbing her face into her shoulder.

He picked up a turkey-sized stone, and threw it so that one of the small alders across the water exploded.

"That more what you're looking for?" he asked.

She nodded, picking up another hand-sized rock and over-arming it into the water, short of her own target.

"Want me to destroy anything else?"

She was getting tired, the anger waning, and the other, unwanted feelings slicking up over her.
Shaking her head, she sat down, and welded her hands to her face, feeling hot tears try to slide them apart.

Emmett sat down beside her, graceful for all his bulk. He tested a solid hand on her back. "I heard," he said. "Do you want me to go get Edward?"

"No." It was huffed out angrily.

Emmett frowned. "Any reason why?"

She made a derisive "tch" in her throat. "Did you hear Carlisle, Emmett?"

"Yup."

"I barely want to be around myself. I doubt he wants to be anywhere near me right now."

"What?"

She stood up, shaking out her hands. It made her arm sting. A welcome distraction from everything else. "Ugh—he's part of me, Emmett." She shuddered, and continued to shake out her hands, and as she came close to the trees, went to fling her palms into them in frustration.

Emmett saw the movement, and managed to intercept the collision, pushing her hands back before she could hurt them.

"Don't!" she yelled. More than anything, she wanted to find some expedient way to destroy some of herself, bodily eliminating every touch of Jacob's presence.

She turned, her thoughts distorted but purposeful, and made a quicker sprint than Emmett expected towards the outcropping that would give her enough leverage to jump into the river's cold depths.

He caught her, trying to gently contain her movements.

Rose was there, her hands at Bella's cheeks.

"No way," she said, "things are crappy right now, but this is not the answer. Come on," she soothed, "let's go see John, OK?"

"AND WHAT?" Bella shrieked, struggling out of their loose hands. "TELL HIM I'M PREGNANT? WITH A VAMPIRE'S BABY BECAUSE MY WEREWOLF RAPIST IS STILL INSIDE ME? FOREVER?"

"Bella," Rose said softly, "just think about the first part of that."

Bella had. Her face collapsed. "You didn't see how he looked, Rose." The tears exploded again, and she sank down, hands into the dirt.

"No," she admitted, "I didn't." She had a lot of thoughts about Edward right now, and not many of them were complimentary. Neither were her sub-audible words. Fortunately for Bella, she couldn't hear them.

But everyone else could.

They could also hear Carlisle's urgent murmurings, trying to counteract the horrified stream of self-recriminations that Edward was working through.
"She's well, Edward. You saw yourself—"

"For how long, Carlisle? With what I've done. God—he raped her. And I've planted a monster inside of her. How could I be so stupid—"

"ENOUGH!" Carlisle finally hissed. "She's distraught. Have you even heard what she's been saying?"

He hadn't.

Carlisle playing it back in his thoughts didn't help him at all.

Before he could bolt towards Bella, Carlisle grabbed his arm. "She loves you, Edward. She wants you. And right now, she needs your reassurance, not your worry or your fear."

He was vibrating with his own distress, and now the knowledge that he'd hurt Bella, nodding mindlessly, pulling his arm away.

Carlisle let go, calling out to Emmett and Rose to give them some space.

"Bella?" he called to her, closing the gap. She'd sat again, knees in her chest. "I'm so sorry—I was just...shocked. I wasn't thinking clearly."

She shook her head, saying nothing, head still down.

He slid his arm around her, sitting down beside her.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Did you know, before we got here?" she asked abruptly.

"No." It was half the truth.

"At all?"

"I wondered," he admitted. "When I felt your ribs. Pregnancy can accelerate healing. I wasn't sure if we'd missed something. I didn't want to alarm you needlessly."

"OK." She slid her hand into his. "It's ours," she said, "I've been trying to tell myself that—that it's ours, but—" she shuddered. "I just—". She was teetering between the wonder of what they'd made, and the horror of how she'd been so transformed.

It was like a teeter-totter from hell, and it made her want to vomit all over again.

"It's OK," Edward said. They were fully wrapped in each other's arms now. "I won't let it hurt you. We'll find a way to get it out."

What?

Her arms dropped. "I know it—but—you can't—"

Her words barely registered with Edward. "Carlisle can find a way. I'll make sure you're safe."

"NO!" she said. "Absolutely not!"

"Bella," he began carefully. "It's—we don't know what it is."
"Yes, we do. It's ours."

"Bella—"

"Ours."

He breathed in, and then let it out slowly.

She needed him, Carlisle had said, and he would be there for her. They could talk tomorrow. He needed to simply be there right now. It could wait.

He hoped it could wait.

"Come inside," he said, mindful she'd been ill. Had too many shocks. She didn't resist when he picked her up, resting his lips against her neck in a soft kiss.

Someone—Esme, he realized, had left a tray of drinks and snacks on the small table in their room. He called out a soft thanks.

"You should have something," he murmured, feeling the tremble in her hands.

"No," she whispered back. "Just you." Her face was turned in to his chest.

When they came to rest on the bed, she turned up to him, finding her target in his lips.

He became very still.

And so did she.

"What?" she whispered, the intonation stretching up, fragile and uncertain at the end.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head, making himself relax.

He could hardly do more harm by giving her what she wanted.

Of course, then, he considered if he could. Could he?

"Edward?" She was barely audible now, gripped by so many rich fears. After a moment, she said, "it's OK. I understand if you don't want—me. It's—I get it."

He didn't though. "What are you talking about?"

The revulsion made her stomach clench again.

"He's part of me," she said. Then she shuddered visibly.

He understood. "No," he said simply, pulling her back to him. "You're you. We're us. That is nothing—simply genetics. I'm—I'm afraid, Bella. Of what I've done."

He'd put a monster inside his wife. Lusted after something he never had a right to, and let his evil nature breed inside her. What else would come of this?

"You've helped me. Made me better."

He wouldn't speak aloud what he thought of his actions.

"I love you," she said.
"I love you too." His forehead wrinkled, and this time their lips met halfway, the need for the other ripe and palpable.

There weren't many words after that, but the snap of buttons undone, and the whisper of zippers loosened.

This time, he waited on her, hands matched to her movements, and she clung desperately to him, wanting to banish every last vestige of what Jacob had done.

But she couldn't, and neither could Edward, and when she began to cry, small sounds that bubbled into wild clutching sobs, she wouldn't let him stop, hands straining for purchase in his shoulders. "Don't," she said, "don't stop."

He did, though, pulling her to him, wrapping her in a blanket, wishing he could join her, and make his own purging tears.

---

A/N for 2018-07-16 - I struggled with this chapter. Not sure if it captured the precarious balance I was looking for. Your thoughts most welcome - and yes, critical ones especially. They help me become a better writer.

~ Erin
She slept fitfully that night, thrashing about in the bed, and finally waking, unable to sleep again in the early morning.

"Come with me," she said, when she went to shower. He followed, stomach clenched uncertainly. After their aborted love-making, he worried that she would press for something she wasn't ready for.

But no, it was simply his closeness she craved. His own horror, at what he'd done was so rampant, it wasn't hard to keep himself from being aroused.

Dressed, and about to head downstairs, she stopped, mid step, hand at her abdomen.

"What?" Edward asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," she whispered. "I just...I felt something." Her voice hovered in the air between reverence, and uncertainty.

It was too subtle for human senses to catch, so she missed the vibration in his body, starting as he yelled for Carlisle.

"I'm here," his father said calmly. Eyeing the statuesque couple.

"She felt something...move."

The repetition was unnecessary. Carlisle had already heard. But it spoke volumes to Edward's distress.

"OK," he said calmly. "It would be good, Bella, if we could run a few tests, if that's alright?" His voice was even, calm. Clinical.

"Sure."

Carlisle murmured reassuringly as he worked, saying that her blood pressure and heart rate were fine. He said less when he listened to the sounds in her abdomen.

When he asked to take another blood sample, Bella finally spoke.

"Why another one?"

Taking a careful breath in, Carlisle said, "I think it's safe to say I've never dealt with a pregnancy like this. I'd like to be...thorough." When it was drawn, he handed it to Edward, feeling that he would be better purposed, than to hover over her, the worry wafting off of him.

"You're a bit chilled," Carlisle said, hand to her forehead. "Are you feeling ill at all?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I feel fine."

Edward handed Carlisle a piece of paper, and he looked at it a long time. "You ran it twice?"

He nodded.
"What?" Bella asked, seeing them stare at it.

"HCG levels," Carlisle said, "double every few days in pregnancy. But yours….have grown much more quickly."

"How much more?"

"A lot more," Carlisle frowned, the math an easy calculation in his mind.

Bella was starting to feel a thrill of panic. "Please tell me, Carlisle."

He nodded, looking at Edward. "You look like you're three months pregnant, Bella."

She stared at him, and then Edward. "But—"

"A pregnancy unlike any I've ever seen," Carlisle repeated. "Are you otherwise feeling well?"

She could barely answer the question. "I guess?"

Edward blurted out, before this horrific charade could go on any longer. "Can you abort it?"

Carlisle didn't even look at him, rebuking Edward silently.

"Is that what you want, Bella?"

Her breathing hitched up with the lump in her throat. She shook her head. "No," she said, "excuse me." She slipped off the table, walking downstairs, knowing somewhere in her mind that she should eat something.

Rose, Esme, and Alice were in the kitchen, pretending to sit casually at the table.

They hadn't talked as a whole family yet, about what they all knew was unfolding inside her. Just as partners, in quiet conversations outside of the house. Outside of Edward's hearing.

"Can I get you something, Bella?" Esme asked tentatively.

"No thank you," she murmured, opening the fridge, pulling out the juice, pouring herself a glass.

When she sat down with them, they continued their quiet tasks, Rose and Alice reading, and Esme sketching out a plan in her book.

After a few minutes, Rose put down her magazine. "Bella," she said, "Edward's being an idiot, and —"

The glass of juice exploded in Bella's hand.

The reaction was instant: Alice, Rose and Esme flew back from the table, afraid to be so close to the coming blood.

And there was blood, a slippery collage of orange juice flecked with red, sliding over the table-top.

"Sorry," Bella said, frustrated, near tears.

"Don't be, it's OK," Esme called out, the three of them keeping their distance.

Edward and Carlisle were there, suddenly, and she started at the hand on her hers, as she moved to grab a towel.
"I'll get it," Edward said, taking it from her hand.

Carlisle held out his own hand. "may I?"

She silently put her hand in his.

He stared at it.

Then she looked. Clearly, there had been a cut, but it wasn't bleeding now. Her palm had a red line, angry and swollen where it would have been.

She'd seen this happen before.

Exactly this.

With Jacob.

She found herself sitting, not remembering how'd she come to be there.

"Slow down," someone was telling her. "Breathe with me, OK? One in, good, and another slow one out."

Her hand trembled when she looked at it now, the line minutey fainter.

"What—what is going on?" she pushed out.

"You're healing, very quickly." The voice was Carlisle's.

Like a werewolf.

She sat there, staring at her hand, sunk into a bubble of herself that occluded all the noise around her.

And there was noise. An angry fist slammed smacked into the table, and raised voices suddenly made her look up.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You shouldn't be fighting about me."

"We're not." Rose's hand was on hers. "What do you want, Bella?"

"I think I'd like to go see my Dad."

No one said anything for a bit.

"OK," Edward said, "can you eat something first?"

Her stomach burbled audibly.

"No," she said, "let's just go."

He didn't say anything, but grabbed his keys.

She was silent in the car, and subdued visiting Charlie.

He'd been moved the day before, and seemed more energetic, himself, trying to sit up as she came in.

"Wow," he said, "I want whatever they've got you on. You look amazing."
"Hey Dad," she said, sure she must look paler for his words. "Thanks. How're you doing?"

"Glad to be home, sort of," he said, gesturing to the room he was in.

"Good," she said. "Can we get you anything, make you more comfortable?"

"No, I'm fine," he said, looking at her, tilting his head. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Because you look like the people I pull over for speeding."

She laughed nervously. "Didn't drive. Can't say the same for Edward."

Charlie frowned at Edward. "Do not let me catch you speeding."

"Of course not," Edward said demurely, smiling knowingly, "wouldn't dream of it."

It was a short visit, made more awkward by the smallest small talk Bella could find to speak of.

When she began to feel the tightness in her throat, as they said goodbye, she turned hastily, letting Edward make the last farewell. He ignored Charlie's pointed look, and caught up with Bella easily, already halfway to the parking lot.

She'd moved much faster than normal.

When they reached the car, Edward took her hand over the console, commanding her attention. "I know," he began, "that this has been a shock to you—to both of us. I'm so sorry, Bella. I didn't think...I never thought—"

"I know you didn't," she said. "You don't have anything to apologize for—"

"We don't know what it is, Bella. I know you want to think this is a pregnancy, and a baby, but we don't—"

"No," she said, "we don't, which means you don't get to freak out yet."

He made half a chuckle, letting himself smile, "not yet. OK."

"No." Her expression mirrored his. Her face was transformed by its lightness.

"Well, if you can let me know when I can, I'd appreciate it."

The squeeze in their hands was mutual, but her smile faltered. "When we have some answers...would be OK."

He was serious again. "Carlisle and I were talking about that, this morning. He's getting some equipment today. He should be able to learn more then."

"OK."

After a moment, he said, "I can't have anything hurt you, Bella. I just can't watch that—and if this, if it's like me..." he couldn't finish the statement.

"Then he or she will love me."

He turned and leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together. "You're so good, Bella. So loving.
I'm—"

"The man who loves me. The man who keeps loving me, even when I'm apparently part wolf."

He tightened the embrace of his hand, shaking his head against hers. "No, you're not, and you need to stop thinking that. It happens with any pregnancy, Bella, and it means nothing—nothing to me, or anyone else. Please don't let it mean anything to you. It only gives him something he never deserved: your attention, your time, some piece of your life."

"You knew?"

"It's common medical knowledge, Bella. It wasn't a secret I meant to keep."

"You don't care?"

He closed his eyes. "You're you, and I love you."

Her cheeks were wet with tears, his hands cool there against their heat.

"I love you too."

"Good," he said, kissing her, "because I have something to ask of you."

"What?"

He took a deep breath in, steeling himself to say it. "That we face whatever this is, together." One hand slipped to her abdomen.

She choked out a sob, and nodded, taking her own kiss from him.

A/N for 2018-07-17 - I know several readers had "ack! more angst?!?" responses to the last chapter. Hopefully, this doesn't give you one of those. This story will be veeery different from BD.

As always, thanks for reading, reacting, and reviewing.

~ Erin
Carlisle's study seemed much more crowded to Bella, when she and Edward walked to it, hand in hand.

"What is that?" Bella asked, looking at the small box in his hand.

"A doppler," he said softly, "lets us listen." He didn't say to what. "Ready?"

"Sure." She squeezed Edward's hand, and he squeezed back.

Her grip tightened, hearing a fuzzy, but regular thump.

"That's you," Carlisle said, smiling gently. "But it should be clearer." He pulled the probe away, checking the wired connection. "Must be something loose inside," he finally concluded.

Then, as he moved the slippery probe to the side, a new sound fluttered, high, rapid and regular.

No one said anything for a moment. Carlisle's voice sounded almost strangled. "That's the fetal...heartbeat."

Bella listened to it, lost in marvel, but Edward was still stunned to silence. Finally, he pushed out a, "how?"

Carlisle just shook his head, eyebrows hidden in his hair. "Bella, can we try the ultrasound?"

She nodded.

He didn't bother moving at a human speed, arranging everything, forgetting to warm the gel.

The coldness of it didn't bother Bella, and she stared intently at the screen, squinting at the grainy image. "Is it normally like that?"

Edward and Carlisle's "no's" were synchronized.

"Is it malfunctioning?" Edward murmured, checking the connections, adjusting the settings.

"No," Carlisle said. "It's fine." Pointing at the screen, he outlined the shape he could see for Bella. "It's almost like the waves are being partially blocked." He pulled away the probe. "May I?" he asked, gesturing to her heart.

"Sure," she said, unbuttoning her shirt.

The graininess of the image persisted.

"There must be something wrong with it," Edward said.

But Carlisle was shaking his head. "I need something to test. Emmett?" he called. "Something small, please."

He was there a moment later, a small, trembling rabbit in hand. "This do?"
"Thank you," Carlisle said, and then, with a speed and finesse Bella could barely see to appreciate, shaved a patch of its fur, splattering gel onto the freshly bald space. The rabbit twitched, but was otherwise held firm by Carlisle's fingers.

The image on the screen was clear. Far clearer than it had been with Bella.

No one said anything as he handed the rabbit back to Emmett, who disappeared with it.

"Is there something wrong with me?" Bella said. "I mean, you can't hear my thoughts, right?" She looked at Edward.

"No," Edward said immediately. "Nothing's wrong with you. The machine just...can't see well, through you."

Turning off the ultrasound, Carlisle sat for a moment. "Well. Congratulations." His eyebrows were halfway to his hair. "The fetus seems to be developing normally, and you appear to be in...exceptional health. I think we should keep monitoring, daily, but I'm cautiously optimistic."

After a moment, Bella breathed out, "we have a baby."

Edward, not quite so ready to accept what his eyes had presented him with, nodded with a small, and uncertain smile, squeezing her hand.

Collecting himself, Carlisle began talking again, this time about basic prenatal care.

- 0 -

The other Cullen's reaction to this startling news was joyful, and exuberant. Edward put on a brave face, forcing down his vibrant fears, telling himself over and over again that she was well.

And she was.

A week after the ultrasound, the needle Carlisle pressed to her arm snapped.

She registered the feeling, but there was no pain.

It had been tough to take the sample the day before, but when he tried again, the second needle broke too.

No one doubted his technique.

Carlisle drummed his fingers on the table. "Can we try an x-ray?"

"Isn't that bad for the baby?" The word still felt unreal on her tongue. It was whispered out.

"It shouldn't be, you're in your second trimester."

"Do we need to?"

"No, but it would be...helpful, to know as much as we can."

"Sure," Bella said, catching Edward's look. She could see the strain, despite his efforts to appear relaxed.

The x-ray was as useless as the ultrasound, only the largest, and most vague shapes of Bella's bones ghosting over the screen.
Her swelling shape left no doubt as to the accelerating rate of growth.

She'd managed to disguise it from Charlie with loose sweatshirts, but there would be no hiding it soon.

"Perhaps a case of the flu? Something we don't want him to catch?" Edward suggested, one afternoon. He looked at her shape, so distinct, there was no way she could mask it as anything else. Certainly not with Charlie, or with the keen eyes of hospital staff. "You can still call him," he said gently. "And Alice can go visit. Give her a break."

Bella nodded in reluctant agreement, but frowned too. Alice, whose visions of Bella had only come back in whispered snatches since the last pregnancy, were gone now. She could see nothing of Bella's, or the baby's futures.

At her ponderous silence, Edward tried, again, to offer her something to eat.

"No," she said, shaking her head at the plate he held in front of her. "Sorry. It's just, ugh—" She put an explanatory hand to her stomach.

"Yeah man, can you blame her?" Emmett said, feet up on the coffee table. "Ugh is right."

"Volunteering to catch me something?" Bella joked, chuckling at the notion.

Then she found herself unexpectedly salivating.

Edward lifted an inquisitive eyebrow, hearing it.

"Actually, do we have any steak?" Bella asked.

Esme nodded, going to the fridge, pulling it out. "How do you want it cooked?"

"Rare. Really, really rare." She said it almost shyly.

Presented, a few minutes later, with a plate, she looked up to see almost every single Cullen staring at her.

"Um."

They all found something else to do, except for Edward, who fiddled with a candle on the table, pretending not to watch her eat.

"Oh my God," she murmured.

"What?" Edward asked, imagining some new, disturbing, pregnancy-related discovery.

"This is amazing."

His relief washed out in the minute slack in his shoulders.

She was too absorbed in—finally—eating, to notice it.

Trying to maintain this small piece of normality, he said, "seeing as you're officially too ill to leave the house, what do you want to do today?" He played with her now free hands, swinging them back and forth.

"Go lay in the sun," she said, "with you. Read a book. If I can see, for all the sparkling." She
grinned. She loved seeing him in the sun.

"Sure," he said, leaning down and kissing her, their closeness slightly impeded by the protuberance of her abdomen. "I'll go get a blanket."

Outside, the clouds persisted, despite the weather report, and Bella's hopes for sun were growing dimmer, when a small breeze threw back the scrum of whiteness, and left them in a startling patch of warm light.

She smiled at Edward, watching the refracted rays pick at her skin, offering the illusion of its own shimmer.

When she first glanced at him watching her, it didn't strike her as strange. He often did.

But today, it was with eyes widened with pure shock.

"Bella," he said, "look." He held up her hand, and then moved his away.

The radiance in her fingers was all their own.

"Is that—?"

"I don't know," he whispered. He was too afraid to say the words, too uncertain of what all of it meant. What all the signs seemed to impossibly point to.

She was sitting, staring at her skin, watching the sun dance over it in that subtle glimmer. Picking up a small, sharp rock, she squeezed it hard enough, that she knew it should draw blood. Or abrade her skin.

Nothing.

"That should have cut my hand," she murmured, and looking at him, said, "am I—?"

"Changing?"

She nodded.

"I don't know."

Their conversation had floated back to the house, and from it, Edward could hear the unprecedented thoughts of his family, wondering at the same, fragile conclusion they turned over in their minds: that she was turning, by the tiniest and most painless degrees, into a vampire.

A/N for 2018-07-18: A guest comment said something to the effect of "this just isn't plausible." I agree. Vampires aren't real! (winks) In all seriousness, comment referred to my utterly ignorant and yes-I-googled-it explanation of fictional vampire-werewolf genetics. I accept that my storyline offers the thinnest plausible suspension of belief on this front, and to this I say: \_(_/)_/ It works for my plot purposes.

BTW, I owe credit for the idea of Bella's transformation to a lovely reader here on A03, whose original comment, and name, I cannot find - many thanks, and apologies for not giving credit to your name.

In the meantime, thank you all, for reading, reacting, and reviewing.
Cheers,
~ Erin
He'd gone to hunt, only leaving because of press of necessity, worn in his black eyes. They were several reassuring shades lighter when he returned after a few hours. Bella didn't question the shortness of his time away, having watched his worry blossom with the many uncertainties her condition—or transformation, or whatever it was, presented.

She had far more confidence than Edward did, that all would be well. His life, so many times that of her short one, had taught him that the balance of probabilities was even, for good, or bad. Fate had favoured few. Whatever was happening to Bella was a pernicious mystery, and one he wanted solved for the better.

"You barely hunted," Bella said, seeing him.

"More than enough," he assured her, leaning down and kissing her chastely.

The small crinkle by his eyes told her all she needed to know about why he'd come back early.

"I'm fine. As promised."

His "Mmm," was thoroughly uncommitted to this notion.

"Want me to try some cartwheels to prove it?" She winked at him.

The words made his tilted smile appear. "I have my doubts about such activities aiding the cause of your well being."

"Shocking notion."

Another kiss grew out of their mutual chuckle.

Then she put her hand to her side, a silent 'O' on her lips, the air shoved away.

When worried for her, Edward's face became a set of sharp corners, furrowed inwards as he watched her breathe through the discomfort.

"How can I help?" he whispered.

She said nothing.

"Bella, how?"

She shook her head, still not able to talk, one hand on her stomach, the other leaning on him.

"What?" he asked, "I didn't hear you."

She finally let her breath out. "Didn't say anything," she managed on a whisper of air, pulling more in.

All the corners in his face were flexing, moving in confusion. "Say something else," he murmured.
"What?" she asked, her turn to be confused.

Then he laughed, his features suddenly soft. Open. He gasped. "Say something else."

"Something." She looked at him, now worried herself.

He picked her up, carrying her back to the couch where she'd been sitting, setting both his hands on either side of her abdomen. "I can hear...them." He laughed again, in delight, this faltering as Bella winced. "No, no," he said quickly, gently. "You're hurting her."

The movement stilled.

"You can hear...our baby?" Her voice was low with awe.

He nodded, watching her carefully. "And...they—he, she, can hear me. Understand me."

Bella's intake of breath was almost silent.

The others around the house had paused in their activities, minds wavering with wonder.

"They're..." the smile widened. "They're like you, Bella. His face widened with joy. Just...beautiful."

Bella's own face was transformed. She wanted to cry with relief, but she held it back, just, knowing how beautifully fragile this moment was.

She squeezed Edward's hand instead, their fingers jointly touching the swelling of her body.

Then he leaned forward, and kissed her in a way that left no question as to what he felt for her.

It made all her other desires, forced into dormancy by his worry, wake up. And demand attention.

He could smell it on her.

"I'm sorry," he said again, "I've left you alone in this."

"Don't," she whispered into his kiss. He was picking her up, carrying her to their bedroom. "I love you. You're here now."

Inside, she didn't wait for him to set her down again, before sliding off her shirt, and then begin working on his.

He had no such patience, and there was a soft shredding, as the fabric slipped from their bodies.

She couldn't lie on her back anymore. It left her feeling nauseated and breathless, so they configured themselves as the split ends of scissor blades, joint in purpose at the hinge, moving together in a motion as old as time.

Her body, in all its changes, was a constantly new set of discoveries, and this experience was no less for her, or for him.

He could feel the new strength in her skin, its temperature closer to his now.

She knew the sweetness of their bodies joined in an approaching equality of strength, her hands able to depress his flesh in her grip.
When he had ensured her pleasure, he felt the ripple of his own, and she groaned into his not so careful grip, luxuriating in its intensity.

So accustomed to worry, he couldn't help himself. "Are you OK?"

She answered with a snorted laugh. "Amazing," she said, kissing him, and bringing herself up to straddle his midsection.

"Oh no," he said, seeing what she was trying to do. "You've—"

"Been missing my husband," she breathed into his ear, gripping him intimately.

He sat part-way up, arms holding her back. "Then let me fix that."

And he did.

Later, when his natural worry had slithered its way back into his mind, he caught Carlisle looking at him, a tiny smirk fluttering on and then off his face, along with a coy thought: the best way to spur babies out, is the way you put them in.

Edward grinned in reply, returning his attention to Bella, who was tackling dinner.

Tackling was the right word.

Emmett joked that the cow was still kicking on her plate, most nights. Esme was her preferred cook, and by cook, Bella meant that the steak be gently tickled by a flame before being served.

While Carlisle's machines had become useless, the tests of his eyes and hands remained certain. Her humanity remained, enough, that he was sure the birth would be human, natural, and soon.

What would happen after, they didn't know.

What the baby would be, was equally large a question.

"Do you think, that I'll keep changing—after?" She'd asked Carlisle.

He'd sighed. "We don't know, but I suspect—and this really is just speculation, that the only reason the change is slow, is because it needs to be, for the baby. A natural protective measure. To keep you and it safe, and to still allow for birth."

But after? That made them all squirm in uncertainty.

Bella was curious, but refused to worry about it.

"Had enough of that," she said, "I just want our baby safe, and us. We'll figure out anything else. Together."

For now, they sat thus, waiting, and watching in wonder at the little life squirming inside, its wordless thoughts joyful, for what tomorrow would bring.

---

A/N for 2018-07-22: Thanks, everyone, for all the adds, and comments - really appreciate it.

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 (70+ 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 far, the group has raised over $1,400.

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
A/N for 2018-07-26: Thanks all, for your comments. Heads up: real life will be busy these next few weeks. I'll write and post as I'm able.

~ Erin

"I'm fine Dad, please don't worry," Bella tried to assure him.

"You sound funny," he said, "you sure you're getting over that flu?"

"Yeah, just taking me a while. That's all. And I really don't want to get you sick."

"Can't say I want to either, but miss you, that's all."

She redirected the questions, asking about his therapy.

"Hurts like hell, so it must be working," Charlie muttered. He was starting to get up and take a few steps with support, still a long ways away from being able to go home.

Satisfied that he was well, and that her absence was beyond suspicion, she wrapped up their phone call, trying to get comfortable in the chair.

She felt like she couldn't get any bigger, her skin taut across her belly.

In the last days, everything about her had become more vibrant. Her cheeks flamed brighter than before, and Emmett joked he could see the blush coming before she was even thinking about it.

She ate, but with increasing distaste for most food, the flavours muted. The juices of the raw steaks appealed more than the flesh itself, but she ate them, knowing, somehow, she still needed them.

"Sore back?" Edward asked, watching her stand and stretch.

"Yeah," she said, wincing, leaning forward on her hands, pushing down onto the chair as she worked her legs.

She made a low, guttural moan, as he dug his fingers into her flesh.

It was a sound Carlisle knew well, and hearing it, slipped into his study, gathering things.

Hearing the scurry of his thoughts, Edward's hands paused momentarily.

"Gngg," Bella pushed out, "don't stop!"

He began moving them again, only to be met with a sound he could only describe as a growl, boiling out of her throat.

"Bella?"

"What?" she asked, stopping the sound abruptly.
"You're...growling," he said, smiling.

"No I'm not." She stood up, as if to prove it.

He chuckled. "You were. Don't stop on my account." Then he pulled her close to him, sideways, avoiding the distance imposed by the pregnancy, and kissed her cheek.

The happy curve of her lips was abruptly interrupted by a sudden and painful ripple around her midsection.

"Oh!" she pushed out. Her startled glance told him she'd reached the same conclusion he had.

"It's OK," he said, "just breathe through it, OK?"

That had all seemed fine, theoretically, when they'd talked about it in the days beforehand, but now there was a fire sliding through her back.

Carlisle was listening, knowing he wasn't needed yet, thinking purposefully at Edward.

Squeezing his fists into her hips, she gasped in relief. When he went to stop, she snapped, "keep going!" and made a long guttural buzz in her throat.

Like the pregnancy, the labour was clearly moving quickly, and he called audibly for Carlisle.

"You're doing fine, Bella," Carlisle said, coming to the door, counting the small spaces between contractions. He pulled towels from the bathroom, setting them on the bed, handing Bella one when he heard the tell-tale pop, and gush.

The liquid that seeped through her jeans had a silvery sheen to it, and she barely had time to notice before another contraction made her curl over onto Edward's chest.

When it ended, her eyes were watering. "I thought this was supposed to start slowly. Easily."

"I'm sorry," Edward murmured. "I know this is hard."

"It's different for everyone, Bella," Carlisle said softly, watching her movements. Watching the squirm inside of her. Both heartbeats remained steady.

Rose and Esme knocked quietly. They'd asked, a few days prior, if they could be present at the birth. Edward had been opening his mouth to say no, but Bella had beat him to it with a happy "of course!" Alice hadn't wanted to crowd the room, and had elected to wait with Jasper, and Emmett.

"Can we help you change?" Esme asked. A soft gown was folded over her arm. Rose's arms were full of bedding, towels and baby items.

Edward looked worriedly at Bella.

"Just for a minute," she breathed, hand on his chest.

He and Carlisle made a silent exit, Esme and Rose helped Bella pull off the soiled clothing. The short, and loose dress hung comfortably.

She's doing fine, Carlisle thought to Edward, who waited with him, anxiously. This is the only birth they'll ever attend for our family. Let them have a few minutes.

He wanted to say that it was the only one he'd ever attend either, and he still had no idea how his
wife would fare through it. He was not inclined to be generous with her time.

When her next contraction started, she rested on Esme's shoulders, and it was Rose's turn to dig her fists into Bella's hips.

It helped that Esme had experience to speak from. "Breathe out," she said gently as the spasm lessened. "Good. You're doing fine."

"This does not feel fine," Bella huffed out, shuffling to the bed. "Edward?"

He was there instantly.

"Help me walk?"

He slipped his arm around her, and they circled the space of the room, pausing at the window when the next tightening began.

This one squeezed all the meaningful words from her.

Yes, Carlisle thought, seeing Edward's face pinch in concern. *She's close.*

The next urge sent Bella scrambling for the waste basket.

"It's OK," Esme murmured, "totally normal." It was her turn to look at Carlisle.

Yes, they all knew it was getting close to time.

Carlisle said nothing, watching. He'd attended enough births to know to wait. Women knew what they were doing.

When she fluttered her fingers at Edward, shoving his hands away, Carlisle flicked his gaze down to the tray of instruments he'd brought, and then back at Bella.

"Bella," he said in a low voice, watching her recover from the last contraction, "can I check?"

She'd consented to an exam in the last week, and he'd been reassured to see that everything looked as normal as any other human pregnancy, but he didn't want her trying to push in vain, if other interventions were required.

Edward grimaced, hearing the bent of this thoughts.

They'd discussed what those other interventions might be. And they were ugly possibilities they all hoped wouldn't be needed.

"OK," she said, and then looked nervously around the room.

Esme and Rose took their cue to leave, and Edward helped her onto the bed, sliding in behind her, letting her rest against him.

She'd tolerated the last time, but it'd recalled so much of the early days after the trauma, it'd been all she could do to endure it, retreating wordlessly to bed, and Edward's safe embrace afterwards.

Her breathing fluttered, feeling Carlisle's very careful touch, and she tensed her hands on Edward's. Carlisle was efficient, and he finished quickly, happy with what he'd found.
"I think," he smiled, "you're going to meet your baby soon."

Bella's relieved smile flickered as Edward helped her sit all the way up, his own face marked with worry. There were so many complications still, that could come.

Another contraction pushed a startled 'O' out of her, crouching forward on the bed, and then a low growl.

"Do you want to be on the bed?" Carlisle asked.

She nodded, not able to talk, and then squished her eyes shut, kneeling and bearing down.

There were multiple sets of hands rubbing her back, soft voices murmuring encouragements.

And it was driving her nuts.

"OFF!" she barked.

The hands disappeared.

She was disappearing herself, inside, becoming muscle and ligament, flexed tendon and shifting bone, all these things conspiring together to extrude the life formed inside her.

The voices were softer now. Whispers of awe.

Edward knelt in front of her, their foreheads together, she using his hands to leverage herself through the next push.

The sensations had been painful, but manageable. Now they were just inexcusable. Her voice was a hoarse growl.

"There's the head," Carlisle said, coming closer.

Cradling her hand in his, Edward put her hand on the emerging crown.

Her own face broke open in emotion, feeling it, and she gasped, a stuttered and airy exclamation on her lips.

"One more push," Carlisle encouraged her.

Bella closed her eyes for the last growling shove, and felt her baby slip into the world.

It's solid cry left no question as to health.

"It's a girl!" Bella exclaimed, receiving her from Carlisle's hands. "Hi Claire!" she whispered.

There was a whisper in the room, as the name registered. Edward and Bella had refused to discuss the possibilities they'd considered in anyone's hearing, and if Alice had seen anything, she'd kept it to herself.

Claire was pale, wet and slippery, eyes wide open, taking in the world before her. Dark hair, almost auburn, curled around her face. Edward could hear everyone doing the same check he was. Ten fingers. Ten toes. No extra limbs. Her mouth featured what seemed to be a complete set of perfect, tiny, pearly teeth.

Edward's smile was so wide, he could barely loosen his lips to speak, but he pulled Bella back,
settling her into the pillows, covering the baby in a blanket.

Carlisle was working, fingers pressing into Bella's abdomen, trying to see if the placenta had detached. He could only guess at its presence, but the umbilical cord was a good clue.

There'd been blood, but little of it, and even less now.

"Oh my God, she's perfect!" Bella choked out.

While Carlisle tended to Bella, Edward had finally begun his own part, running a careful finger over his...daughter. She was, as far as he could tell, perfect in shape, little heart fluttering with a healthy regularity. Her lips were working, head moving back and forth, searching.

"What's she doing?" Bella asked, looking at Edward.

"Babies look to nurse instinctively," he said, shrugging uncertainly.

Seeing her shift Claire purposefully in her arms, Carlisle put a warning hand on her shoulder. "I'd normally say it wouldn't hurt to try, but I'd rather be safe than sorry." His finger drifted over the tiny foot. "May I?" he asked, holding out his hands.

"Not yet," Edward said, smiling, and taking her first. The cord was still attached, so he and Bella shared her in their arms. Her little hand fluttered up to his cheek, and his sharp intake of breath made everyone in the room stop.

"What?" Bella asked, suddenly worried.

Edward just shook his head, staring at their daughter, not able to put words to it yet. After a moment, the little hand drifted back down to her body.

"She showed me something."

"Showed you—what—how—?"

He shook his head again. "Here," he said, and shifted aside to let Carlisle take her.

Leaning over Bella, Carlisle slipped his hand under Claire's back, working silently, carefully checking over her small body, smiling at the little eyes that seemed so clearly focused. Then her hand fluttered up again, and it was Carlisle's turn to blink.

"She—" he started.

"What?!" Bella asked, more insistently. Angrily.

"I saw things, when she touched me." Then he looked at Bella. "You, and Edward."

The room was abuzz with speculative thoughts, and Edward shook his head, trying to shut it out.

Then Claire gave a small, mewling cry, and arched her back, and Bella gasped.

Bella's gasp became a series of them, and then a desperate push, the placenta finally making its appearance. Her breathing didn't settle again, though, increasing into startled choking, breaths.

Seeing the change, Carlisle put Claire into Esme's arms, handing Edward the scissors and a clamp, palpating Bella's abdomen, checking for bleeding.
There was none.

Finishing with Claire, Edward handed her to the first set of arms that reached for her.

"Bella?" he called, "What's happening?"

"It hurts!"

"What hurts?" Carlisle asked, voice even. His thoughts were tinged with fear. This was all so unknown.

"Inside!" she shrieked. "It's burning!"

All of them collectively shuddered, knowing exactly what it was she was describing.

She was changing, and this time, it was not so gently as before.

Her next sound was a shriek that clawed at release, and found none, and began the scrabbling ascent for escape that only time would give.

- 0 -

"Anything else I can do for you Charlie?" Mike asked. He'd been by to check on the house. It was in excellent shape. Bella had called in a service to make sure everything was taken care of, and if anything, the lawn was better kept, and the fridge cleaner than Mike had ever seen it.

"I think Bella's got it in hand."

Charlie doubted very much Bella had had anything to do with it, but was grateful that one of the Cullen's had. He felt a guilty squirm for Bella's, and their kindness, after what he'd done, but then blew out a breath, remembering his promise to try to move past it.

Charlie also worried for her. She hadn't called in two days, and when he tried phoning, Esme or Alice answered, somehow massaging his worries away while they chatted, leaving him answerless and anxious once they hung up.

"Would you mind driving out to see Bella?" he asked Mike. "Take her some flowers for me? She's been down with something nasty. Can't see me until she's better."

"Sure," Mike said, pulling out his notebook to take down the address.

He was prompt in filling the request, and late that afternoon, found himself winding down the long gravel drive.

He had to wait a while after ringing the doorbell. Looking around, he took in the scene, as his training taught him to. A neat stack of recycling sat by the garage, several large boxes folded into the recycling bag. The image on one of them made him look twice. A diaper box. And one for a carseat. He looked closer. Newborn size. He frowned. He hadn't heard anything about that, and he couldn't help but think he would have. Surely Carlisle would have mentioned something about a baby arriving. Maybe another foster child? None of the women of the household had been obviously pregnant the last time they'd been in town.

Finally, he could see a shape approaching the door. One of the kids.

"Hi there," Jasper said, smiling at the deputy. "Can I help you, officer?"
"Oh, yeah, Charlie wanted me to drop these off for Bella. Asked if I could give them to her in person."

Then there was a roaring scream from upstairs.

A woman.

Suddenly, Mike felt very confused.

"You alright?" Jasper asked, most solicitously.

"Yeah, fine. Um, can you give these to…" He felt completely disoriented.

"Bella?" Jasper supplied.

"That'd be great." He handed over the flowers, and turned to leave, now feeling very uncertain suddenly. Anxious. He got back into his car as fast as he could. By the time he hit the end of the driveway, he was trying to figure out why he hadn't stayed to see Bella, but thought it would be sufficiently strange to go back. And those boxes. Odd.

He puzzled over this on the way home, stopping at the store on the rez to pick up some things for dinner.

At the cashier, he was still frowning over what had happened at the Cullen's house, and barely answered the cashier's questions.

"Uh, Mr. Littlefoot?" the young man asked again.

"Sorry," he said, struggling for the cashier's name. They talked a fair bit when he came in.

"It's Seth," he said, setting the milk into a bag.

"Sorry Seth, I'm just...I had the weirdest thing happen. You know how some people just discombobulate you?"

"I do, actually," he said, punching in the amount for the ground chuck.

"Yeah, took Charlie's daughter some flowers. He asked me to go see her. Said she hadn't been feeling well."

"Uh-huh," Seth said, face sliding into a focused concentration.

"Anyway, I must be tired or something, didn't even remember to ask to go see her. Just handed over the flowers. Guess I'll go check on her another time."

"Mm," Seth said, eyebrows pushed together. "I'll ask my sister, see if she wants to visit Bella. Save you the trip."

"I'd appreciate it, Seth, thanks. Things have been busy at home, hey, with the little one?"

"Bet they are," Seth smiled.

Wrapping up their exchange of groceries for cash, Mike left, relieved to be spared the embarrassment of a second visit. How could he be so air-headed?

Behind him, Seth let wild, and then alarmed ruminations speculate as to the origin of an illness that
would keep Bella from her very, very ill father.
Leah had snorted out a derisive sound that was best described as a “tcha,” when Seth suggested she call, or go by and see Bella.

“What, love me that much little brother? Send me off to the nest of vampires.”

“They’re not that bad, c’mon.” Seth genuinely liked Edward. Struggled with Sam’s ingrained animosity towards the Cullens.

Heck, pretty much all the other wolves’ animosity towards them.

“Fine,” he said, “I’ll go.” Then, because he was young, and his sister still knew how to get his goat, muttered out a “tell mom I loved her if I don’t come back.”

Leah just rolled her eyes, and said, “don’t do anything stupid.”

Because he was young enough to not be able to drive, he had few options but to hitchhike, catching a ride with some older kids heading to Forks. They dropped him at the edge of the drive, and he began a long, slow, human walk towards the house.

- 0 -

The fire that had started with labour, and rested briefly with the birth, became a raging inferno that blistered from inside.

It consumed her, physically, and mentally, flying out to the ends of her nerves in her fingers, her toes, and in the very strands of her hair.

Carlisle, and then Edward, tried talking to, explaining what was happening, but screaming was her only release, and even this faded as its effectiveness waned with wear.

The blessing was that her change, already progressing by degrees, was almost complete, and it was a matter of hours—not days—before the fire began to recede.

Edward refused to leave, giving Claire to Esme, trusting her instincts.

Bella’s thoughts remained mute to him, in all forms. She’d withdrawn, not seeming to hear, or see anything.

It terrified him.

None of the other changes he’d witnessed had been like this.

He feared she wouldn’t emerge, that her mind, already silent, would become more silent still.

Or absent.

Alice showed him that she would rise safely from the blackness her transformation, but she couldn’t pinpoint when.
Even so assured, he waited anxiously.

So when Bella opened her violently red eyes, and whispered his name, he gasped her name in relief. “Bella.” He wanted to lean into her. Press his face to hers, and hold her in gratitude.

She reached up and grabbed him, nearly crushing him instead.

“Bella,” he said again, this time with the whisper of compressed air and lungs.

“Oh, sorry!” she said, letting go immediately.

Jasper was suddenly there, as was Emmett, and behind them, Carlisle.

“Claire?” she asked anxiously.

“She’s fine,” Edward said, “just fine.”

“How’ve you been feeding her?” she went on, standing, seemingly shocked to find herself so. She’d moved so quickly.

“Formula,” Carlisle said, his voice even and low, as if trying to provide as little stimulation as possible, “she’s only eaten a few times.”

“A few times? But Babies need to eat—”

“It hasn’t even been a day since she was born, Bella. She’s doing very well, I promise you,” Edward murmured.

“But—I thought, I thought it was—”

“You’ve been changing for weeks already, Bella,” Carlisle said, still behind Emmett and Jasper.

Then Edward saw Bella’s eyes register her brother-in-law.

“Jasper!” She looked horrified. Then abruptly, and extraordinarily calm.

“Scars,” he said. “More noticeable now, hmm?”

Bella nodded, processing this, and then set her jaw in a firm line. “I want to see Claire.”

Edward tentatively put his hand on hers. “Let’s hunt first.”

Suddenly, Bella’s own hand was at her throat. “OK.”

Jasper murmured to Edward, “how’s she doing this? Can you hear—?”

“No, I can’t hear,” he said, “and I have no idea.”

“What?” Bella asked, suspicion colouring her voice.

“Be so in control,” Edward explained. “Most newborns are...not so calm.”

“I’m...OK,” she said. “Everything is just...”

“A lot?” Jasper suggested.

“Yes,” Bella said, smiling a little. “But I want to see Claire, so—”
“Let’s go, yes,” Edward finished for her. Then he stopped, mid-step towards leading her to the window.

“What?” Bella asked, seeing Jasper straighten.

“We have a visitor,” he murmured, wishing he could keep this from Bella. “Seth Clearwater.”

“What?” Emmett asked. It was more of a growl than a word.

Everyone else’s thoughts echoed this question.

“Oh God,” Edward said, “The deputy. He mentioned his visit here to Seth. He’s come to make sure Bella’s OK.”

“I am,” Bella said. “And we have their agreement, right? It was what Sam agreed...after.”

Everyone else in the room seemed less certain of this sentiment.

“Yes, but I’m concerned for his safety,” Edward said, his attempt at a reassuring smile flickering and then falling completely off of his face.

“Won’t he be?” Bella said. “I mean, you’ve always told me that they repulse you, so..?” She shrugged.

“It wouldn’t be wise to risk it,” Carlisle said, shaking his head. “Go. Hunt. I’ll explain...something.”

Then Claire let out a loud, and protesting wail.

Edward swore.

“What?” Bella asked, alarmed, feeling the full range of her new, and powerful emotions. Edward never swore.

“Seth heard Claire.”

Bella repeated the profanity that had freshly fallen from her husband’s lips.

- 0 -

The wail had reached Seth’s ears. Lifting his nose, and cocking his head, he knew there was no question as to what direction it came from. And that it wasn’t a vampire. How could it be? It was a baby, after all.

If he’d heard it earlier, he might have turned around. Gone home. Got Sam.

But the Cullens must know he was coming. Have smelled or heard him.

No, he decided, he’d press on. Maybe a friend was visiting with a baby.

By the time he got to the door, though, his nose had told him there was no human present...but there was something there he didn’t recognize. He knocked softly, knowing it would be heard.

His eyes, too, took in the recycling still neatly set by the garage. Edward had been too distracted with Bella’s transformation to make a full inventory of Deputy Mike Littlefoot’s thoughts, to safely catalog the human questions needing tending to.
So Seth wondered why the Cullens would need a carseat. Or diapers. Or...yep, he recognized the brand stamp from stocking it at the store: formula.

“Hi Seth,” Carlisle said politely. “This is a surprise. Sam didn’t tell us you were coming.”

“Oh, no,” Seth said, “Just um, Charlie’s work buddy mentioned he’d come by. Said he’d come to see Bella. Then left confused.”

He raised a set of very young, but clearly challenging eyebrows at Carlisle.

A brave boy, Carlisle thought. With a big heart. He wasn’t so certain of the wisdom of this trip.

“Bella’s not been well, Seth. She’s resting right now.”

This tugged at Seth’s suspicions. He’d trusted the Cullens, but he also knew an evasion when he heard one.

“When would be a good time for me to see her?”

“Perhaps she can call you later, and arrange for a visit then?”

“Maybe,” Seth said, frowning a little.

Edward and Bella waited some distance away, still within hearing range. They’d started their run, but he’d pulled Bella to a stop, needing to know what Carlisle’s plans were. To know that Seth was directed away from any trouble.

That Claire was in no danger.

As a family, they hadn’t even considered what the wolves would do, if they found out about her. They’d planned to leave as soon as they could, stringing Charlie along with tales of illness and recovery, until he was well enough to hear the news of Bella’s ‘death’.

But now Edward was hearing and seeing things in Seth’s mind that would not be easily shooed away.

After a moment, Seth swallowed, and said, “Whose baby?”

He gestured to the boxes by the garage.

“Oh, we’ve taken on a foster baby,” Carlisle lied smoothly, “they needed someone on short notice. I volunteered.”

Seth didn’t believe it for a minute, but he let the lie ride. “Oh, cool, can I say hi? Mom says I’ve got the touch with the little ones.”

There was no safe way to tell Carlisle no. Seth would hear any words that would reach him, so Edward closed his eyes and prayed.

Fervently.

Balancing on the pinpoint of his decision, Carlisle said, “of course. Do come in.”

Edward choked on the “no!” he wanted to scream, swallowing it, knowing his silence was fundamental to this sliver of hope Carlisle was riding on.
“Hi Seth,” Esme called, walking over slowly with the baby. “This is Claire. Do me a favour and go wash your hands if you’re going to come close.”

“Sure,” Seth said, watching Esme with some wonder. That was a real baby, in a vampire’s arms. He could hear her heartbeat, fluttering. Very fast.

Washing his hands in the kitchen, he listened to it. As he walked closer to Esme, he asked, “um, should her heart beat that fast?”

“She’s a bit of a special case,” Carlisle lied expertly. “Heart problems. They couldn’t find a medical placement for her. Why they asked us.” He shrugged.

Seth’s mind begrudged some plausibility here.

“Can I hold her?”

No, Edward thought. Say no.

But it would have been strange to say no. After welcoming him. After asking him to wash his hands.

“Certainly,” Esme said, and passed her sleeping charge over to Seth’s sturdy arms.

The movement unsettled Claire, and she blinked, opening her deep brown eyes.

Then she smiled, revealing her full set of perfect teeth.

Seth blinked.

“How old is she?” He stammered.

“A few weeks,” Carlisle lied again.

And, as in slow motion, Edward watched in Carlisle and Esme’s horrified thoughts, as Claire reached up her little hand to Seth’s face.

His gasp seemed to go on forever.

If his arms weren’t so used to the firm commitment needed to hold a baby, the shock would have made him drop her.

Finally, he pushed out words. “What was that?”

Outside, Edward closed his eyes, and then, opening them again, looked at Bella. She’d watched him intently during the few minutes they’d been away, knowing something was wrong, but trusting him enough to wait. “I need to go back,” Edward said. “Can you wait here?”

“No,” she said, “I’ll go with you.”

“Bella, no,” he said, “it’s not safe. Not for Claire. She’s half human love, and—”

From the house, they could hear Seth’s voice, now raised in anger. “What happened to Bella? She was screaming .”

“He thinks we’ve hurt you somehow, Bella. He thinks Claire has something to do with it.”

“Then let’s show him you haven’t.” Her cheeks couldn’t flush in anger anymore, but the line of her
jaw told him all he needed to know.

Then she was gone, ahead of him by a fraction of a second, moving back to the house.

When she reached the entranceway, Jasper and Emmett blocked her way to Claire and Seth.

“I’m fine, Seth,” Bella growled. “But if you hurt my baby, I’ll kill you.”

“Seth,” Esme said, approaching him cautiously, arms out, “give the baby back to me, please.” Her look was fraught with an anxiety not often seen.

Edward was glad Bella didn’t realize it was in response to her.

“She’s fine,” Esme assured her.

Bella turned her gaze fully to Seth, Edward now standing behind her, his hand on her arm.

“Your baby?” Seth asked, confusion squashing his eyebrows together.

“Yes. Mine.”

“Ours,” Edward amended.

“But you’re—”

“It changed me,” Bella explained.

“But—”

“But what, Seth?” Bella challenged, an angry curve in her forehead sliding up.

Edward sincerely hoped Seth did not ask any of the very specific, and personal questions currently populating his mind. He doubted they’d be received well.

“So, she’s—“ and he swallowed, looking at Claire, then he stopped, not quite sure.

“Half human, half vampire,” Edward supplied.

Seth mumbled the words back to himself. Then he asked, “and she can...communicate? Was that what that was?”

“Yes,” Carlisle said, rubbing his forefinger against Claire’s cheek, himself another barrier between Bella and Claire.

Edward asked the question that was on all their minds. “What will you tell Sam?”

Seth shrugged. If the circumstances had been anything else, it would've been sweet, hearing the innocent trust of his thoughts. He saw the Cullens as good, so different from the rest of the pack.

“The truth,” he answered simply.

Edward and Carlisle exchanged glances.

They had no idea what Claire was, really, or what she would become. But she was half human, and clearly intelligent. And half Vampire too.

“She doesn’t seem dangerous,” Seth said, “and she can communicate. Um, what does she eat, though?”
Rose has slipped in behind Esme. “Formula, obviously,” she snorted. “She’s a baby, Seth.”

Claire’s thoughts had made her opinion on formula clear. She couldn’t stand it, but it had been the only thing presented, so she tolerated it.

Seth was chewing on a thought that made Edward’s eyebrows rise in true surprise.

“He can’t know,” Edward said suddenly, staring at Seth.

“But he already knows you’re not human. And what we are. Why does it matter if he knows that Bella is too?”

Jasper’s growl had grown in magnitude, trying to manage the feelings Bella was rollercoastering through.

“I think Claire might require some explanation. And the fact that Bella might eat her father, could be problematic.” Edward said icily.

He was done with the wolves. After everything that had happened, he’d had enough of their interfering and bumbling disruptions.

“It’s time to leave, Seth. Now. Bella needs to hunt.”

“K,” Seth said, turning. “Congrats, by the way.”

“Let’s go,” Edward said to Bella, pulling her away, finally, far into the woods.

Their hunt was fraught with worry, and Edward had to pull Bella away from her distracted thoughts to focus.

“It’s going to be alright,” he told her. “Just be here, with me. OK?”

“OK,” she nodded, trying to imagine the worries evaporating off of her. They would rise, and then return, settling heavily.

Finally, catching a scent of something, Edward lifted his chin in the direction it had come from. Then the wind shifted, and it wasn’t deer that Bella was smelling.

“No,” Edward said, horrified, “don’t!”

But she was gone, running, following the smell that appealed above all others.

The hikers, far off of the trails, were just coming into view.

And there weren’t just two of them, there were three. One was a baby, strapped to the man’s back.

Its little cry made Bella stop, horrified.

“Oh my God,” she managed, trying to hold her breath. “Get me out of here!”

“Go!” Edward said, pointing away from where they were.

They were far from home now, and Edward ran with her, leading her to the first game he could find—a small deer.

She shredded its throat with her teeth, spilling much blood before swallowing any.
When she finished, she dropped the carcass, startled by the lack of weight she perceived.

“More?” he asked.

She nodded, and they went on, he showing her how to puncture neatly, absorbing all her kill.

“This gets neater, right?” she asked, looking at him, spotless in his tidy clothes.

He chuckled. “Yes. You did beautifully.”

Then he leaned over and kissed her.

The action was soon reversed, Bella pushing him into the dirt, lips hard over his.

“Claire,” he whispered. “More of this, later.”

She growled over him, body pressing him into the forest floor. “I’m holding you to that.”

The he grinned, one of those unbalanced facial productions that had made her human heart flutter. Now her solidified form shivered, storing his promise in its harder substance.

- 0 -

Sam and Emily stared at Seth.

“A baby?” Emily repeated. “They had a baby?”

“Uh-huh,” Seth said, not helpfully.

“Phase. Now.” Sam ordered.

Stepping outside, they found the dark of the treeline, and Sam saw everything that Seth had seen. He repeated, over and over in his mind, the interaction he’d had with the... baby.

He had a hard time wrapping his head around the concept for such a creature.

*She’s just a baby, Sam,* Seth thought, hearing the bent of his thoughts.

_A baby_ , Sam thought again.

By now the other pack minds had joined them.

Leah’s thoughts were more of a pained contraction, and then a more easily worn disgust.

Paul scoffed. _God, you’re not going to let that ride, are you? Bad enough we have a treaty with those things._

_Shut it, Paul_ , Sam ordered.

The remaining voices were less certain, waiting on Sam’s judgement.

_We have a treaty with them_ , Seth thought clearly. _They’ve never broken it. Even when we gave them permission to._

_They changed Bella_ , Leah spat.

_No, they didn’t, even though they could have._ Seth thought. _She...got pregnant._
There were a lot of muffled cringes there.

Seth thought the thing that made him cringe: *Jacob raped her. And no one believed her.*

Sam acquiesced. *We leave it be. But if anything happens with—*

*Claire*, Seth thought.

*Their...offspring*, Sam begrudged, *then we remove the threat.*

There were murmurs of agreement around, Seth the one, uneasy dissenting opinion.

*We remove it*, Seth, Sam thought at him.

Seth mumbled, *you’re the Alpha*, and left it at that.
A/N for 2018-08-15: it is time to wrap this story up. Any last burning requests for scenes / plot developments? Let me know.

~ Erin

“Alice,” Charlie said, in a kind voice wearied with impatience, “please stop fussing.”

“Fussing?” she asked, perfect eyebrows arched.

“Fussing,” he mumbled, lifting his chin towards the small table she’d brought over to the couch, complete with a glass of water and a plate of neatly sliced fruit.

“You expect me to leave you hungry? Hours before the nurse comes over to check on you?”

“I can walk, Alice.”

She snorted in response.

“Your confidence is inspiring.”

He took a sip of the water.

“How’s Bella?”

“Better,” she said, “still not well enough to visit, though.”

He grunted.

“Really,” Alice said, “she’s not, and she doesn’t want you to be...affected by it.”

Charlie didn’t say anything for a bit, but then mumbled, “doesn’t seem to bother you.”

It was Alice’s turn to pause, “no,” she said quietly, “it doesn’t.”

“I miss her, Alice.” He didn’t bother keeping the emotion from his voice. He was tired. Coming home had exhausted him, even though all he’d had to do was walk the short distance inside.

“Trust me, Charlie, it’s purely for your benefit that she’s not here.”

He put his teeth together in a tight, and frustrated clench. “Is that really it? Or is it something...weird?”

Alice’s face betrayed nothing. “I’ll have her call you when I get back, OK?”

He huffed out a resigned breath. “Fine.”

Then Alice stopped moving for a moment. “Seems you have a visitor.” Her nose wrinkled.

Charlie listened, but heard nothing for a bit, and then picked up the still distant rumble of an engine.
It grew close, and then chugged to a stop in his driveway.

He looked uneasily at Alice. “You staying?”

Her mouth twisted. “Do you want me to?”

“Yes,” he growled out, almost petulantly.

“OK.” Again, her face showed nothing.

It was most ungratifying.

Leah’s face was much more so.

Her nose was so crinkled it looked like a misplaced prune.

“Some company you keep, Charlie,” she muttered, eyeing Alice’s cross-armed form, casually leaning against the mantel.

Alice only nodded politely.

Leah pushed Billy into the living room.

“Hey old man,” he said to Charlie.

“Speak for yourself. Young and spry here.”

“Sue sent some food.” He put a paper bag on the table with a clunk.

“That was nice of her.”

Billy grunted. “Better than anything I make.”

They both chuckled. Billy was a terrible cook. Marginally worse than Charlie.

“Please say thank you for me, Leah.”

“Sure,” she drawled. “But seeing as you’re the grandpa, I’d say you win the older competition.”

Billy paled, and Alice’s eyes went wide for a fraction of section.

It was all enough for Charlie to see.

“What did you say?” he asked Leah.

“Grand-pa,” she said, enunciating the syllables carefully. Bitterly.

Charlie turned to look at Alice.

She raised an inquiring eyebrow at Leah, face straight.

Billy was not so well disciplined. His palor had disappeared into a stinging red. “Time to go, Leah.”

“We just got here, Billy.”

“No shit. Let’s go.”
“What do you mean, ‘grandpa’?” Charlie asked again, shifting in his seat, moving to stand.

Alice moved closer, a very solid and cold hand on his shoulder. “Just sit.” Her voice was dangerously soft. “Think you need to explain that comment, Leah.”

“Don’t need to do anything for you or your kind—”

“Shut it, Leah,” Billy warned her.

“Or what?” she spat, “we’ll make nice with the leeches?”

“Quiet!” he barked. “Do I need to get it ordered?” His face was a mottled purply red.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” Charlie barked.

“See you, Charlie, sorry,” Billy muttered, turning his chair, jerking his head towards the door. Leah rolled her eyes in answer, pushing him outside again.

“Can you get me to the car, please,” Charlie growled out to Alice.

“Charlie,” she said in a too smooth voice, “you just got home, you’re supposed to—”

“Get me to the car, Alice. Please.”

“You—”

“I’ll drive myself. He stood with a pained grunt, clutching at the wall, shuffling along.

“Fine,” Alice muttered. Then she slipped her arm under his and helped him outside.

If he didn’t know better, he’d have thought he’d been half carried there.

“I just need to make a quick phone call, OK?”

“Quick,” he muttered, uncomfortable in the passenger seat.

Alice seemed to whisper into her phone, a short distance from the car, and when she was done, lowered herself elegantly into the driver’s seat.

“Where to, Charlie?”

“Bella.”

“Right,” she sighed. “Let’s go.”

“You will be fine, Bella,” Edward whispered to her, watching Bella blink over the strange sensation of the contact lenses. “I know it.”

She wasn’t capable of tears anymore, but there was a choked sob born somewhere in her throat.

“This is my Dad, Edward. What if—”

“You were fine in the woods on your first day, Bella, and it’s been a month now. You haven’t so much as blinked at the human scents that have come this way.”

“But what if he’s...like I was, what if—”
“The world explodes and we all die?” Emmett supplied.

“Very helpful,” Edward growled.

“You’ll be fine, Bella,” Emmett said more kindly. “And if you’re not, all of us will defend Charlie. Trust me.”

“He’ll be here in a few minutes,” Edward murmured, “why don’t we just work on keeping you calm until then?”

She nodded, reluctantly, motioning to Rose for Claire.

“Hey,” she whispered to her, letting the little fingers fall on her own face. “I am nervous. I’m afraid I’ll hurt your grandpa.”

Claire was the size of a sturdy three month old, but a very coordinated one. A very intelligent one, too.

“How’re we going to explain her?” Bella asked.

This was not so easy to answer.

“We’ll tell him what Carlisle told Seth.”

Bella stared at Edward.

“It isn’t meant to convince him, Bella, but he needs to know the public story, more than anything.”

She took a breath in, and then let it out, all the flavours of the room unique, and familiar. A smaller part of her mind insisted this action should calm her, but it accomplished nothing in this direction.

Then an unnatural feeling descended, and she was calm, even though she didn’t own the sensation.

“Not sure that’ll work, Jasper, but thank you.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” she sighed, relieved when her own feelings reasserted themselves.

Bella took the next few minutes to answer Claire’s silent questions about Charlie, and more importantly, to explain that she shouldn't show Charlie things.

“It just isn’t expected,” she said quietly, lost in this little conversation. “Babies are quiet. They don’t do much….no, I know you’re not like that. It’s just for a short time.”

Edward chuckled. It still delighted him that they reasoned with their daughter.

The irregular crunch of gravel under tires made them look up. The human scent was not long in breathing its way into the room, either.

Claire turned her head to Bella, and told her it smelled good.

“You can’t bite him, either. Definitely not.”

Claire repeated the sight of Bella’s alarmed face back to her.

“I love him. He’s very breakable. We need to be very, very careful with him.”
Claire nodded.

“Can you pretend to be just a normal, boring baby for a bit?”

More nodding.

“Go sit,” Edward said to her, “it’ll make it easier for you to move more...humanly.”

Alice helped Charlie to the door, and Bella watched impatiently, and with concern. “He shouldn’t be up and around,” she hissed at Edward.

Edward was getting a better picture of why he was, and sighed. “Leah,” he muttered.

When Bella went to stand, he whispered, “sit,” to her again sub-audibly, “you’re supposed to be recovering, remember?”

She tucked her teeth into her lip, watching Charlie’s slow progress into the room. He hadn’t really looked up yet, white with the effort of moving.

Carlisle had appeared at this point, drawn by the unhealthy sounds he could hear coming from Charlie.

“Hi Charlie,” he murmured softly. “Do me a favour and sit down.”

“I’m fine. And so are you,” he said to Bella.

“Hi, Dad.”

Then Charlie looked at her, and his eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. Claire turned her head, and now his eyes widened at the doll-like replica of his own daughter, “what the hell?” he whispered.

Carlisle opened his mouth to say something, but Charlie held up a hand, not taking his eyes off of Bella and Claire.

“She looks exactly like you did.”

Bella said nothing, keeping her glance from flicking towards Edward and back.

“And you’re not sick.”

Bella shook her head. She didn’t want to waste the air she’d sucked in before he entered the room.

“What’s going on?”

No one spoke for a moment, and then Edward said, “remember what I told you, Charlie?”

Charlie’s mouth twisted in frustration. “You’ve told me a lot of things, Edward. Many of them not true.”

Edward arched an eyebrow in acknowledgement. “Some questions are best not asked.” Then he picked up Claire from Bella, reassuring his wife with his eyes. “This is Claire. And yes, you are a grandfather. We’re adopting her. She has some very...special needs.”

“No more lies.”
Edward paused, midway across the room. “Your eyes have told you the truth, Charlie, but you need to have something to tell the world, which doesn’t see so clearly.”

This seemed to mollify Charlie, and he nodded, opening his own arms to hold the child Edward presented.

“Hi,” he said, his voice suddenly soft, as one would make it for an infant.

Then she waved at him, and he blinked.

“Special?”

“Very special,” Edward repeated.

Charlie held Claire for a bit, who did her part and behaved as much like a baby as she knew to do. Then Charlie looked up at Bella. “Cat got your tongue?”

Edward glanced at Bella, assessing her movements, trying to understand how she was faring. Jasper was in the next room with the rest of the Cullens, ready, in case of any need. His thoughts told Edward Bella was doing well, but that she was strained and fearful.

“We won’t let you hurt him,” Edward whispered to her. “Talk to him, it’s alright.”

“I’m still...getting used to...this,” she said, spreading her fingers out, waving at her form.

Charlie nodded slowly, his jaw working. “You OK?” he husked out.

“Never better.”

“Missed you,” Charlie said.

“You too, Dad.” She looked like she wanted to cry.

Then Claire put her hand up, moving to Charlie’s cheek.

Edward’s eyes widened with concern.

And Charlie’s widened with shock.

“What?”

“She’s...reassuring you,” Edward said, seeing what Claire was showing him.

Charlie stared at the baby-shaped person in his arms, stunned to wordlessness.

Carlisle knocked at this point, his many thoughts full of worry for Charlie’s physical well being.

“I agree,” Edward said, “you need to rest, Charlie. This is...a lot.”

His father-in-law could only nod. He didn’t even think to ask how Edward knew what Carlisle’s intentions were.

Right before he passed out.

Bella caught Claire with one arm, her other hand flying to her father’s head. “Dad?”
“He’s OK,” Carlisle said, “just tired. He needs to be in bed.”

“Are you sure?”

Carlisle was nodding, listening, moving Charlie’s feet up onto the sofa arm, laying him down flat, checking the bandages on his midsection and arms. “I’m going to take him home. Alice?” He was pulling syringes out from his bag, administering one of them. “Just a very mild sedative to calm him down,” he explained to Bella.

“He’s going to have so many questions, Carlisle—”

“I’ll stay with him.”

“It’s too much, though,” she almost cried out, “he—”

“He’s still recovering Bella,” Edward said, slipping his arm around her. “He did well. He understands the need to keep this quiet.”

“But—”

“And you did incredibly well.”

She nodded, her head still full of fear and concern.

“Think about what this means, love,” he whispered, as she watched Carlisle pick Charlie up.

She was still so anxious for him, she could only look at her husband with the wrinkles of it all over her forehead.

“We can stay, for a little while. Be with Charlie. You get to keep your dad.” His own voice was soft with emotion. “Claire gets a human grandpa.”

The smile that broke out on her face was beautiful for all its lingering disbelief.

It was suddenly too much, the sucking maelstrom of feeling yanking at her.

“Rose,” Edward called, taking Claire, handing her to his sister. Then his arms were all for Bella, and they were flying, the scrim of trees a blur in their run.

“I can’t,” she finally breathed, stopping in the shade of an ancient fir, hands shaking at an inhuman frequency.

The panic was clawing at her, and she was trying to breathe through it, the air only adding more stimulus.

“No!” she shrieked when he went to touch her. The small push made him fly through the alders behind him, chips and dust exploding everywhere.

“Oh God, Edward, I’m sorry!” Her distress was only growing.

“I’m fine,” he said, moving slowly back towards her. “Breathing isn’t going to help, love.” He held out his hand, an invitation to touch.

She hadn’t had one of these attacks, not in her new self yet.

“I’m here, nothing is going to hurt you. I doubt very much anything can hurt you,” he added more
She laughed a little in the midst of her panic, the feeling lessening.

Edward’s hand remained open, and she tentatively put her own in it. He pulled her to him, their hands mutually at each other’s backs, cheeks pressed together.

He let his fingers work in small circles, feeling the vibrations in her form subside.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t be,” he murmured, “you’ve been through so much, and you’re doing so well.”

“It helps,” she said, their faces side by side, “that the memories are fading.”

He nodded, the friction of their cheeks pleasant.

Then their lips were exploring that togetherness.

He risked putting his hands to the softness of her hair. She slid hers to his hips, pulling him closer.

“I can tell,” he chuckled.

Then they were horizontal, Edward resting between her and the ground.

“This feels...amazing, and—”

“Just stop at amazing,” Edward mumbled, reversing their positions.

Her hands were busy flicking open buttons and zippers. Her marvelled that she had the patience for such intricacies, where he was ready to shred their clothes away.

He made himself wait, slipping his lips down her form to worship it in all its perfect mounds and undulations.

The sound she made when he reached the mid-point of her body pleased him almost as much as her touch.

It was brief, though, capped by a soft, “no, I want you in me.”

He demonstrated how well he could, and not in the way he knew she wanted.

The purring groan that slipped out of her throat made him grin too widely for what he was doing.

Her hands were insistent, though, and he returned his mouth to hers, growling at the bite of her teeth on his lip.

“I want you,” she repeated, and he obliged her, still so delighted to not have to spare his movements with her sturdy flesh.

There was still some reticence, though, and she pressed with her fingers, “don’t hold back,” she hushed. “I want you.”

This was a joining that dug into the earth, a divet that they made with her curled back, hands entrenched in his, ankles flexed around his thighs.

“Better?” he asked her, as they stood, lingering in the after effects of this muddy pleasure.
“Amazing,” she smiled, shyly.

There was no hurry in their walk home, marked by several pleasurable divergences into similar activities, but a slowly growing appreciation of the surprising happiness they found themselves holding together.

- 0 -

Carlisle didn’t press with hard questions or answers when Charlie woke, calmly seeing to the necessities of this still frail human body.

When Charlie did, though, Carlisle had simple answers.

“The fewer questions you ask, Charlie, the safer we’ll all be.”

“I think I deserve some answers, Carlisle.”

He was blunt. “You can have answers, and all our deaths, or you can accept what you see.”

Charlie’s eyes were unaffected by his illness. He knew there was no poker face on Carlisle.

“We can leave now, Charlie, if this is too hard.”

“No,” he said quickly, afraid they might if he didn’t.

“It’s too dangerous for you to know more.”

“No more lies, then. I won’t ask, but just...don’t lie.”

“Alright.” Carlisle’s voice was solemn.

“And you tell me if you need to leave. I don’t want to wake up and find you gone.”

“Of course.”

Charlie stuck out his hand, and Carlisle returned it.

“Deal.”
The end

A/N for 2018-09-01: Thank you, all for your response to this story. It's been a pleasure to write, and to hear your reactions to it. I can't stress how lovely it's been to get to know some of you, who've commented so faithfully. I'm sad to see this little community go.

In the meantime, if you like angst (and how can you not, if you're reading this?) head on over to my newest story, "A descent like no other," which is well under way.

~ Erin
@FlamingMapleWrites on FB

Ten years later

"Taller than me now, Dad," Bella smiled, laughing into the receiver at his response. "Not something you ever had to worry about."

Claire and Esme were engrossed in a swath of architectural paperwork, Alice peeking over their shoulders, chirping her own suggestions here and there.

"Yeah, new place. You'll come visit, right?...don't even start with that again, Dad. Come on." She rolled her eyes, mouthing "he wants to pay for his flight," at Edward, who walking into the room.

He smiled back at her, shaking his head, but it was Esme who held up her hand for the phone. Bella murmured, "hold on, Dad, Esme wants to talk to you."

"Hi Charlie," Esme said softly, "we're looking forward to seeing you. Don't tell me you want to worry Bella with spending your retirement savings on us?" She waited a moment, listening, "you just let us know when you want to come...anytime, really. Claire can't wait to see you. Neither can the rest of us."

That they'd held on to this part of Bella's human life was a joy to them all. A small thing to offset the necessary cutting out of so many other parts. Renee, and Phil included.

Edward and Bella had both 'died', tragically and unexpectedly, in a car accident a few years after their marriage. Before that, there had been visits from Renee and Phil in the short intervening years, rich with surprise at the adoption of a child. After meeting her the once, Claire was conveniently absent at some city specialist's appointments whenever Renee and Phil were in Forks.

Jasper had taken on the task of manipulating age appropriate images of Claire to share with them. Carlisle and Esme had adopted Claire for all human purposes, homeschooling in Carlisle's remote work locations, avoiding the possibility of personal visits.

After a modestly successful career, Phil had retired, and Renee resumed her teaching work again. They'd found a happy equilibrium in their respective busyness, burying their grief in the joy of a grandchild, far away as she was.

Done with massaging Charlie's will to comply with her own, Esme handed the phone back to Bella.

"You talk to mom, lately?" she asked.
"Course," he said, "forget your own birthday?"

"No," she said too quickly. She hadn't, but it didn't merit much notice anymore. "How is she?"

"Good. Taken up knitting, if you can believe it."

"Really?"

Renee's interests had always been varied, but they'd never really knelt in such domestic directions.

"Did you tell her she's finally acting her age?" Bella quipped.

"I'm not suicidal, thank you very much," Charlie replied.

Catching Edward's eye, Bella could see he was waiting for her. She wrapped up her phone call with Charlie, hands slipping together as they moved outside into the leafy forests upstate New York presented.

Their hunt finished, they rested on a large glacial erratic, appreciating the texture its rough edges presented, and the many hues the forest was dipping itself in.

"So different," she murmured. They'd moved far north after their faked deaths, but still on the western stretches of the continent, staying as close as they dared to Charlie, making his trips easier.

His retirement freed him to go further now, and they'd sought the safer distance of the eastern coast, hidden in one of the many untouched pockets of wildness the state still kept.

She snorted out a sudden laugh.

"What?" Edward asked, turning and smiling. She was as beautiful as ever, more so even, with time.

"Just still seems bizarre to be able to smell the syrup in the trees."

He chuckled. It delighted him to know her own discoveries. There were still so many remaining to them as she adapted to this life.

While he'd been beside himself with worry and fear, watching her take that final leg of the trip to Italy, to present herself to the Volturi, he'd been conversely awed at her return. Her mind remained silent as ever, but she painted her thoughts and memories with her words, her eloquence only increasing with the capacity of her immortal mind.

She wrote now, stories spun of her endless imagination, published under the carefully constructed guise of a reclusive artist located in the inaccessible Montana wilderness.

Charlie had laughed when she'd sent him one of her books. Then he'd read it, and phoned her back with serious congratulations.

"I'm sure you can invent a nice supernatural character to enjoy that experience," he smiled.

"Maybe," she said coyly. "Might want to keep that one close."

She'd avoided supernatural content.

Too dangerous.

"Want to head back?" he asked, fingers tangling with hers.
"Not really," she whispered, leaning over to find his lips with her own.

They were together in all the ways that mattered, time immaterial to their existence. It was a happy one. And it would be forever.

- The End -

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!