**Summary**

As Seattle is ravaged by a string of mysterious killings and a malicious vampire continues her quest for revenge, Bella once again finds herself surrounded by danger. In the midst of it all, she is forced to choose between her love for Edythe and her friendship with Julie—knowing that her decision has the potential to ignite the ageless struggle between vampire and werewolf. With her graduation quickly approaching, Bella has one more decision to make: life or death. But which is which?

**Notes**

Eclipse is here, finally. I know you've been waiting - especially whoever sent me those anons lol. Same drill, please inform me of any mistakes you might notice.

**Note:** I still have to do Eclipse in M/M, so it's gonna be a little bit, but obviously Breaking Dawn comes after this. Here's the thing. I know the whole point of this project is to do everything the same, but... BD kinda sucks. So I do have some plans to change the story. These plans are nothing crazy: Bella would come down with a mysterious illness, the conflict with the wolves would revolve around Bella's transformation instead of Renesmee's existence, and the Volturi conflict would be about the wolf alliance. The general structure of the story would remain the same, and I would use existing passages as much as possible. HOWEVER, the point of this project was not to change things so extensively, so I've made a compromise with myself. I will be doing BD as written for the F/F version, and changing it up for the M/M version. I considered writing Beau as trans to facilitate the pregnancy but when I introduced the idea to my two brain cells they didn't think it was cool to put such a
character through this very traumatic pregnancy.
ALL OUR ATTEMPTS AT SUBTERFUGE HAD BEEN IN VAIN.

With ice in my heart, I watched her prepare to defend me. Her intense concentration betrayed no hint of doubt, though she was outnumbered. I knew that we could expect no help—at this moment, her family was fighting for their lives just as surely as she was for ours.

Would I ever learn the outcome of that other fight? Find out who the winners and the losers were? Would I live long enough for that?

The odds of that didn’t look so great.

Black eyes, wild with their fierce craving for my death, watched for the moment when my protector’s attention would be diverted. The moment when I would surely die.

Somewhere, far, far away in the cold forest, a wolf howled.

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Bella,

I don’t know why you’re making Charlie carry notes to Billy like we’re in second grade—if I
I wanted to talk to you I would answer the

You made the choice here, okay? You can’t have it both ways when

What part of ‘mortal enemies’ is too complicated for you to

Look, I know I’m being a jerk, but there’s just no way around

We can’t be friends when you’re spending all your time with a bunch of

It just makes it worse when I think about you too much, so don’t write anymore

Yeah, I miss you, too. A lot. Doesn’t change anything. Sorry.

Julie

I ran my fingers across the page, feeling the dents where she had pressed the pen to the paper so hard that it had nearly broken through. I could picture her writing this—scrawling the angry letters in her rough handwriting, slashing through line after line when the words came out wrong, maybe even snapping the pen in her too-big hand; that would explain the ink splatters. I could imagine the frustration pulling her black eyebrows together and crumpling her forehead. If I’d been there, I might have laughed. Don’t give yourself a brain hemorrhage, Julie, I would have told her. Just spit it out.

Laughing was the last thing I felt like doing now as I reread the words I’d already memorized. Her answer to my pleading note—passed from Charlie to Billy to her, just like second grade, as she’d pointed out—was no surprise. I’d known the essence of what it would say before I’d opened it.

What was surprising was how much each crossed-out line wounded me—as if the points of the letters had cutting edges. More than that, behind each angry beginning lurked a vast pool of hurt; Julie’s pain cut me deeper than my own.

While I was pondering this, I caught the unmistakable scent of a smoking burner rising from the kitchen. In another house, the fact that someone besides myself was cooking might not be a cause for panicking.

I shoved the wrinkled paper into my back pocket and ran, making it downstairs in the nick of time.

The jar of spaghetti sauce Charlie’d stuck in the microwave was only on its first revolution when I yanked the door open and pulled it out.

“What did I do wrong?” Charlie demanded.

“You’re supposed to take the lid off first, Dad. Metal’s bad for microwaves.” I swiftly removed the lid as I spoke, poured half the sauce into a bowl, and then put the bowl inside the microwave and the jar back in the fridge; I fixed the time and pressed start.

Charlie watched my adjustments with pursed lips. “Did I get the noodles right?”

I looked in the pan on the stove—the source of the smell that had alerted me. “Stirring helps,” I said mildly. I found a spoon and tried to de-clump the mushy hunk that was scalded to the bottom.

Charlie sighed.
“So what’s all this about?” I asked him.

He folded his arms across his chest and glared out the back windows into the sheeting rain. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he grumbled.

I was mystified. Charlie cooking? And what was with the surly attitude? Edythe wasn’t here yet; usually my dad reserved this kind of behavior for my girlfriend’s benefit, doing his best to illustrate the theme of “unwelcome” with every word and posture. Charlie’s efforts were unnecessary—Edythe knew exactly what my dad was thinking without the show.

The word girlfriend had me chewing on the inside of my cheek with a familiar tension while I stirred. It wasn’t the right word, not at all. I needed something more expressive of eternal commitment…. But words like destiny and fate sounded hokey when you used them in casual conversation.

Edythe had another word in mind, and that word was the source of the tension I felt. It put my teeth on edge just to think it to myself.

Fiancée. Ugh. I shuddered away from the thought.

“Did I miss something? Since when do you make dinner?” I asked Charlie. The pasta lump bobbed in the boiling water as I poked it. “Or try to make dinner, I should say.”

Charlie shrugged. “There’s no law that says I can’t cook in my own house.”

“You would know,” I replied, grinning as I eyed the badge pinned to his leather jacket.

“Ha. Good one.” He shrugged out of the jacket as if my glance had reminded him he still had it on, and hung it on the peg reserved for his gear. His gun belt was already slung in place—he hadn’t felt the need to wear that to the station for a few weeks. There had been no more disturbing disappearances to trouble the small town of Forks, Washington, no more sightings of the giant, mysterious wolves in the ever-rainy woods.…

I prodded the noodles in silence, guessing that Charlie would get around to talking about whatever was bothering him in his own time. My dad was not a man of many words, and the effort he had put into trying to orchestrate a sit-down dinner with me made it clear there were an uncharacteristic number of words on his mind.

I glanced at the clock routinely—something I did every few minutes around this time. Less than a half hour to go now.

Afternoons were the hardest part of my day. Ever since my former best friend (and werewolf), Julie Black, had informed on me about the motorcycle I’d been riding on the sly—a betrayal she had devised in order to get me grounded so that I couldn’t spend time with my girlfriend (and vampire), Edythe Cullen—Edythe had been allowed to see me only from seven till nine-thirty p.m., always inside the confines of my home and under the supervision of my dad’s unfailingly crabby glare.

This was an escalation from the previous, slightly less stringent grounding that I’d earned for an unexplained three-day disappearance and one episode of cliff diving.

Of course, I still saw Edythe at school, because there wasn’t anything Charlie could do about that. And then, Edythe spent almost every night in my room, too, but Charlie wasn’t precisely aware of that. Edythe’s ability to climb easily and silently through my second-story window was almost as useful as her ability to read Charlie’s mind.
Though the afternoon was the only time I spent away from Edythe, it was enough to make me restless, and the hours always dragged. Still, I endured my punishment without complaining because—for one thing—I knew I’d earned it, and—for another—because I couldn’t bear to hurt my dad by moving out now, when a much more permanent separation hovered, invisible to Charlie, so close on my horizon.

My dad sat down at the table with a grunt and unfolded the damp newspaper there; within seconds he was clucking his tongue in disapproval.

“Don’t know why you read the news, Dad. It only ticks you off.”

He ignored me, grumbling at the paper in his hands. “This is why everyone wants to live in a small town! Ridiculous.”

“What have big cities done wrong now?”

“Seattle’s making a run for murder capital of the country. Five unsolved homicides in the last two weeks. Can you imagine living like that?”

“I think Phoenix is actually higher up the homicide list, Dad. I have lived like that.” And I’d never come close to being a murder victim until after I moved to his safe little town. In fact, I was still on several hit lists…. The spoon shook in my hands, making the water tremble.

“Well, you couldn’t pay me enough,” Charlie said.

I gave up on saving dinner and settled for serving it; I had to use a steak knife to cut a portion of spaghetti for Charlie and then myself, while he watched with a sheepish expression. Charlie coated his helping with sauce and dug in. I disguised my own clump as well as I could and followed his example without much enthusiasm. We ate in silence for a moment. Charlie was still scanning the news, so I picked up my much-abused copy of *Wuthering Heights* from where I’d left it this morning at breakfast, and tried to lose myself in turn-of-the-century England while I waited for him to start talking.

I was just to the part where Heathcliff returns when Charlie cleared his throat and threw the paper to the floor.

“You’re right,” Charlie said. “I did have a reason for doing this.” He waved his fork at the gluey spread. “I wanted to talk to you.”

I laid the book aside; the binding was so destroyed that it slumped flat to the table. “You could have just asked.”

He nodded, his eyebrows pulling together. “Yeah. I’ll remember that next time. I thought taking dinner off your hands would soften you up.”

I laughed. “It worked—your cooking skills have me soft as a marshmallow. What do you need, Dad?”

“Well, it’s about Julie.”

I felt my face harden. “What about her?” I asked through stiff lips.

“Easy, Bells. I know you’re still upset that she told on you, but it was the right thing. She was being responsible.”
“Responsible,” I repeated scathingly, rolling my eyes. “Right. So, what about Julie?”

The careless question repeated inside my head, anything but trivial. What about Julie? What was I going to do about her? My former best friend who was now… what? My enemy? I cringed.

Charlie’s face was suddenly wary. “Don’t get mad at me, okay?”

“Mad?”

“Well, it’s about Edythe, too.”

My eyes narrowed.

Charlie’s voice got gruffer. “I let her in the house, don’t I?”

“You do,” I admitted. “For brief periods of time. Of course, you might let me out of the house for brief periods now and then, too,” I continued—only jokingly; I knew I was on lockdown for the duration of the school year. “I’ve been pretty good lately.”

“Well, that’s kind of where I was heading with this…. And then Charlie’s face stretched into an unexpected eye-crinkling grin; for a second he looked twenty years younger.

I saw a dim glimmer of possibility in that smile, but I proceeded slowly. “I’m confused, Dad. Are we talking about Julie, or Edythe, or me being grounded?”

The grin flashed again. “Sort of all three.”

“And how do they relate?” I asked, cautious.

“Okay.” He sighed, raising his hands as if in surrender. “So I’m thinking maybe you deserve a parole for good behavior. For a teenager, you’re amazingly non-whiney.”

My voice and eyebrows shot up. “Seriously? I’m free?”

Where was this coming from? I’d been positive I would be under house arrest until I actually moved out, and Edythe hadn’t picked up any wavering in Charlie’s thoughts.…

Charlie held up one finger. “Conditionally.”


“Bella, this is more of a request than a demand, okay? You’re free. But I’m hoping you’ll use that freedom… judiciously.”

“What does that mean?”

He sighed again. “I know you’re satisfied to spend all of your time with Edythe—”

“I spend time with Archie, too,” I interjected. Edythe’s brother had no hours of visitation; he came and went as he pleased. Charlie was putty in his capable hands.

“That’s true,” he said. “But you have other friends besides the Cullens, Bella. Or you used to.”

We stared at each other for a long moment.

“When was the last time you spoke to Angela Weber?” he threw at me.
“Friday at lunch,” I answered immediately.

Before Edythe’s return, my school friends had polarized into two groups. I liked to think of those groups as good vs. evil. Us and them worked, too. The good guys were Angela, her steady boyfriend Ben Cheney, and Mike Newton; these three had all very generously forgiven me for going crazy when Edythe left. Lauren Mallory was the evil core of the them side, and almost everyone else, including my first friend in Forks, Jessica Stanley, seemed content to go along with her anti-Bella agenda.

With Edythe back at school, the dividing line had become even more distinct.

Edythe’s return had taken its toll on Mike’s friendship, but Angela was unswervingly loyal, and Ben followed her lead. Despite the natural aversion most humans felt toward the Cullens, Angela sat dutifully beside Archie every day at lunch. After a few weeks, Angela even looked comfortable there. It was difficult not to be charmed by the Cullens—once one gave them the chance to be charming.

“Outside of school?” Charlie asked, calling my attention back.

“I haven’t seen anyone outside of school, Dad. Grounded, remember? And Angela has a boyfriend, too. She’s always with Ben. If I’m really free,” I added, heavy on the skepticism, “maybe we could double.”

“Okay. But then…” He hesitated. “You and Jules used to be joined at the hip, and now—”

I cut him off. “Can you get to the point, Dad? What’s your condition—exactly?”

“I don’t think you should dump all your other friends for your girlfriend, Bella,” he said in a stern voice. “It’s not nice, and I think your life would be better balanced if you kept some other people in it. What happened last September…”

I flinched.

“Well,” he said defensively. “If you’d had more of a life outside of Edythe Cullen, it might not have been like that.”

“It would have been exactly like that,” I muttered.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“The point?” I reminded him.

“Use your new freedom to see your other friends, too. Keep it balanced.”

I nodded slowly. “Balance is good. Do I have specific time quotas to fill, though?”

He made a face, but shook his head. “I don’t want to make this complicated. Just don’t forget your friends…”

It was a dilemma I was already struggling with. My friends. People who, for their own safety, I would never be able to see again after graduation.

So what was the better course of action? Spend time with them while I could? Or start the separation now to make it more gradual? I quailed at the idea of the second option.

“…particularly Julie,” Charlie added before I could think things through more than that.
A greater dilemma than the first. It took me a moment to find the right words. “Julie might be… difficult.”

“The Blacks are practically family, Bella,” he said, stern and fatherly again. “And Julie has been a very, very good friend to you.”

“I know that.”

“Don’t you miss her at all?” Charlie asked, frustrated.

My throat suddenly felt swollen; I had to clear it twice before I answered. “Yes, I do miss her,” I admitted, still looking down. “I miss her a lot.”

“Then why is it difficult?”

It wasn’t something I was at liberty to explain. It was against the rules for normal people—human people like me and Charlie—to know about the clandestine world full of myths and monsters that existed secretly around us. I knew all about that world—and I was in no small amount of trouble as a result. I wasn’t about to get Charlie in the same trouble.

“With Julie there is a… conflict,” I said slowly. “A conflict about the friendship thing, I mean. Friendship doesn’t always seem to be enough for Jules.” I wound my excuse out of details that were true but insignificant, hardly crucial compared to the fact that Julie’s werewolf pack bitterly hated Edythe’s vampire family—and therefore me, too, as I fully intended to join that family. It just wasn’t something I could work out with her in a note, and she wouldn’t answer my calls. But my plan to deal with the werewolf in person had definitely not gone over well with the vampires.

“Isn’t Edythe up for a little healthy competition?” Charlie’s voice was sarcastic now.

I leveled a dark look at him. “There’s no competition.”

“You’re hurting Julie’s feelings, avoiding her like this. She’d rather be just friends than nothing.”

Oh, now I was avoiding her?

“I’m pretty sure Jules doesn’t want to be friends at all.” The words burned in my mouth. “Where’d you get that idea, anyway?”

Charlie looked embarrassed now. “The subject might have come up today with Billy….”

“You and Billy gossip like old women,” I complained, stabbing my fork viciously into the congealed spaghetti on my plate.

“Billy’s worried about Julie,” Charlie said. “Jules’s having a hard time right now…. She’s depressed.”

I winced, but kept my eyes on the blob.

“And then you were always so happy after spending the day with Jules.” Charlie sighed.

“I’m happy now,” I growled fiercely through my teeth.

The contrast between my words and tone broke through the tension. Charlie burst into laughter, and I had to join in.

“And Julie,” he insisted.

“I’ll try.”

“Good. Find that balance, Bella. And, oh, yeah, you’ve got some mail,” Charlie said, closing the subject with no attempt at subtlety. “It’s by the stove.”

I didn’t move, my thoughts twisting into snarls around Julie’s name. It was most likely junk mail; I’d just gotten a package from my mom yesterday and I wasn’t expecting anything else.

Charlie shoved his chair away from the table and stretched as he got to his feet. He took his plate to the sink, but before he turned the water on to rinse it, he paused to toss a thick envelope at me. The letter skidded across the table and thunked into my elbow.

“Er, thanks,” I muttered, puzzled by his pushiness. Then I saw the return address—the letter was from the University of Alaska Southeast. “That was quick. I guess I missed the deadline on that one, too.”

Charlie chuckled.

I flipped the envelope over and then glared up at him. “It’s open.”

“I was curious.”

“I’m shocked, Sheriff. That’s a federal crime.”

“Oh, just read it.”

I pulled out the letter, and a folded schedule of courses.

“Congratulations,” he said before I could read anything. “Your first acceptance.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“We should talk about tuition. I’ve got some money saved up—”

“Hey, hey, none of that. I’m not touching your retirement, Dad. I’ve got my college fund.” What was left of it—and there hadn’t been much to begin with.

Charlie frowned. “Some of these places are pretty pricey, Bells. I want to help. You don’t have to go to all the way to Alaska just because it’s cheaper.”

It wasn’t cheaper, not at all. But it was far away, and Juneau had an average of three hundred twenty-one overcast days per year. The first was my prerequisite, the second was Edythe’s.

“I’ve got it covered. Besides, there’s lots of financial aid out there. It’s easy to get loans.” I hoped my bluff wasn’t too obvious. I hadn’t actually done a lot of research on the subject.

“So…” Charlie began, and then he pursed his lips and looked away.

“So what?”

“Nothing. I was just…” He frowned. “Just wondering what… Edythe’s plans are for next year?”

“Oh.”
“Well?”

Three quick raps on the door saved me. Charlie rolled his eyes and I jumped up.

“Coming!” I called while Charlie mumbled something that sounded like, “Go away.” I ignored him and went to let Edythe in.

I wrenched the door out of my way—ridiculously eager—and there she was, my personal miracle.

Time had not made me immune to the perfection of her face, and I was sure that I would never take any aspect of her for granted. My eyes traced over her pale white features: her jawline, her full lips—twisted up into a smile now, the straight line of her nose, the sharp angle of her cheekbones, the smooth marble span of her forehead—partially obscured by a tangle of rain-darkened bronze hair.

... 

I saved her eyes for last, knowing that when I looked into them I was likely to lose my train of thought. They were wide, warm with liquid gold, and framed by a thick fringe of black lashes. Staring into her eyes always made me feel extraordinary—sort of like my bones were turning spongy. I was also a little lightheaded, but that could have been because I’d forgotten to keep breathing. Again.

It was a face any model in the world would trade her soul for. Of course, that might be exactly the asking price: one soul.

No. I didn’t believe that. I felt guilty for even thinking it, and was glad—as I was often glad—that I was the one person whose thoughts were a mystery to Edythe.

I reached for her hand, and sighed when her cold fingers found mine. Her touch brought with it the strangest sense of relief—as if I’d been in pain and that pain had suddenly ceased.

“Hey.” I smiled a little at my anticlimactic greeting.

She raised our interlaced fingers to brush my cheek with the back of her hand. “How was your afternoon?”

“Slow.”

“For me, as well.”

She pulled my wrist up to her face, our hands still twisted together. Her eyes closed as her nose skimmed along the skin there, and she smiled gently without opening them. Enjoying the bouquet while resisting the wine, as she’d once put it.

I knew that the scent of my blood—so much sweeter to her than any other person’s blood, truly like wine beside water to an alcoholic—caused her actual pain from the burning thirst it engendered. But she didn’t seem to shy away from it as much as she once had. I could only dimly imagine the Herculean effort behind this simple gesture.

It made me sad that she had to try so hard. I comforted myself with the knowledge that I wouldn’t be causing her pain much longer.

I heard Charlie approaching then, stamping his feet on the way to express his customary displeasure with our guest. Edythe’s eyes snapped open and she let our hands fall, keeping them twined.
“Good evening, Charlie.” Edythe was always flawlessly polite, though Charlie didn’t deserve it.

Charlie grunted at her, and then stood there with his arms crossed over his chest. He was taking the idea of parental supervision to extremes lately.

“I brought another set of applications,” Edythe told me then, holding up a stuffed manila envelope. She was wearing a roll of stamps like a ring around her littlest finger.

I groaned. How were there any colleges left that she hadn’t forced me to apply to already? And how did she keep finding these loophole openings? It was so late in the year.

She smiled as if she could read my thoughts; they must have been very obvious on my face. “There are still a few open deadlines. And a few places willing to make exceptions.”

I could just imagine the motivations behind such exceptions. And the dollar amounts involved.

Edythe laughed at my expression.

“Shall we?” she asked, towing me toward the kitchen table.

Charlie huffed and followed behind, though he could hardly complain about the activity on tonight’s agenda. He’d been pestering me to make a decision about college on a daily basis.

I cleared the table quickly while Edythe organized an intimidating stack of forms. When I moved Wuthering Heights to the counter, Edythe raised one eyebrow. I knew what she was thinking, but Charlie interrupted before Edythe could comment.

“Speaking of college applications, Edythe,” Charlie said, his tone even more sullen—he tried to avoid addressing Edythe directly, and when he had to, it exacerbated his bad mood. “Bella and I were just talking about next year. Have you decided where you’re going to school?”

Edythe smiled up at Charlie and her voice was friendly. “Not yet. I’ve received a few acceptance letters, but I’m still weighing my options.”

“Where have you been accepted?” Charlie pressed.

“Syracuse… Harvard… Dartmouth… and I just got accepted to the University of Alaska Southeast today.” Edythe turned her face slightly to the side so that she could wink at me. I stifled a giggle.

“Harvard? Dartmouth?” Charlie mumbled, unable to conceal his awe. “Well that’s pretty… that’s something. Yeah, but the University of Alaska… you wouldn’t really consider that when you could go Ivy League. I mean, your parents would want you to…”

“Carlisle and Earnest are always fine with whatever I choose to do,” Edythe told him serenely.

“Hmph.”

“Guess what, Edythe?” I asked in a bright voice, playing along.

“What, Bella?”

I pointed to the thick envelope on the counter. “I just got my acceptance to the University of Alaska!”

“Congratulations!” She grinned. “What a coincidence.”
Charlie’s eyes narrowed and he glared back and forth between the two of us. “Fine,” he muttered after a minute. “I’m going to go watch the game, Bella. Nine-thirty.”

That was his usual parting command.

“Er, Dad? Remember the very recent discussion about my freedom…?”

He sighed. “Right. Okay, ten-thirty. You still have a curfew on school nights.”

“Bella’s no longer grounded?” Edythe asked. Though I knew she wasn’t really surprised, I couldn’t detect any false note to the sudden excitement in her voice.

“Conditionally,” Charlie corrected through his teeth. “What’s it to you?”

I frowned at my dad, but he didn’t see.

“It’s just good to know,” Edythe said. “Archie has been itching for a shopping partner, and I’m sure Bella would love to see some city lights.” She smiled at me.

But Charlie growled, “No!” and his face flushed purple.

“Dad! What’s the problem?”

He made an effort to unclench his teeth. “I don’t want you going to Seattle right now.”

“Huh?”

“I told you about that story in the paper—there’s some kind of gang on a killing spree in Seattle and I want you to steer clear, okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “Dad, there’s a better chance that I’ll get struck by lightning than that the one day I’m in Seattle—”

“No, that’s fine, Charlie,” Edythe said, interrupting me. “I didn’t mean Seattle. I was thinking Portland, actually. I wouldn’t have Bella in Seattle, either. Of course not.”

I looked at her in disbelief, but she had Charlie’s newspaper in her hands and she was reading the front page intently.

She must have been trying to appease my father. The idea of being in danger from even the most deadly of humans while I was with Archie or Edythe was downright hilarious.

It worked. Charlie stared at Edythe for one second more, and then shrugged. “Fine.” He stalked off toward the living room, in a bit of a hurry now—maybe he didn’t want to miss tip-off.

I waited till the TV was on, so that Charlie wouldn’t be able to hear me.

“What—,” I started to ask.

“Hold on,” Edythe said without looking up from the paper. Her eyes stayed focused on the page as she pushed the first application toward me across the table. “I think you can recycle your essays for this one. Same questions.”

Charlie must still be listening. I sighed and started to fill out the repetitive information: name, address, social…. After a few minutes I glanced up, but Edythe was now staring pensively out the window. As I bent my head back to my work, I noticed for the first time the name of the school.
I snorted and shoved the papers aside.

“Bella?”

“Be serious, Edythe. Dartmouth?”

Edythe lifted the discarded application and laid it gently in front of me again. “I think you’d like
New Hampshire,” she said. “There’s a full complement of night courses for me, and the forests are
very conveniently located for the avid hiker. Plentiful wildlife.” She pulled out the crooked smile
she knew I couldn’t resist.

I took a deep breath through my nose.

“I’ll let you pay me back, if that makes you happy,” she promised. “If you want, I can charge you
interest.”

“Like I could even get in without some enormous bribe. Or was that part of the loan? The new
Cullen wing of the library? Ugh. Why are we having this discussion again?”

“Will you just fill out the application, please, Bella? It won’t hurt you to apply.”

My jaw flexed. “You know what? I don’t think I will.”

I reached for the papers, planning to crumple them into a suitable shape for lobbing at the trashcan,
but they were already gone. I stared at the empty table for a moment, and then at Edythe. She
didn’t appear to have moved, but the application was probably already tucked away in her jacket.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“I sign your name better than you do yourself. You’ve already written the essays.”

“You’re going way overboard with this, you know.” I whispered on the off chance that Charlie
wasn’t completely lost in his game. “I really don’t need to apply anywhere else. I’ve been accepted
in Alaska. I can almost afford the first semester’s tuition. It’s as good an alibi as any. There’s no
need to throw away a bunch of money, no matter whose it is.”

A pained looked tightened her face. “Bella—”

“Don’t start. I agree that I need to go through the motions for Charlie’s sake, but we both know I’m
not going to be in any condition to go to school next fall. To be anywhere near people.”

My knowledge of those first few years as a new vampire was sketchy. Edythe had never gone into
details—it wasn’t her favorite subject—but I knew it wasn’t pretty. Self-control was apparently an
acquired skill. Anything more than correspondence school was out of the question.

“I thought the timing was still undecided,” Edythe reminded me softly. “You might enjoy a
semester or two of college. There are a lot of human experiences you’ve never had.”

“I’ll get to those afterward.”

“They won’t be human experiences afterward. You don’t get a second chance at humanity, Bella.”

I sighed. “You’ve got to be reasonable about the timing, Edythe. It’s just too dangerous to mess
around with.”

“There’s no danger yet,” she insisted.
I glared at her. No danger? Sure. I only had a sadistic vampire trying to avenge her mate’s death with my own, preferably through some slow and torturous method. Who was worried about Victoria? And, oh yeah, the Volturi—the vampire royal family with their small army of vampire warriors—who insisted that my heart stop beating one way or another in the near future, because humans weren’t allowed to know they existed. Right. No reason at all to panic.

Even with Archie keeping watch—Edythe was relying on his uncannily accurate visions of the future to give us advance warning—it was insane to take chances.

Besides, I’d already won this argument. The date for my transformation was tentatively set for shortly after my graduation from high school, only a handful of weeks away.

A sharp jolt of unease pierced my stomach as I realized how short the time really was. Of course this change was necessary—and the key to what I wanted more than everything else in the world put together—but I was deeply conscious of Charlie sitting in the other room enjoying his game, just like every other night. And my mother, Renée, far away in sunny Florida, still pleading with me to spend the summer on the beach with her and her new husband. And Julie, who, unlike my parents, would know exactly what was going on when I disappeared to some distant school. Even if my parents didn’t grow suspicious for a long time, even if I could put off visits with excuses about travel expenses or study loads or illnesses, Julie would know the truth.

For a moment, the idea of Julie’s certain revulsion overshadowed every other pain.

“Bella,” Edythe murmured, her face twisting when she read the distress in mine. “There’s no hurry. I won’t let anyone hurt you. You can take all the time you need.”

“I want to hurry,” I whispered, smiling weakly, trying to make a joke of it. “I want to be a monster, too.”

Her teeth clenched; she spoke through them. “You have no idea what you’re saying.” Abruptly, she flung the damp newspaper onto the table in between us. Her finger stabbed the headline on the front page:

DEATH TOLL ON THE RISE,

POLICE FEAR GANG ACTIVITY

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Monsters are not a joke, Bella.”

I stared at the headline again, and then up to her hard expression. “A… a vampire is doing this?” I whispered.

She smiled without humor. Her voice was low and cold. “You’d be surprised, Bella, at how often my kind are the source behind the horrors in your human news. It’s easy to recognize, when you know what to look for. The information here indicates a newborn vampire is loose in Seattle. Bloodthirsty, wild, out of control. The way we all were.”

I let my gaze drop to the paper again, avoiding her eyes.
“We’ve been monitoring the situation for a few weeks. All the signs are there—the unlikely
disappearances, always in the night, the poorly disposed-of corpses, the lack of other evidence.…
Yes, someone brand-new. And no one seems to be taking responsibility for the neophyte.…” She
took a deep breath. “Well, it’s not our problem. We wouldn’t even pay attention to the situation if
wasn’t going on so close to home. Like I said, this happens all the time. The existence of monsters
results in monstrous consequences.”

I tried not to see the names on the page, but they jumped out from the rest of the print like they
were in bold. The five people whose lives were over, whose families were mourning now. It was
different from considering murder in the abstract, reading those names. Maureen Gardiner,
Geoffrey Campbell, Grace Razi, Michelle O’Connell, Ronald Albrook. People who’d had parents
and children and friends and pets and jobs and hopes and plans and memories and futures.…

“It won’t be the same for me,” I whispered, half to myself. “You won’t let me be like that. We’ll
live in Antarctica.”

Edythe snorted, breaking the tension. “Penguins. Lovely.”

I laughed a shaky laugh and knocked the paper off the table so I wouldn’t have to see those names;
it hit the linoleum with a thud. Of course Edythe would consider the hunting possibilities. She and
her “vegetarian” family—all committed to protecting human life—preferred the flavor of large
predators for satisfying their dietary needs. “Alaska, then, as planned. Only somewhere much more
remote than Juneau—somewhere with grizzlies galore.”

“Better,” she allowed. “There are polar bears, too. Very fierce. And the wolves get quite large.”

My mouth fell open and my breath blew out in a sharp gust.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. Before I could recover, the confusion vanished and her whole body
seemed to harden. “Oh. Never mind the wolves, then, if the idea is offensive to you.” Her voice
was stiff, formal, her shoulders rigid.

“She was my best friend, Edythe,” I muttered. It stung to use the past tense. “Of course the idea
offends me.”

“Please forgive my thoughtlessness,” she said, still very formal. “I shouldn’t have suggested that.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I stared at my hands, clenched into a double fist on the table.

We were both silent for a moment, and then her cool finger was under my chin, coaxing my face
up. Her expression was much softer now.

“Sorry. Really.”

“I know. I know it’s not the same thing. I shouldn’t have reacted that way. It’s just that… well, I
was already thinking about Julie before you came over.” I hesitated. Her tawny eyes seemed to get
a little bit darker whenever I said Julie’s name. My voice turned pleading in response. “Charlie
says Jules is having a hard time. She’s hurting right now, and… it’s my fault.”

“You’ve done nothing wrong, Bella.”

I took a deep breath. “I need to make it better, Edythe. I owe her that. And it’s one of Charlie’s
conditions, anyway—”

Her face changed while I spoke, turning hard again, statue-like.
“You know it’s out of the question for you to be around a werewolf unprotected, Bella. And it would break the treaty if any of us cross over onto their land. Do you want us to start a war?”

“Of course not!”

“Then there’s really no point in discussing the matter further.” She dropped her hand and looked away, searching for a subject change. Her eyes paused on something behind me, and she smiled, though her eyes stayed wary.

“I’m glad Charlie has decided to let you out—you’re sadly in need of a visit to the bookstore. I can’t believe you’re reading *Wuthering Heights* again. Don’t you know it by heart yet?”

“Not all of us have photographic memories,” I said curtly.

“Photographic memory or not, I don’t understand why you like it. The characters are ghastly people who ruin each others’ lives. I don’t know how Heathcliff and Cathy ended up being ranked with couples like Romeo and Juliet or Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. It isn’t a love story, it’s a hate story.”

“You have some serious issues with the classics,” I snapped.

“Perhaps it’s because I’m not impressed by antiquity.” She smiled, evidently satisfied that she’d distracted me. “Honestly, though, why *do* you read it over and over?!” Her eyes were vivid with real interest now, trying—again—to unravel the convoluted workings of my mind. She reached across the table to cradle my face in her hand. “What is it that appeals to you?”

Her sincere curiosity disarmed me. “I’m not sure,” I said, scrambling for coherency while her gaze unintentionally scattered my thoughts. “I think it’s something about the inevitability. How nothing can keep them apart—not her selfishness, or his evil, or even death, in the end.…”

Her face was thoughtful as she considered my words. After a moment she smiled a teasing smile. “I still think it would be a better story if either of them had one redeeming quality.”

“I think that may be the point,” I disagreed. “Their love *is* their only redeeming quality.”

“I hope you have better sense than that—to fall in love with someone so… malignant.”

“It’s a bit late for me to worry about who I fall in love with,” I pointed out. “But even without the warning, I seem to have managed fairly well.”

She laughed quietly. “I’m glad you think so.”

“Well, I hope you’re smart enough to stay away from someone so selfish. Catherine is really the source of all the trouble, not Heathcliff.”

“I’ll be on my guard,” she promised.

I sighed. She was so good at distractions.

I put my hand over her to hold it to my face. “I need to see Julie.”

Her eyes closed. “No.”

“It’s truly not dangerous at all,” I said, pleading again. “I used to spend all day in La Push with the whole lot of them, and nothing ever happened.”
But I made a slip; my voice faltered at the end because I realized as I was saying the words that they were a lie. It was not true that nothing had ever happened. A brief flash of memory—an enormous gray wolf crouched to spring, baring his dagger-like teeth at me—had my palms sweating with an echo of remembered panic.

Edythe heard my heart accelerate and nodded as if I’d acknowledged the lie aloud. “Werewolves are unstable. Sometimes, the people near them get hurt. Sometimes, they get killed.”

I wanted to deny it, but another image slowed my rebuttal. I saw in my head the once beautiful face of Elliott Young, now marred by a trio of dark scars that dragged down the corner of his right eye and left his mouth warped forever into a lopsided scowl.

She waited, grimly triumphant, for me to find my voice.

“You don’t know them,” I whispered.

“I know them better than you think, Bella. I was here the last time.”

“The last time?”

“We started crossing paths with the wolves about seventy years ago…. We had just settled near Hoquiam. That was before Archie and Jasper were with us. We outnumbered them, but that wouldn’t have stopped it from turning into a fight if not for Carlisle. He managed to convince Ephraim Black that coexisting was possible, and eventually we made the truce.”

Julie’s great-grandfather’s name startled me.

“We thought the line had died out with Ephraim,” Edythe muttered; it sounded like she was talking to himself now. “That the genetic quirk which allowed the transmutation had been lost…. ” She broke off and stared at me accusingly. “Your bad luck seems to get more potent every day. Do you realize that your insatiable pull for all things deadly was strong enough to recover a pack of mutant canines from extinction? If we could bottle your luck, we’d have a weapon of mass destruction on our hands.”

I ignored the ribbing, my attention caught by her assumption—was she serious? “But I didn’t bring them back. Don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“My bad luck had nothing to do with it. The werewolves came back because the vampires did.”

Edythe stared at me, her body motionless with surprise.

“Julie told me that your family being here set things in motion. I thought you would already know. …”

Her eyes narrowed. “Is that what they think?”

“Edythe, look at the facts. Seventy years ago, you came here, and the werewolves showed up. You come back now, and the werewolves show up again. Do you think that’s a coincidence?”

She blinked and her glare relaxed. “Carlisle will be interested in that theory.”


She was silent for a moment, staring out the window into the rain; I imagined she was
contemplating the fact that her family’s presence was turning the locals into giant dogs.

“Interesting, but not exactly relevant,” she murmured after a moment. “The situation remains the same.”

I could translate that easily enough: no werewolf friends.

I knew I must be patient with Edythe. It wasn’t that she was unreasonable, it was just that she didn’t understand. She had no idea how very much I owed Julie Black—my life many times over, and possibly my sanity, too.

I didn’t like to talk about that barren time with anyone, and especially not Edythe. She had only been trying to save me when she’d left, trying to save my soul. I didn’t hold her responsible for all the stupid things I’d done in her absence, or the pain I had suffered.

She did.

So I would have to word my explanation very carefully.

I got up and walked around the table. She opened her arms for me and I sat on her lap, nestling into her cool stone embrace. I looked at her hands while I spoke.

“Please just listen for a minute. This is so much more important than some whim to drop in on an old friend. Julie is in pain.” My voice distorted around the word. “I can’t not try to help her—I can’t give up on her now, when she needs me. Just because she’s not human all the time…. Well, she was there for me when I was… not so human myself. You don’t know what it was like….” I hesitated. Edythe’s arms were rigid around me; her hands were in fists now, the tendons standing out. “If Julie hadn’t helped me… I’m not sure what you would have come home to. I owe her better than this, Edythe.”

I looked up at her face warily. Her eyes were closed, and her jaw was strained.

“I’ll never forgive myself for leaving you,” she whispered. “Not if I live a hundred thousand years.”

I put my hand against her cold face and waited until she sighed and opened her eyes.

“You were just trying to do the right thing. And I’m sure it would have worked with anyone less mental than me. Besides, you’re here now. That’s the part that matters.”

“If I’d never left, you wouldn’t feel the need to go risk your life to comfort a dog.”

I flinched. I was used to Julie and all her derogatory slurs—bloodsucker, leech, parasite…. Somehow it sounded harsher in Edythe’s velvet voice.

“I don’t know how to phrase this properly,” Edythe said, and her tone was bleak. “It’s going to sound cruel, I suppose. But I’ve come too close to losing you in the past. I know what it feels like to think I have. I am not going to tolerate anything dangerous.”

“You have to trust me on this. I’ll be fine.”

Her face was pained again. “Please, Bella,” she whispered.

I stared into her suddenly burning golden eyes. “Please what?”

“Please, for me. Please make a conscious effort to keep yourself safe. I’ll do everything I can, but I
would appreciate a little help.”

“I’ll work on it,” I murmured.

“Do you really have any idea how important you are to me? Any concept at all of how much I love you?” She pulled me tighter against her hard chest, tucking my head under her chin.

I pressed my lips against her snow-cold neck. “I know how much I love you,” I answered.

“You compare one small tree to the entire forest.”

I rolled my eyes, but she couldn’t see. “Impossible.”

She kissed the top of my head and sighed.

“No werewolves.”

“I’m not going along with that. I have to see Julie.”

“Then I’ll have to stop you.”

She sounded utterly confident that this wouldn’t be a problem.

I was sure she was right.

“We’ll see about that,” I bluffed anyway. “She’s still my friend.”

I could feel Julie’s note in my pocket, like it suddenly weighed ten pounds. I could hear the words in her voice, and she seemed to be agreeing with Edythe—something that would never happen in reality.

*Doesn’t change anything. Sorry.*
I FELT ODDLY BUOYANT AS I WALKED FROM SPANISH toward the cafeteria, and it wasn’t just because I was holding hands with the most perfect person on the planet, though that was certainly part of it.

Maybe it was the knowledge that my sentence was served and I was a free woman again.

Or maybe it wasn’t anything to do with me specifically. Maybe it was the atmosphere of freedom that hung over the entire campus. School was winding down, and, for the senior class especially, there was a perceptible thrill in the air.

Freedom was so close it was touchable, taste-able. Signs of it were everywhere. Posters crowded together on the cafeteria walls, and the trashcans wore a colorful skirt of spilled-over fliers: reminders to buy yearbooks, class rings, and announcements; deadlines to order graduation gowns, hats, and tassels; neon-bright sales pitches—the juniors campaigning for class office; ominous, rose-wreathed advertisements for this year’s prom. The big dance was this coming weekend, but I had an ironclad promise from Edythe that I would not be subjected to that again. After all, I’d already had that human experience.

No, it must be my personal freedom that lightened me today. The ending of the school year did not give… me the pleasure it seemed to give the other students. Actually, I felt nervous to the point of nausea whenever I thought of it. I tried to *not* think of it.

But it was hard to escape such an omnipresent topic as graduation.

“Have you sent your announcements, yet?” Angela asked when Edythe and I sat down at our table. She had her light brown hair pulled back into a sloppy ponytail instead of her usual smooth hairdo, and there was a slightly frantic look about her eyes.

Archie and Ben were already there, too, on either side of Angela. Ben was intent over a comic book, his glasses sliding down his narrow nose. Archie was scrutinizing my boring jeans-and-a-t-shirt outfit in a way that made me self-conscious. Probably plotting another makeover. I sighed. My indifferent attitude to fashion was a constant thorn in his side. If I’d allow it, he’d love to dress me every day—perhaps several times a day—like some oversized three-dimensional paper doll.

“No,” I answered Angela. “There’s no point, really. Renée knows when I’m graduating. Who else is there?”

“How about you, Archie?”

Archie smiled. “All done.”

“Lucky you.” Angela sighed. “My mother has a thousand cousins and she expects me to hand-address one to everybody. I’m going to get carpal tunnel. I can’t put it off any longer and I’m just dreading it.”

“I’ll help you,” I volunteered. “If you don’t mind my awful handwriting."

Charlie would like that. From the corner of my eye, I saw Edythe smile. She must like that, too—me fulfilling Charlie’s conditions without involving werewolves.

Angela looked relieved. “That’s so nice of you. I’ll come over any time you want.”
“Actually, I’d rather go to your house if that’s okay—I’m sick of mine. Charlie un-grounded me last night.” I grinned as I announced my good news.

“Really?” Angela asked, mild excitement lighting her always-gentle brown eyes. “I thought you said you were in for life.”

“I’m more surprised than you are. I was sure I would at least have finished high school before he set me free.”

“Well, this is great, Bella! We’ll have to go out to celebrate.”

“You have no idea how good that sounds.”

“What should we do?” Archie mused, his face lighting up at the possibilities. Archie’s ideas were usually a little grandiose for me, and I could see it in his eyes now—the tendency to take things too far kicking into action.

“Whatever you’re thinking, Archie, I doubt I’m that free.”

“Free is free, right?” he insisted.

“I’m sure I still have boundaries—like the continental U.S., for example.”

Angela and Ben laughed, but Archie grimaced in real disappointment.

“So what are we doing tonight?” he persisted.

“Nothing. Look, let’s give it a couple of days to make sure he wasn’t joking. It’s a school night, anyway.”

“We’ll celebrate this weekend, then.” Archie’s enthusiasm was impossible to repress.

“Sure,” I said, hoping to placate him. I knew I wasn’t going to do anything too outlandish; it would be safer to take it slow with Charlie. Give him a chance to appreciate how trustworthy and mature I was before I asked for any favors.

Angela and Archie started talking about options; Ben joined the conversation, setting his comics aside. My attention drifted. I was surprised to find that the subject of my freedom was suddenly not as gratifying as it had been just a moment ago. While they discussed things to do in Port Angeles or maybe Hoquiam, I began to feel disgruntled.

It didn’t take long to determine where my restlessness stemmed from.

Ever since I’d said goodbye to Julie Black in the forest outside my home, I’d been plagued by a persistent, uncomfortable intrusion of a specific mental picture. It popped into my thoughts at regular intervals like some annoying alarm clock set to sound every half hour, filling my head with the image of Julie’s face crumpled in pain. This was the last memory I had of her.

As the disturbing vision struck again, I knew exactly why I was dissatisfied with my liberty. Because it was incomplete.

Sure, I was free to go to anywhere I wanted—except La Push; free to do anything I wanted—except see Julie. I frowned at the table. There had to be some kind of middle ground.

“Archie? Archie!”
Angela’s voice yanked me from my reverie. She was waving her hand back and forth in front of Archie’s blank, staring face. Archie’s expression was something I recognized—an expression that sent an automatic shock of panic through my body. The vacant look in his eyes told me that he was seeing something very different from the mundane lunchroom scene that surrounded us, but something that was every bit as real in its own way. Something that was coming, something that would happen soon. I felt the blood slither from my face.

Then Edythe laughed, a very natural, relaxed sound. Angela and Ben looked toward him, but my eyes were locked on Archie. He jumped suddenly, as if someone had kicked him under the table.

“Is it naptime already, Archie?” Edythe teased.

Archie was himself again. “Sorry, I was daydreaming, I guess.”

“Daydreaming’s better than facing two more hours of school,” Ben said.

Archie threw himself back into the conversation with more animation than before—just a little bit too much. Once I saw his eyes lock with Edythe’s, only for a moment, and then he looked back to Angela before anyone else noticed. Edythe was quiet, playing absentmindedly with a strand of my hair.

I waited anxiously for a chance to ask Edythe what Archie had seen in his vision, but the afternoon passed without one minute of alone time.

It felt odd to me, almost deliberate. After lunch, Edythe slowed her pace to match Ben’s, talking about some assignment I knew she’d already finished. Then there was always someone else there between classes, though we usually had a few minutes to ourselves. When the final bell rang, Edythe struck up a conversation with Mike Newton of all people, falling into step beside him as Mike headed for the parking lot. I trailed behind, letting Edythe tow me along.

I listened, confused, while Mike answered Edythe’s unusually friendly queries. It seemed Mike was having car troubles.

“…but I just replaced the battery,” Mike was saying. His eyes darted ahead and then back to Edythe warily. Mystified, just like I was.

“Perhaps it’s the cables?” Edythe offered.

“Maybe. I really don’t know anything about cars,” Mike admitted. “I need to have someone look at it, but I can’t afford to take it to Dowling’s.”

I opened my mouth to suggest my mechanic, and then snapped it shut again. My mechanic was busy these days—busy running around as a giant wolf.

“I know a few things—I could take a look, if you like,” Edythe offered. “Just let me drop Archie and Bella at home.”

Mike and I both stared at Edythe with our mouths hanging open.

“Er… thanks,” Mike mumbled when he recovered. “But I have to get to work. Maybe some other time.”

“Absolutely.”

“See ya.” Mike climbed into his car, shaking his head in disbelief.
Edythe’s Volvo, with Archie already inside, was just two cars away.

“What was that about?” I muttered as Edythe held the passenger door for me.

“Just being helpful,” Edythe answered.

And then Archie, waiting in the backseat, was babbling at top speed.

“You’re really not that good a mechanic, Edythe. Maybe you should have Rosalie take a look at it tonight, just so you look good if Mike decides to let you help, you know. Not that it wouldn’t be fun to watch his face if Rosalie showed up to help. But since Rosalie is supposed to be across the country attending college, I guess that’s not the best idea. Too bad. Though I suppose, for Mike’s car, you’ll do. It’s only within the finer tunings of a good Italian sports car that you’re out of your depth. And speaking of Italy and sports cars that I stole there, you still owe me a yellow Porsche. I don’t know that I want to wait for Christmas…..”

I stopped listening after a minute, letting his quick voice become just a hum in the background as I settled into my patient mode.

It looked to me like Edythe was trying to avoid my questions. Fine. She would have to be alone with me soon enough. It was only a matter of time.

Edythe seemed to realize that, too. She dropped Archie at the mouth of the Cullens’ drive as usual, though by this point I half expected her to drive him to the door and walk him in.

As he got out, Archie threw a sharp look at her face. Edythe seemed completely at ease.

“See you later,” she said. And then, ever so slightly, she nodded.

Archie turned to disappear into the trees.

She was quiet as she turned the car around and headed back to Forks. I waited, wondering if she would bring it up herself. She didn’t, and this made me tense. What had Archie seen today at lunch? Something she didn’t want to tell me, and I tried to think of a reason why she would keep secrets. Maybe it would be better to prepare myself before I asked. I didn’t want to freak out and have her think I couldn’t handle it, whatever it was.

So we were both silent until we got to back to Charlie’s house.

“Light homework load tonight,” she commented.

“Mmm,” I assented.

“Do you suppose I’m allowed inside again?”

“Charlie didn’t throw a fit when you picked me up for school.”

But I was sure Charlie was going to turn sulky fast when he got home and found Edythe here. Maybe I should make something extra-special for dinner.

Inside, I headed up the stairs, and Edythe followed. She lounged on my bed and gazed out the window, seeming oblivious to my edginess.

I stowed my bag and turned the computer on. There was an unanswered e-mail from my mom to attend to, and she got panicky when I took too long. I drummed my fingers as I waited for my decrepit computer to wheeze awake; they snapped against the desk, staccato and anxious.
And then her fingers were on mine, holding them still.

“Are we a little impatient today?” she murmured.

I looked up, intending to make a sarcastic remark, but her face was closer than I’d expected. Her golden eyes were smoldering, just inches away, and her breath was cool against my open lips. I could taste her scent on my tongue.

I couldn’t remember the witty response I’d been about to make. I couldn’t remember my name.

She didn’t give me a chance to recover.

If I had my way, I would spend the majority of my time kissing Edythe. There wasn’t anything I’d experienced in my life that compared to the feeling of her cool lips, marble hard but always so gentle, moving with mine.

I didn’t often get my way.

So it surprised me a little when her fingers braided themselves into my hair, securing my face to hers. My arms locked behind her neck, and I wished I was stronger—strong enough to keep her prisoner here. One hand slid down my back, pressing me tighter against her stone chest. Even through her sweater, her skin was cold enough to make me shiver—it was a shiver of pleasure, of happiness, but her hands began to loosen in response.

I knew I had about three seconds before she would sigh and slide me deftly away, saying something about how we’d risked my life enough for one afternoon. Making the most of my last seconds, I crushed myself closer, molding myself to the shape of her. The tip of my tongue traced the curve of her lower lip; it was as flawlessly smooth as if it had been polished, and the taste—

She pulled my face away from hers, breaking my hold with ease—she probably didn’t even realize that I was using all my strength.

She chuckled once, a low, throaty sound. Her eyes were bright with the excitement she so rigidly disciplined.

“Ah, Bella.” She sighed.

“I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m not.”

“And I should feel sorry that you’re not sorry, but I don’t. Maybe I should go sit on the bed.”

I exhaled a little dizzily. “If you think that’s necessary….”

She smiled crookedly and disentangled herself.

I shook my head a few times, trying to clear it, and turned back to my computer. It was all warmed up and humming now. Well, not as much humming as groaning.

“Tell Renée I said hello.”

“Sure thing.”

I scanned through Renée’s e-mail, shaking my head now and then at some of the dippier things she’d done. I was just as entertained and horrified as the first time I’d read this. It was so like my mother to forget exactly how paralyzed she was by heights until she was already strapped to a parachute and a dive instructor. I felt a little frustrated with Phil, her husband of almost two years,
for allowing that one. I would have taken better care of her. I knew her so much better.

You have to let them go their own way eventually, I reminded myself. You have to let them have their own life.…

I’d spent most of my life taking care of Renée, patiently guiding her away from her craziest plans, good-naturedly enduring the ones I couldn’t talk her out of. I’d always been indulgent with my mom, amused by her, even a little condescending to her. I saw her cornucopia of mistakes and laughed privately to myself. Scatterbrained Renée.

I was a very different person from my mother. Someone thoughtful and cautious. The responsible one, the grown-up. That’s how I saw myself. That was the person I knew.

With the blood still pounding in my head from Edythe’s kiss, I couldn’t help but think of my mother’s most life-altering mistake. Silly and romantic, getting married fresh out of high school to a man she barely knew, then producing me a year later. She’d always promised me that she had no regrets, that I was the best gift her life had ever given her. And yet she’d drilled it into me over and over—smart people took marriage seriously. Mature people went to college and started careers before they got deeply involved in a relationship. She knew I would never be as thoughtless and goofy and small-town as she’d been.…

I gritted my teeth and tried to concentrate as I answered her letter.

Then I hit her parting line and remembered why I’d neglected to write sooner.

*You haven’t said anything about Julie in a long time,* she’d written. *What’s she up to these days?*  

Charlie was prompting her, I was sure.

I sighed and typed quickly, tucking the answer to her question between two less sensitive paragraphs.

*Julie is fine, I guess. I don’t see her much; she spends most of her time with a pack of her friends down at La Push these days.*

Smiling wryly to myself, I added Edythe’s greeting and hit “send.”

I didn’t realize that Edythe was standing silently behind me again until after I’d turned off the computer and shoved away from the desk. I was about to scold her for reading over my shoulder when I realized that she wasn’t paying any attention to me. She was examining a flat black box with wires curling crookedly away from the main square in a way that didn’t look healthy for whatever it was. After a second, I recognized the car stereo Eleanor, Rosalie, and Jasper had given me for my last birthday. I’d forgotten about the birthday presents hiding under a growing pile of dust on the floor of my closet.

“What did you *do* to this?” she asked in a horrorstruck voice.

“It didn’t want to come out of the dashboard.”

“So you felt the need to torture it?”
“You know how I am with tools. No pain was inflicted intentionally.”

She shook her head, her face a mask of faux tragedy. “You killed it.”

I shrugged. “Oh, well.”

“It would hurt their feelings if they saw this,” she said. “I guess it’s a good thing that you’ve been on house arrest. I’ll have to get another one in place before they notice.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need a fancy stereo.”

“It’s not for your sake that I’m going to replace it.”

I sighed.

“You didn’t get much good out of your birthday presents last year,” she said in a disgruntled voice. Suddenly, she was fanning herself with a stiff rectangle of paper.

I didn’t answer, for fear my voice would shake. My disastrous eighteenth birthday—with all its far-reaching consequences—wasn’t something I cared to remember, and I was surprised that she would bring it up. She was even more sensitive about it than I was.

“Do you realize these are about to expire?” she asked, holding the paper out to me. It was another present—the voucher for airplane tickets that Earnest and Carlisle had given me so that I could visit Renée in Florida.

I took a deep breath and answered in a flat voice. “No. I’d forgotten all about them, actually.”

Her expression was carefully bright and positive; there was no trace of any deep emotion as she continued. “Well, we still have a little time. You’ve been liberated… and we have no plans this weekend, as you refuse to go to the prom with me.” She grinned. “Why not celebrate your freedom this way?”

I gasped. “By going to Florida?”

“You did say something about the continental U.S. being allowable.”

I glared at her, suspicious, trying to understand where this had come from.

“Well?” she demanded. “Are we going to see Renée or not?”

“Charlie will never allow it.”

“Charlie can’t keep you from visiting your mother. She still has primary custody.”

“Nobody has custody of me. I’m an adult.”

She flashed a brilliant smile. “Exactly.”

I thought it over for a short minute before deciding that it wasn’t worth the fight. Charlie would be furious—not that I was going to see Renée, but that Edythe was going with me. Charlie wouldn’t speak to me for months, and I’d probably end up grounded again. It was definitely smarter not to even bring it up. Maybe in a few weeks, as a graduation favor or something.

But the idea of seeing my mother now, not weeks from now, was hard to resist. It had been so long since I’d seen Renée. And even longer since I’d seen her under pleasant circumstances. The last
time I’d been with her in Phoenix, I’d spent the whole time in a hospital bed. The last time she’d come here, I’d been more or less catatonic. Not exactly the best memories to leave her with.

And maybe, if she saw how happy I was with Edythe, she would tell Charlie to ease up.

Edythe scrutinized my face while I deliberated.

I sighed. “Not this weekend.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to fight with Charlie. Not so soon after he’s forgiven me.”

Her eyebrows pulled together. “I think this weekend is perfect,” she muttered.

I shook my head. “Another time.”

“You aren’t the only one who’s been trapped in this house, you know.” She frowned at me.

Suspicion returned. This kind of behavior was unlike her. She was always so impossibly selfless; I knew it was making me spoiled.

“You can go anywhere you want,” I pointed out.

“The outside world holds no interest for me without you.”

I rolled my eyes at the hyperbole.

“I’m serious,” she said.

“Let’s take the outside world slowly, all right? For example, we could start with a movie in Port Angeles…”

She groaned. “Never mind. We’ll talk about it later.”

“There’s nothing left to talk about.”

She shrugged.

“Okay, then, new subject,” I said. I’d almost forgotten my worries about this afternoon—had that been her intention? “What did Archie see today at lunch?”

My eyes were fixed on her face as I spoke, measuring her reaction.

Her expression was composed; there was only the slightest hardening of her topaz eyes. “He’s been seeing Jasper in a strange place, somewhere in the southwest, Archie thinks, near Jasper’s former… family. But he has no conscious intentions to go back.” She sighed. “It’s got Archie worried.”

“Oh.” That was nothing close to what I’d been expecting. But of course it made sense that Archie would be watching out for Jasper’s future. Jasper was his soul mate, his true other half, though they weren’t as flamboyant about their relationship as Rosalie and Eleanor were. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I didn’t realize you’d noticed,” she said. “It’s probably nothing important, in any case.”

My imagination was sadly out of control. I’d taken a perfectly normal afternoon and twisted it until
it looked like Edythe was going out of her way to keep things from me. I needed therapy.

We went downstairs to work on our homework, just in case Charlie showed up early. Edythe finished in minutes; I slogged laboriously through my calculus until I decided it was time to fix Charlie’s dinner. Edythe helped, making faces every so often at the raw ingredients—human food was mildly repulsive to her. I made stroganoff from Grandma Swan’s recipe, because I was sucking up. It wasn’t one of my favorites, but it would please Charlie.

Charlie seemed to already be in a good mood when he got home. He didn’t even go out of his way to be rude to Edythe. Edythe excused herself from eating with us, as usual. The sound of the nightly news drifted from the front room, but I doubted Edythe was really watching.

After forcing down three helpings, Charlie kicked his feet up on the spare chair and folded his hands contentedly across his distended stomach.

“That was great, Bells.”

“I’m glad you liked it. How was work?” He’d been eating with too much concentration for me to make conversation before.

“Sort of slow. Well, dead slow really. Mark and I played cards for a good part of the afternoon,” he admitted with a grin. “I won, nineteen hands to seven. And then I was on the phone with Billy for a while.”

I tried to keep my expression the same. “How is he?”

“Good, good. His joints are bothering him a little.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

“Yeah. He invited us down to visit this weekend. He was thinking of having the Clearwaters and the Uleys over too. Sort of a playoff party…”

“Huh,” was my genius response. But what could I say? I knew I wouldn’t be allowed to hit a werewolf party, even with parental supervision. I wondered if Edythe would have a problem with Charlie hanging out in La Push. Or would she suppose that, since Charlie was mostly spending time with Billy, who was only human, my father wouldn’t be in danger?

I got up and piled the dishes together without looking at Charlie. I dumped them into the sink and started the water. Edythe appeared silently and grabbed a dishtowel.

Charlie sighed and gave up for the moment, though I imagined he would revisit the subject when we were alone again. He heaved himself to his feet and headed for the TV, just like every other night.

“Charlie,” Edythe said in a conversational tone.

Charlie stopped in the middle of his little kitchen. “Yeah?”

“Did Bella ever tell you that my parents gave her airplane tickets on her last birthday, so that she could visit Renée?”

I dropped the plate I was scrubbing. It glanced off the counter and clattered noisily to the floor. It didn’t break, but it spattered the room, and all three of us, with soapy water. Charlie didn’t even seem to notice.
“Bella?” he asked in a stunned voice.

I kept my eyes on the plate as I retrieved it. “Yeah, they did.”

Charlie swallowed loudly, and then his eyes narrowed as he turned back to Edythe. “No, she never mentioned it.”

“Hmm,” Edythe murmured.

“Was there a reason you brought it up?” Charlie asked in a hard voice.

Edythe shrugged. “They’re about to expire. I think it might hurt Earnest’s feelings if Bella doesn’t use his gift. Not that he’d say anything.”

I stared at Edythe in disbelief.

Charlie thought for a minute. “It’s probably a good idea for you to visit your mom, Bella. She’d love that. I’m surprised you didn’t say anything about this, though.”

“I forgot,” I admitted.

He frowned. “You forgot that someone gave you plane tickets?”

“Mmm,” I murmured vaguely, and turned back to the sink.

“I noticed that you said *they’re* about to expire, Edythe,” Charlie went on. “How many tickets did your parents give her?”

“Just one for her… and one for me.”

The plate I dropped this time landed in the sink, so it didn’t make as much noise. I could easily hear the sharp huff as my father exhaled. The blood rushed into my face, fueled by irritation and chagrin. Why was Edythe doing this? I glared at the bubbles in the sink, panicking.

“That’s out of the question!” Charlie was abruptly in a rage, shouting the words.

“Why?” Edythe asked, her voice saturated with innocent surprise. “You just said it was a good idea for her to see her mother.”

Charlie ignored her. “You’re not going anywhere with her, young lady!” he yelled. I spun around and he was jabbing a finger at me.

Anger pulsed through me automatically, an instinctive reaction to his tone.

“I’m not a child, Dad. And I’m not grounded anymore, remember?”

“Oh yes, you are. Starting now.”

“For what?!”

“Because I said so.”

“Do I need to remind you that I’m a legal adult, Charlie?”

“This is my house—you follow my rules!”

My glare turned icy. “If that’s how you want it. Do you want me to move out tonight? Or can I
have a few days to pack?"

Charlie’s face went bright red. I instantly felt horrible for playing the move-out card.

I took a deep breath and tried to make my tone more reasonable. “I’ll do my time without complaining when I’ve done something wrong, Dad, but I’m not going to put up with your prejudices.”

He sputtered, but managed nothing coherent.

“Now, I know that you know that I have every right to see Mom for the weekend. You can’t honestly tell me you’d object to the plan if I was going with Archie or Angela.”

“Friends,” he grunted, with a nod. “Archie and Angela don’t think of you that way.”

“Would it bother you if I took Julie?”

I’d only picked the name because I knew of my father’s preference for Julie, but I quickly wished I hadn’t; Edythe’s teeth clenched together with an audible snap.

My father struggled to compose himself before he answered. “Yes,” he said in an unconvincing voice. “That would bother me.”

“You’re a rotten liar, Dad.”

“Bella—”

“It’s not like I’m headed off to Vegas to be a showgirl or anything. I’m going to see Mom,” I reminded him. “She’s just as much my parental authority as you are.”

He threw me a withering look.

“Are you implying something about Mom’s ability to look after me?”

Charlie flinched at the threat implicit in my question.

“You’d better hope I don’t mention this to her,” I said.

“You’d better not,” he warned. “I’m not happy about this, Bella.”

“There’s no reason for you to be upset.”

He rolled his eyes, but I could tell the storm was over.

I turned to pull the plug out of the sink. “So my homework is done, your dinner is done, the dishes are done, and I’m not grounded. I’m going out. I’ll be back before ten-thirty.”

“Where are you going?” His face, almost back to normal, flushed light red again.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I’ll keep it within a ten-mile radius, though. Okay?”

He grunted something that did not sound like approval, and stalked out of the room. Naturally, as soon as I’d won the fight, I began to feel guilty.

“We’re going out?” Edythe asked, her voice low but enthusiastic.

I turned to glower at her. “Yes. I think I’d like to speak to you alone.”
She didn’t look as apprehensive as I thought she should.

I waited to begin until we were safely in her car.

“What was *that*?” I demanded.

“I know you want to see your mother, Bella—you’ve been talking about her in your sleep. Worrying actually.”

“I have?”

She nodded. “But, clearly, you were too much of a coward to deal with Charlie, so I interceded on your behalf.”

“Interceded? You threw me to the sharks!”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t think you were in any danger.”

“I told you I didn’t want to fight with Charlie.”

“Nobody said that you had to.”

I glowered at her. “I can’t help myself when he gets all bossy like that—my natural teenage instincts overpower me.”

She chuckled. “Well, that’s not my fault.”

I stared at her, speculating. She didn’t seem to notice. Her face was serene as she gazed out the windshield. Something was off, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Or maybe it was just my imagination again, running wild like it had this afternoon.

“Does this sudden urge to see Florida have anything to do with the party at Billy’s place?”

Her jaw flexed. “Nothing at all. It wouldn’t matter if you were here or on the other side of the world, you still wouldn’t be going.”

It was just like with Charlie before—just like being treated as a misbehaving child. I gritted my teeth together so I wouldn’t start shouting. I didn’t want to fight with Edythe, too.

Edythe sighed, and when she spoke her voice was warm and velvet again. “So what do you want to do tonight?” she asked.

“Can we go to your house? I haven’t seen Earnest in so long.”

She smiled. “He’ll like that. Especially when he hears what we’re doing this weekend.”

I groaned in defeat.

We didn’t stay out late, as I’d promised. I was not surprised to see the lights still on when we pulled up in front of the house—I knew Charlie would be waiting to yell at me some more.

“You’d better not come inside,” I said. “It will only make things worse.”
“His thoughts are relatively calm,” Edythe teased. Her expression made me wonder if there was some additional joke I was missing. The corners of her mouth twitched, fighting a smile.

“I’ll see you later,” I muttered glumly.

She laughed and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll be back when Charlie’s snoring.”

The TV was loud when I got inside. I briefly considered trying to sneak past him.

“Could you come in here, Bella?” Charlie called, sinking that plan.

My feet dragged as I took the five necessary steps.

“What’s up, Dad?”

“Did you have a nice time tonight?” he asked. He seemed ill at ease. I looked for hidden meanings in his words before I answered.

“Yes,” I said hesitantly.

“What did you do?”

I shrugged. “Hung out with Archie and Jasper. Edythe beat Archie at chess, and then I played Jasper. He buried me.”

I smiled. Edythe and Archie playing chess was one of the funniest things I’d ever seen. They’d sat there nearly motionless, staring at the board, while Archie foresaw the moves she would make and she picked the moves he would make in return out of his head. They played most of the game in their minds; I think they’d each moved two pawns when Archie suddenly flicked his king over and surrendered. It took all of three minutes.

Charlie hit the mute button—an unusual action.

“Look, there’s something I need to say.” He frowned, looking very uncomfortable.

I sat still, waiting. He met my gaze for a second before shifting his eyes to the floor. He didn’t say anything more.

“What is it, Dad?”

He sighed. “I’m not good at this kind of thing. I don’t know how to start…."

I waited again.

“Okay, Bella. Here’s the thing.” He got up from the couch and started pacing back and forth across the room, looking as his feet all the time. “You and Edythe seem pretty serious, and there are some things that you need to be careful about. I know you’re an adult now, but you’re still young, Bella, and there are a lot of important things you need to know when you… well, when you’re physically involved with—”

“Oh, please, please no!” I begged, jumping to my feet. “Please tell me you are not trying to have a sex talk with me, Charlie.”

He glared at the floor. “I am your father. I have responsibilities. Remember, I’m just as embarrassed as you are.”
“I don’t think that’s humanly possible. Anyway, Mom beat you to the punch about ten years ago. You’re off the hook.”

“Ten years ago you didn’t have a girlfriend,” he muttered unwillingly. “I found some stuff on the Internet, different things about, uh, being involved with girls…” I could tell he was battling with his desire to drop the subject. We were both standing up, looking at the floor, and facing away from each other.

“I appreciate the effort, but it’s really not necessary,” I mumbled, and my face had to be as red as his. This was beyond the seventh circle of Hades; even worse was realizing that Edythe had known this was coming. No wonder she’d seemed so smug in the car.

“Just tell me that you two are being responsible,” Charlie pled, obviously wishing a pit would open in the floor so that he could fall in.

I knew Charlie wasn’t concerned about pregnancy, and I doubted he would expect Edythe to give me any kind of infection—I knew what he was really getting at. “Don’t worry about it, Dad, it’s—we’re—it’s not like that.”

“Not that I don’t trust you, Bella, but I know you don’t want to tell me anything about this, and you know I don’t really want to hear it. I will try to be open-minded, though. I know the times have changed.”

I laughed awkwardly. “Maybe the times have, but Edythe is very old-fashioned. You have nothing to worry about.”

Charlie sighed. “Sure she is,” he muttered.

“Ugh!” I groaned. “I really wish you were not forcing me to say this out loud, Dad. Really. But… I am a… virgin, and I have no immediate plans to change that status.”

We both cringed, but then Charlie’s face smoothed out. He seemed to believe me.

“Can I go to bed, now? Please.”

“In a minute,” he said.

“Aw, please, Dad? I’m begging you.”

“The embarrassing part’s over, I promise,” he assured me.

I shot a glance at him, and was grateful to see that he looked more relaxed, that his face was back to its regular color. He sank down onto the sofa, sighing with relief that he was past the sex speech.

“What now?”

“I just wanted to know how the balance thing is coming along.”

“Oh. Good, I guess. I made plans with Angela today. I’m going to help her with her graduation announcements. Just us.”

“That’s nice. And what about Jules?”

I sighed. “I haven’t figured that one out yet, Dad.”

“Keep trying, Bella. I know you’ll do the right thing. You’re a good person.”
Nice. So if I didn’t figure out some way to make things right with Julie, then I was a bad person? That was below the belt.

“Sure, sure,” I agreed. The automatic response almost made me smile—it was something I’d picked up from Julie. I even said it in the same patronizing tone she used with her own father.

Charlie grinned and turned the sound back on. He slumped lower into the cushions, pleased with his night’s work. I could tell he would be up with the game for a while.

“’Night, Bells.”

“See you in the morning!” I sprinted for the stairs.

Edythe was long gone and she wouldn’t be back until Charlie was asleep—she was probably out hunting or something to pass the time—so I was in no hurry to undress for bed. I wasn’t in the mood to be alone, but I certainly wasn’t going to go back downstairs to hang out with my Dad, just in case he thought of some topic of sex education that he hadn’t touched on before; I shuddered.

So, thanks to Charlie, I was wound up and anxious. My homework was done and I didn’t feel mellow enough for reading or just listening to music. I considered calling Renée with the news of my visit, but then I realized that it was three hours later in Florida, and she would be asleep.

I could call Angela, I supposed.

But suddenly I knew that it wasn’t Angela that I wanted to talk to. That I needed to talk to.

I stared at the blank black window, biting my lip. I don’t know how long I stood there weighing the pros against the cons—doing the right thing by Julie, seeing my closest friend again, being a good person, versus making Edythe furious with me. Ten minutes maybe. Long enough to decide that the pros were valid while the cons were not. Edythe was only concerned about my safety, and I knew that there was really no problem on that count.

The phone wasn’t any help; Julie had refused to answer my phone calls since Edythe’s return. Besides, I needed to see her—see her smiling again the way she used to. I needed to replace that awful last memory of her face warped and twisted by pain if I was ever going to have any peace of mind.

I had an hour probably. I could make a quick run down to La Push and be back before Edythe realized I had gone. It was past my curfew, but would Charlie really care about that when Edythe wasn’t involved? One way to find out.

I grabbed my jacket and shoved my arms through the sleeves as I ran down the stairs.

Charlie looked up from the game, instantly suspicious.

“You care if I go see Jules tonight?” I asked breathlessly. “I won’t stay long.”

As soon as I said Jules’s name, Charlie’s expression relaxed into a smug smile. He didn’t seem surprised at all that his lecture had taken effect so quickly. “Sure, kid. No problem. Stay as long as you like.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said as I darted out the door.

Like any fugitive, I couldn’t help looking over my shoulder a few times while I jogged to my truck, but the night was so black that there really was no point. I had to feel my way along the side of the
truck to the handle.

My eyes were just beginning to adjust as I shoved my keys in the ignition. I twisted them hard to the left, but instead of roaring deafeningly to life, the engine just clicked. I tried it again with the same results.

And then a small motion in my peripheral vision made me jump.

“Gah!” I gasped in shock when I saw that I was not alone in the cab.

Edythe sat very still, a faint bright spot in the darkness, only her hands moving as she turned a mysterious black object around and around. She stared at the object as she spoke.

“Archie called,” she murmured.

Archie! Damn. I’d forgotten to account for him in my plans. She must have him watching me.

“He got nervous when your future rather abruptly disappeared five minutes ago.”

My eyes, already wide with surprise, popped wider.

“Because he can’t see the wolves, you know,” she explained in the same low murmur. “Had you forgotten that? When you decide to mingle your fate with theirs, you disappear, too. You couldn’t know that part, I realize that. But can you understand why that might make me a little… anxious? Archie saw you disappear, and he couldn’t even tell if you’d come home or not. Your future got lost, just like theirs.

“We’re not sure why this is. Some natural defense they’re born with?” She spoke as if she were talking to herself now, still looking at the piece of my truck’s engine as she twirled it in her hands. “That doesn’t seem entirely likely, since I haven’t had any trouble reading their thoughts. The Blacks’ at least. Carlisle theorizes that it’s because their lives are so ruled by their transformations. It’s more an involuntary reaction than a decision. Utterly unpredictable, and it changes everything about them. In that instant when they shift from one form to the other, they don’t really even exist. The future can’t hold them….”

I listened to her musing in stony silence.

“I’ll put your car back together in time for school, in case you’d like to drive yourself,” she assured me after a minute.

With my lips mashed together, I retrieved my keys and stiffly climbed out of the truck.

“Shut your window if you want me to stay away tonight. I’ll understand,” she whispered just before I slammed the door.

I stomped into the house, slamming that door, too.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie demanded from the couch.

“Truck won’t start,” I growled.

“Want me to look at it?”

“No. I’ll try it in the morning.”

“Want to use my car?”
I wasn’t supposed to drive his police cruiser. Charlie must be really desperate to get me to La Push. Nearly as desperate as I was.

“No. I’m tired,” I grumbled. “’Night.”

I stamped my way up the stairs, and went straight to my window. I shoved the metal frame roughly—it crashed shut and the glass trembled.

I stared at the shivering black glass for a long moment, until it was still. Then I sighed, and opened the window as wide as it would go.
THE SUN WAS SO DEEPLY BURIED BEHIND THE CLOUDS that there was no way to tell if it had set or not. After the long flight—chasing the sun westward so that it seemed unmoving in the sky—it was especially disorienting; time seemed oddly variable. It took me by surprise when the forest gave way to the first buildings, signaling that we were nearly home.

“You’ve been very quiet,” Edythe observed. “Did the plane make you sick?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sad to leave?”

“More relieved than sad, I think.”

She raised one eyebrow at me. I knew it was useless and—much as I hated to admit it—unnecessary to ask her to keep her eyes on the road.

“Renée is so much more... perceptive than Charlie in some ways. It was making me jumpy.”

Edythe laughed. “Your mother has a very interesting mind. Almost childlike, but very insightful. She sees things differently than other people.”

Insightful. It was a good description of my mother—when she was paying attention. Most of the time Renée was so bewildered by her own life that she didn’t notice much else. But this weekend she’d been paying plenty of attention to me.

Phil was busy—the high school baseball team he coached was in the playoffs—and being alone with Edythe and me had only sharpened Renée’s focus. As soon as the hugs and squeals of delight were out of the way, Renée began to watch. And as she’d watched, her wide blue eyes had become first confused and then concerned.

This morning we’d gone for a walk along the beach. She wanted to show off all the beauties of her new home, still hoping, I think, that the sun might lure me away from Forks. She’d also wanted to talk with me alone, and that was easily arranged. Edythe had fabricated a term paper to give herself an excuse to stay indoors during the day.

In my head, I went through the conversation again....

Renée and I ambled along the sidewalk, trying to stay in the range of the infrequent palm tree shadows. Though it was early, the heat was smothering. The air was so heavy with moisture that just breathing in and out was giving my lungs a workout.

“Bella?” my mother asked, looking out past the sand to the lightly crashing waves as she spoke.

“What is it, Mom?”

She sighed, not meeting my gaze. “I’m worried....”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, anxious at once. “What can I do?”

“It’s not me.” She shook her head. “I’m worried about you... and Edythe.”

Renée finally looked at me when she said his name, her face apologetic.
“Oh,” I mumbled, fixing my eyes on a pair of joggers as they passed us, drenched with sweat.

“You two are more serious than I’d been thinking,” she went on.

I frowned, quickly reviewing the last two days in my head. Edythe and I had barely touched—in front of her, at least. I wondered if Renée was about to give me a lecture on responsibility, too. I didn’t mind that the way I had with Charlie. It wasn’t embarrassing with my mom. After all, I’d been the one giving her that lecture time and time again in the last ten years.

“There’s something… strange about the way you two are together,” she murmured, her forehead creasing over her troubled eyes. “The way she watches you—it’s so… protective. Like she’s about to throw herself in front of a bullet to save you or something.”

I laughed, though I was still not able to meet her gaze. “That’s a bad thing?”

“No.” She frowned as she struggled for the words. “It’s just different. She’s very intense about you… and very careful. I feel like I don’t really understand your relationship. Like there’s some secret I’m missing….”

“I think you’re imagining things, Mom,” I said quickly, struggling to keep my voice light. There was a flutter in my stomach. I’d forgotten how much my mother saw. Something about her simple view of the world cut through all the distractions and pierced right to the truth of things. This had never been a problem before. Until now, there had never been a secret I couldn’t tell her.

“It’s not just her.” She set her lips defensively. “I wish you could see how you move around her.”

“What do you mean?”

“The way you move—you orient yourself around her without even thinking about it. When she moves, even a little bit, you adjust your position at the same time. Like magnets… or gravity. You’re like a… satellite, or something. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

She pursed her lips and stared down.

“Don’t tell me,” I teased, forcing a smile. “You’re reading mysteries again, aren’t you? Or is it sci-fi this time?”

Renée flushed a delicate pink. “That’s beside the point.”

“Found anything good?”

“Well, there was one—but that doesn’t matter. We’re talking about you right now.”

“You should stick to romance, Mom. You know how you freak yourself out.”

Her lips turned up at the corners. “I’m being silly, aren’t I?”

For half a second I couldn’t answer. Renée was so easily swayed. Sometimes it was a good thing, because not all of her ideas were practical. But it pained me to see how quickly she caved in to my trivializing, especially since she was dead right this time.

She looked up, and I controlled my expression.

“Not silly—just being a mom.”

She laughed and then gestured grandly toward the white sands stretching to the blue water.
“And all this isn’t enough to get you to move back in with your silly mom?”

I wiped my hand dramatically across my forehead, and then pretended to wring my hair out.

“You get used to the humidity,” she promised.

“You can get used to rain, too,” I countered.

She elbowed me playfully and then took my hand as we walked back to her car.

Other than her worries about me, she seemed happy enough. Content. She still looked at Phil with goo-goo eyes, and that was comforting. Surely her life was full and satisfying. Surely she didn’t miss me that much, even now….

Edythe’s icy fingers brushed my cheek. I looked up, blinking, coming back to the present. She leaned down and kissed my forehead.

“We’re home, Sleeping Beauty. Time to awake.”

We were stopped in front of Charlie’s house. The porch light was on and the cruiser was parked in the driveway. As I examined the house, I saw the curtain twitch in the living room window, flashing a line of yellow light across the dark lawn.

I sighed. Of course Charlie was waiting to pounce.

Edythe must have been thinking the same thing, because her expression was stiff and her eyes remote as she came to get my door for me.

“How bad?” I asked.

“Charlie’s not going to be difficult,” Edythe promised, her voice level with no hint of humor. “He missed you.”

My eyes narrowed in doubt. If that was the case, then why was Edythe tensed as if for a battle?

My bag was small, but she insisted on carrying it into the house. Charlie held the door open for us.

“Welcome home, kid!” Charlie shouted like he really meant it. “How was Jacksonville?”

“Moist. And buggy.”

“So Renée didn’t sell you on the University of Florida?”

“She tried. But I’d rather drink water than inhale it.”

Charlie’s eyes flickered unwillingly to Edythe. “Did you have a nice time?”

“Yes,” Edythe answered in a serene voice. “Renée was very hospitable.”

“That’s… um, good. Glad you had fun.” Charlie turned away from Edythe and pulled me in for an unexpected hug.

“Impressive,” I whispered in his ear.

He rumbled a laugh. “I really missed you, Bells. The food around here sucks when you’re gone.”

“I’ll get on it,” I said as he let me go.
“Would you call Julie first? She’s been bugging me every five minutes since six o’clock this morning. I promised I’d have you call her before you even unpacked.”

I didn’t have to look at Edythe to feel that she was too still, too cold beside me. So this was the cause of her tension.

“Julie wants to talk to me?”

“Pretty bad, I’d say. She wouldn’t tell me what it was about—just said it was important.”

The phone rang then, shrill and demanding.

“That’s her again, I’d bet my next paycheck,” Charlie muttered.

“I got it.” I hurried to the kitchen.

Edythe followed after me while Charlie disappeared into the living room.

I grabbed the phone mid-ring, and twisted around so that I was facing the wall. “Hello?”

“You’re back,” Julie said.

Her familiar husky voice sent a wave of wistfulness through me. A thousand memories spun in my head, tangling together—a rocky beach strewn with driftwood trees, a garage made of plastic sheds, warm sodas in a paper bag, a tiny room with one too-small shabby loveseat. The laughter in her deep-set black eyes, the feverish heat of her big hand around mine, the flash of her white teeth against her dark skin, her face stretching into the wide smile that had always been like a key to a secret door where only kindred spirits could enter.

It felt sort of like homesickness, this longing for the place and person who had sheltered me through my darkest night.

I cleared the lump from my throat. “Yes,” I answered.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Julie demanded.

Her angry tone instantly got my back up. “Because I’ve been in the house for exactly four seconds and your call interrupted Charlie telling me that you’d called.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Sure. Now, why are you harassing Charlie?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Yeah, I figured out that part all by myself. Go ahead.”

There was a short pause.

“You going to school tomorrow?”

I frowned to myself, unable to make sense of this question. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I dunno. Just curious.”

Another pause.
“So what did you want to talk about, Jules?”

She hesitated. “Nothing really, I guess. I… wanted to hear your voice.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m so glad you called me, Jules. I…” But I didn’t know what more to say. I wanted to tell her I was on my way to La Push right now. And I couldn’t tell her that.

“I have to go,” she said abruptly.

“What?”

“I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“But Jules—”

She was already gone. I listened to the dial tone with disbelief.

“That was short,” I muttered.

“Is everything all right?” Edythe asked. Her voice was low and careful.

I turned slowly to face her. Her expression was perfectly smooth—impossible to read.

“I don’t know. I wonder what that was about.” It didn’t make sense that Julie had been hounding Charlie all day just to ask me if I was going to school. And if she’d wanted to hear my voice, then why did she hang up so quickly?

“Your guess is probably better than mine,” Edythe said, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“Mmm,” I murmured. That was true. I knew Jules inside and out. It shouldn’t be that complicated to figure out her motivations.

With my thoughts miles away—about fifteen miles away, up the road to La Push—I started combing through the fridge, assembling ingredients for Charlie’s dinner. Edythe leaned against the counter, and I was distantly aware that her eyes were on my face, but too preoccupied to worry about what she saw there.

The school thing seemed like the key to me. That was the only real question Jules had asked. And she had to be after an answer to something, or she wouldn’t have been bugging Charlie so persistently.

Why would my attendance record matter to her, though?

I tried to think about it in a logical way. So, if I hadn’t been going to school tomorrow, what would be the problem with that, from Julie’s perspective? Charlie had given me a little grief about missing a day of school so close to finals, but I’d convinced him that one Friday wasn’t going to derail my studies. Jules would hardly care about that.

My brain refused to come up with any brilliant insights. Maybe I was missing some vital piece of information.

What could have changed in the past three days that was so important that Julie would break her long streak of refusing to answer my phone calls and contact me? What difference could three days make?
I froze in the middle of the kitchen. The package of icy hamburger in my hands slipped through my numb fingers. It took me a slow second to miss the thud it should have made against the floor.

Edythe had caught it and thrown it onto the counter. Her arms were already around me, her lips at my ear.

“What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, dazed.

Three days could change everything.

Hadn’t I just been thinking about how impossible college was? How I couldn’t be anywhere near people after I’d gone through the painful three-day conversion that would set me free from mortality, so that I could spend eternity with Edythe? The conversion that would make me forever a prisoner to my own thirst.…

Had Charlie told Billy that I’d vanished for three days? Had Billy jumped to conclusions? Had Julie really been asking me if I was still human? Making sure that the werewolves’ treaty was unbroken—that none of the Cullens had dared to bite a human… bite, not kill…?

But did she honestly think I would come home to Charlie if that was the case?

Edythe shook me. “Bella?” she asked, truly anxious now.

“I think… I think she was checking,” I mumbled. “Checking to make sure. That I’m human, I mean.”

Edythe stiffened, and a low hiss sounded in my ear.

“We’ll have to leave,” I whispered. “Before. So that it doesn’t break the treaty. We won’t ever be able to come back.”

Her arms tightened around me. “I know.”

“Ahem.” Charlie cleared his voice loudly behind us.

I jumped, and then pulled free of Edythe’s arms, my face getting hot. Edythe leaned back against the counter. Her eyes were tight. I could see worry in them, and anger.

“If you don’t want to make dinner, I can call for a pizza,” Charlie hinted.

“No, that’s okay, I’m already started.”

“Okay,” Charlie said. He propped himself against the doorway, folding his arms.

I sighed and got to work, trying to ignore my audience.

“If I asked you to do something, would you trust me?” Edythe asked, an edge to her soft voice.

We were almost to school. Edythe had been relaxed and joking just a moment ago, and now suddenly her hands were clenched tight on the steering wheel, her knuckles straining in an effort
not to snap it into pieces.

I stared at her anxious expression—her eyes were far away, like she was listening to distant voices.

My pulse sped in response to her stress, but I answered carefully. “That depends.”

We pulled into the school lot.

“I was afraid you would say that.”

“What do you want me to do, Edythe?”

“I want you to stay in the car.” She pulled into her usual spot and turned the engine off as she spoke. “I want you to wait here until I come back for you.”

“But… why?”

That was when I saw her. She would have been hard to miss, towering over the students the way she did, even if she hadn’t been leaning against her black motorcycle, parked illegally on the sidewalk.

“Oh.”

Julie’s face was a calm mask that I recognized well. It was the face she used when she was determined to keep her emotions in check, to keep herself under control. It made her look like Sam, the oldest of the wolves, the leader of the Quileute pack. But Julie could never quite manage the perfect serenity Sam always exuded.

I’d forgotten how much this face bothered me. Though I’d gotten to know Sam pretty well before the Cullens had come back—to like him, even—I’d never been able to completely shake the resentment I felt when Julie mimicked Sam’s expression. It was a stranger’s face. She wasn’t my Julie when she wore it.

“You jumped to the wrong conclusion last night,” Edythe murmured. “She asked about school because she knew that I would be where you were. She was looking for a safe place to talk to me. A place with witnesses.”

So I’d misinterpreted Julie’s motives last night. Missing information, that was the problem. Information like why in the world Julie would want to talk to Edythe.

“I’m not staying in the car;” I said.

Edythe groaned quietly. “Of course not. Well, let’s get this over with.”

Julie’s face hardened as we walked toward her, hand in hand.

I noticed other faces, too—the faces of my classmates. I noticed how their eyes widened as they took in all six foot five inches of Julie’s long body, muscled up the way no normal sixteen-and-a-half-year-old girl ever had been. I saw those eyes rake over her tight black t-shirt—short-sleeved, though the day was unseasonably cool—her ragged, grease-smeared jeans, and the glossy black bike she leaned against. Their eyes didn’t linger on her face—something about her expression had them glancing quickly away. And I noticed the wide berth everyone gave her, the bubble of space that no one dared to encroach on.

With a sense of astonishment, I realized that Julie looked dangerous to them. How odd.
Edythe looked around pointedly, his eyes resting on the witnesses who were just barely out of hearing range. A few people were hesitating on the sidewalk, their eyes bright with expectation. Like they were hoping a fight might break out to alleviate the tedium of another Monday morning. I saw Tyler Crowley nudge Austin Marks, and they both paused on their way to class.

“I already know what you came to say,” Edythe reminded Julie in voice so low that I could barely make it out. “Message delivered. Consider us warned.”

Edythe glanced down at me for a fleeting second with worried eyes.

“Warned?” I asked blankly. “What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t tell her?” Julie asked, her eyes widening with disbelief. “What, were you afraid she’d take our side?”

“Please drop it, Julie,” Edythe said in an even voice.

“Why?” Julie challenged.

I frowned in confusion. “What don’t I know? Edythe?”

Edythe just glared at Julie as if she hadn’t heard me.

“Jules?”

Julie raised her eyebrow at me. “She didn’t tell you that her big… sister crossed the line Saturday night?” she asked, her tone thickly layered with sarcasm. Then her eyes flickered back to Edythe. “Paul was totally justified in—”

“It was no-man’s land!” Edythe hissed.

“Was not!”

Julie was fuming visibly. Her hands trembled. She shook her head and sucked in two deep lungfuls of air.

“Eleanor and Paul?” I whispered. Paul was Julie’s most volatile pack brother. He was the one who’d lost control that day in the woods—the memory of the snarling gray wolf was suddenly vivid in my head. “What happened? Were they fighting?” My voice strained higher in panic. “Why? Did Paul get hurt?”
“No one fought,” Edythe said quietly, only to me. “No one got hurt. Don’t be anxious.”

Julie was staring at us with incredulous eyes. “You didn’t tell her anything at all, did you? Is that why you took her away? So she wouldn’t know that—?”

“Leave now.” Edythe cut her off mid-sentence, and her face was abruptly frightening—truly frightening. For a second, she looked like… like a vampire. She glared at Julie with vicious, unveiled loathing.

Julie raised her eyebrows, but made no other move. “Why haven’t you told her?”

They faced each other in silence for a long moment. More students gathered behind Tyler and Austin. I saw Mike next to Ben—Mike had one hand on Ben’s shoulder, like he was holding him in place.

In the dead silence, all the details suddenly fell into place for me with a burst of intuition.

Something Edythe didn’t want me to know.

Something that Julie wouldn’t have kept from me.

Something that had the Cullens and the wolves both in the woods, moving in hazardous proximity to each other.

Something that would cause Edythe to insist that I fly across the country.

Something that Archie had seen in a vision last week—a vision Edythe had lied to me about.

Something I’d been waiting for anyway. Something I knew would happen again, as much as I might wish it never would. It was never going to end, was it?

I heard the quick **gasp, gasp, gasp, gasp** of the air dragging through my lips, but I couldn’t stop it. It looked like the school was shaking, like there was an earthquake, but I knew it was my own trembling that caused the illusion.

“She came back for me,” I choked out.

Victoria was never going to give up till I was dead. She would keep repeating the same pattern—feint and run, feint and run—until she found a hole through my defenders.

Maybe I’d get lucky. Maybe the Volturi would come for me first—they’d kill me quicker, at least.

Edythe held me tight to her side, angling her body so that she was still between me and Julie, and stroked my face with anxious hands. “It’s fine,” she whispered to me. “It’s fine. I’ll never let her get close to you, it’s fine.”

Then she glared at Julie. “Does that answer your question, mongrel?”

“You don’t think Bella has a right to know?” Julie challenged. “It’s her life.”

Edythe kept her voice muted; even Tyler, edging forward by inches, would be unable to hear. “Why should she be frightened when she was never in danger?”

“Better frightened than lied to.”

I tried to pull myself together, but my eyes were swimming in moisture. I could see it behind my
lids—I could see Victoria’s face, her lips pulled back over her teeth, her crimson eyes glowing with the obsession of her vendetta; she held Edythe responsible for the demise of her love, James. She wouldn’t stop until Edythe’s love was taken from her, too.

Edythe wiped the tears from my cheek with her fingertips.

“Do you really think hurting her is better than protecting her?” she murmured.

“She’s tougher than you think,” Julie said. “And she’s been through worse.”

Abruptly, Julie’s expression shifted, and she was staring at Edythe with an odd, speculative expression. Her eyes narrowed like she was trying to do a difficult math problem in her head.

I felt Edythe cringe. I glanced up at her, and her face was contorted in what could only be pain. For one ghastly moment, I was reminded of our afternoon in Italy, in the macabre tower room of the Volturi, where Jane had tortured Edythe with her malignant gift, burning her with her thoughts alone.…

The memory snapped me out of my near hysteria and put everything in perspective. Because I’d rather Victoria killed me a hundred times over than watch Edythe suffer that way again.

“That’s funny,” Julie said, laughing as she watched Edythe’s face.

Edythe winced, but smoothed her expression with a little effort. She couldn’t quite hide the agony in her eyes.

I glanced, wide-eyed, from Edythe’s grimace to Julie’s sneer.

“What are you doing to her?” I demanded.

“It’s nothing, Bella,” Edythe told me quietly. “Julie just has a good memory, that’s all.”

Julie grinned, and Edythe winced again.

“Stop it! Whatever you’re doing.”

“Sure, if you want.” Julie shrugged. “It’s her own fault if she doesn’t like the things I remember, though.”

I glared at her, and she smiled back impishly—like a kid caught doing something she knows she shouldn’t by someone who she knows won’t punish her.

“The principal’s on his way to discourage loitering on school property,” Edythe murmured to me. “Let’s get to English, Bella, so you’re not involved.”

“Overprotective, isn’t she?” Julie said, talking just to me. “A little trouble makes life fun. Let me guess, you’re not allowed to have fun, are you?”

Edythe glowered, and her lips pulled back from her teeth ever so slightly.

“Shut up, Jules,” I said.

Julie laughed. “That sounds like a no. Hey, if you ever feel like having a life again, you could come see me. I’ve still got your motorcycle in my garage.”

This news distracted me. “You were supposed to sell that. You promised Charlie you would.” If I
hadn’t begged on Jules’s behalf—after all, she’d put weeks of labor into both motorcycles, and she deserved some kind of payback—Charlie would have thrown my bike in a Dumpster. And possibly set that Dumpster on fire.

“Yeah, right. Like I would do that. It belongs to you, not me. Anyway, I’ll hold on to it until you want it back.”

A tiny hint of the smile I remembered was suddenly playing around the edges of her lips.

“Jules…”

She leaned forward, her face earnest now, the bitter sarcasm fading. “I think I might have been wrong before, you know, about not being able to be friends. Maybe we could manage it, on my side of the line. Come see me.”

I was vividly conscious of Edythe, her arms still wrapped protectively around me, motionless as a stone. I shot a look at her face—it was calm, patient.

“I, er, don’t know about that, Jules.”

Julie dropped the antagonistic façade completely. It was like she’d forgotten Edythe was there, or at least she was determined to act that way. “I miss you every day, Bella. It’s not the same without you.”

“I know and I’m sorry, Jules, I just…”

She shook her head, and sighed. “I know. Doesn’t matter, right? I guess I’ll survive or something. Who needs friends?” She grimaced, trying to cover the pain with a thin attempt at bravado.

Julie’s suffering had always triggered my protective side. It was not entirely rational—Julie was hardly in need of any physical protection I could offer. But my arms, pinned beneath Edythe’s, yearned to reach out to her. To wrap around her big, warm waist in a silent promise of acceptance and comfort.

Edythe’s shielding arms had become restraints.

“Okay, get to class,” a stern voice sounded behind us. “Move along, Mr. Crowley.”

“Get to school, Jules,” I whispered, anxious as soon as I recognized the principal’s voice. Julie went to the Quileute school, but she might still get in trouble for trespassing or the equivalent.

Edythe released me, taking just my hand and pulling me behind her body again.

Mr. Greene pushed through the circle of spectators, his brows pressing down like ominous storm clouds over his small eyes.

“I mean it,” he was threatening. “Detention for anyone who’s still standing here when I turn around again.”

The audience melted away before he was finished with his sentence.

“Ah, Miss Cullen. Do we have a problem here?”

“Not at all, Mr. Greene. We were just on our way to class.”

“Excellent. I don’t seem to recognize your friend.” Mr. Greene turned his glower on Julie. “Are
you a new student here?”

Mr. Greene’s eyes scrutinized Julie, and I could see that he’d come to the same conclusion everyone else had: dangerous. A troublemaker.

“Nope,” Julie answered, half a smirk on her broad lips.

“Then I suggest you remove yourself from school property at once, young lady, before I call the police.”

Julie’s little smirk became a full-blown grin, and I knew she was picturing Charlie showing up to arrest her. This grin was too bitter, too full of mocking to satisfy me. This wasn’t the smile I’d been waiting to see.

Julie said, “Yes, sir,” and snapped a military salute before she climbed on her bike and kicked it to a start right there on the sidewalk. The engine snarled and then the tires squealed as she spun it sharply around. In a matter of seconds, Julie raced out of sight.

Mr. Greene gnashed his teeth together while he watched the performance.

“Miss Cullen, I expect you to ask your friend to refrain from trespassing again.”

“She’s no friend of mine, Mr. Greene, but I’ll pass along the warning.”

Mr. Greene pursed his lips. Edythe’s perfect grades and spotless record were clearly a factor in Mr. Greene’s assessment of the incident. “I see. If you’re worried about any trouble, I’d be happy to—”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Mr. Greene. There won’t be any trouble.”

“I hope that’s correct. Well, then. On to class. You, too, Miss Swan.”

Edythe nodded, and pulled me quickly along toward the English building.

“Do you feel well enough to go to class?” she whispered when we were past the principal.

“Yes,” I whispered back, not quite sure if this was a lie.

Whether I felt well or not was hardly the most important consideration. I needed to talk to Edythe right away, and English class wasn’t the ideal place for the conversation I had in mind.

But with Mr. Greene right behind us, there weren’t a lot of other options.

We got to class a little late and took our seats quickly. Mr. Berty was reciting a Frost poem. He ignored our entrance, refusing to let us break his rhythm.

I yanked a blank page out of my notebook and started writing, my handwriting more illegible than normal thanks to my agitation.

What happened? Tell me everything. And screw the protecting me crap, please.

I shoved the note at Edythe. She sighed, and then began writing. It took her less time than me, though she wrote an entire paragraph in her own personal calligraphy before she slipped the paper
Archie saw that Victoria was coming back. I took you out of town merely as a precaution—there was never a chance that she would have gotten anywhere close to you. Eleanor and Jasper very nearly had her, but Victoria seems to have some instinct for evasion. She escaped right down the Quileute boundary line as if she were reading it from a map. It didn’t help that Archie’s abilities were nullified by the Quileutes’ involvement. To be fair, the Quileutes might have had her, too, if we hadn’t gotten in the way. The big gray one thought Eleanor was over the line, and he got defensive. Of course Rosalie reacted to that, and everyone left the chase to protect their companions. Carlisle and Jasper got things calmed down before it got out of hand. But by then, Victoria had slipped away. That’s everything.

I frowned at the letters on the page. All of them had been in on it—Eleanor, Jasper, Archie, Rosalie, and Carlisle. Maybe even Earnest, though she hadn’t mentioned him. And then Paul and the rest of the Quileute pack. It might so easily have turned into a fight, pitting my future family and my old friends against each other. Any one of them could have been hurt. I imagined the wolves would be in the most danger, but picturing tiny Archie next to one of the huge werewolves, fighting…

I shuddered.

Carefully, I scrubbed out the entire paragraph with my eraser and then I wrote over the top:

*What about Charlie? She could have been after him.*

Edythe was shaking her head before I finished, obviously going to downplay any danger on Charlie’s behalf. She held a hand out, but I ignored that and started again.

*You can’t know that she wasn’t thinking that, because you weren’t here. Florida was a bad idea.*

She took the paper from underneath my hand.

*I wasn’t about to send you off alone. With your luck, not even the black box would survive.*

That wasn’t what I’d meant at all; I hadn’t thought of going without her. I’d meant that we should have stayed here together. But I was sidetracked by her response, and a little miffed. Like I couldn’t fly cross country without bringing the plane down. Very funny.
So let’s say my bad luck did crash the plane. What exactly were you going to do about it?

Why is the plane crashing?

She was trying to hide a smile now.

The pilots are passed out drunk.

Easy. I’d fly the plane.

Of course. I pursed my lips and tried again.

Both engines have exploded and we’re falling in a death spiral toward the earth.

I’d wait till we were close enough to the ground, get a good grip on you, kick out the wall, and jump. Then I’d run you back to the scene of the accident, and we’d stumble around like the two luckiest survivors in history.

I stared at her wordlessly.

“What?” she whispered.

I shook my head in awe. “Nothing,” I mouthed.

I scrubbed out the disconcerting conversation and wrote one more line.

You will tell me next time.

I knew there would be a next time. The pattern would continue until someone lost.

Edythe stared into my eyes for a long moment. I wondered what my face looked like—it felt cold, so the blood hadn’t returned to my cheeks. My eyelashes were still wet.

She sighed and then nodded once.
Thanks.

The paper disappeared from under my hand. I looked up, blinking in surprise, just as Mr. Berty came down the aisle.

“Is that something you’d like to share there, Miss Cullen?”

Edythe looked up innocently and held out the sheet of paper on top of her folder. “My notes?” she asked, sounding confused.

Mr. Berty scanned the notes—no doubt a perfect transcription of his lecture—and then walked away frowning.

It was later, in Calculus—my one class without Edythe—that I heard the gossip.

“My money’s on the big Indian chick,” someone was saying. I wrinkled my nose at the description.

I peeked up to see that Tyler, Mike, Austin, and Ben had their heads bent together, deep in conversation.

“Yeah,” Mike whispered. “Did you see the size of that Julie girl? I think she could take Edythe down.” Mike sounded pleased by the idea.

“I don’t think so,” Ben disagreed. “There’s something about Edythe. She’s always so… confident. I have a feeling she can take care of herself.”

“I’m with Ben,” Tyler agreed. “Besides, if that other kid messed Edythe up, you know that whole family would get involved.”

“Have you been down to La Push lately?” Mike asked. “Lauren and I went to the beach a couple of weeks ago, and believe me, Julie’s friends are all just as big as she is. And they’re all guys.”

“Huh,” Tyler said. “Too bad it didn’t turn into anything. Guess we’ll never know how it would have turned out.”

“It didn’t look over to me,” Austin said. “Maybe we’ll get to see.”

Mike grinned. “Anyone in the mood for a bet?”

“Ten on Julie,” Austin said at once.

“Ten on Edythe,” Tyler chimed in.

“Ten on Edythe,” Ben agreed.

“Julie,” Mike said.

“Hey, do you guys know what it was about?” Austin wondered. “That might affect the odds.”

“I can guess,” Mike said, and then he shot a glance at me at the same time that Ben and Tyler did.
From their expressions, none of them had realized I was in easy hearing distance. They all looked away quickly, shuffling the papers on their desks.

“"I still say Julie,” Mike muttered under his breath. 
I WAS HAVING A BAD WEEK.

I knew that essentially nothing had changed. Okay, so Victoria had not given up, but had I ever dreamed for one moment that she had? Her reappearance had only confirmed what I’d already known. No reason for fresh panic.

In theory. Not panicking was easier said than done.

Graduation was only a few weeks away, but I wondered if it wasn’t a little foolish to sit around, weak and tasty, waiting for the next disaster. It seemed too dangerous to be human—just begging for trouble. Someone like me shouldn’t be human. Someone with my luck ought to be a little less helpless.

But no one would listen to me.

Carlisle had said, “There are seven of us, Bella. And with Archie on our side, I don’t think Victoria’s going to catch us off guard. I think it’s important, for Charlie’s sake, that we stick with the original plan.”

Earnest had said, “We’d never allow anything to happen to you, sweetheart. You know that. Please don’t be anxious.” And then he’d kissed my forehead.

Eleanor had said, “I’m really glad Edythe didn’t kill you. Everything’s so much more fun with you around.”

Rosalie had glared at her.

Archie had rolled his eyes and said, “I’m offended. You’re not honestly worried about this, are you?”

“If it’s no big deal, then why did Edythe drag me to Florida?” I’d demanded.

“Well, haven’t you noticed yet, Bella, that Edythe is just the teeniest bit prone to overreaction?”

Jasper had silently erased all the panic and tension in my body with his curious talent of controlling emotional atmospheres. I’d felt reassured, and let them talk me out of my desperate pleading.

Of course, that calm had worn off as soon as Edythe and I had walked out of the room.

So the consensus was that I was just supposed to forget that a deranged vampire was stalking me, intent on my death. Go about my business.

I did try. And surprisingly, there were other things almost as stressful to dwell on besides my status on the endangered species list….

Because Edythe’s response had been the most frustrating of them all.

“That’s between you and Carlisle,” she’d said. “Of course, you know that I’m willing to make it between you and me at any time that you wish. You know my condition.” And she had smiled angelically.

Ugh. I did know her condition. Edythe had promised that she would change me herself whenever I
wanted… just as long as I was married to her first.

Sometimes I wondered if she was only pretending that she couldn’t read my mind. How else had she struck upon the one condition that I would have trouble accepting? The one condition that would slow me down.

All in all, a very bad week. And today was the worst day in it.

It was always a bad day when Edythe was away. Archie had foreseen nothing out of the ordinary this weekend, and so I’d insisted that she take the opportunity to go hunting with her sisters. I knew how it bored her to hunt the easy, nearby prey.

“Go have fun,” I’d told her. “Bag a few mountain lions for me.”

I would never admit to her how hard it was for me when she was gone—how it brought back the abandonment nightmares. If she knew that, it would make her feel horrible and she would be afraid to ever leave me, even for the most necessary reasons. It had been like that in the beginning, when she’d first returned from Italy. Her golden eyes had turned black and she’d suffered from her thirst more than it was already necessary that she suffer. So I put on a brave face and all but kicked her out the door whenever Eleanor and Rosalie wanted to go.

I think she saw through me, though. A little. This morning there had been a note left on my pillow:

_I’ll be back so soon you won’t have time to miss me. Look after my heart—I’ve left it with you._

So now I had a big empty Saturday with nothing but my morning shift at Newton’s Olympic Outfitters to distract me. And, of course, the oh-so-comforting promise from Archie.

“I’m staying close to home to hunt. I’ll only be fifteen minutes away if you need me. I’ll keep an eye out for trouble.”

Translation: don’t try anything funny just because Edythe is gone.

Archie was certainly just as capable of crippling my truck as Edythe was.

I tried to look on the bright side. After work, I had plans to help Angela with her announcements, so that would be a distraction. And Charlie was in an excellent mood due to Edythe’s absence, so I might as well enjoy that while it lasted. Archie would spend the night with me if I was pathetic enough to ask her to. And then tomorrow, Edythe would be home. I would survive.

Not wanting to be ridiculously early for work, I ate my breakfast slowly, one Cheerio at a time. Then, when I’d washed the dishes, I arranged the magnets on the fridge into a perfect line. Maybe I was developing obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The last two magnets—round black utilitarian pieces that were my favorites because they could hold ten sheets of paper to the fridge without breaking a sweat—did not want to cooperate with my fixation. Their polarities were reversed; every time I tried to line the last one up, the other jumped out of place.

For some reason—impending mania, perhaps—this really irritated me. Why couldn’t they just play nice? Stupid with stubbornness, I kept shoving them together as if I was expecting them to
suddenly give up. I could have flipped one over, but that felt like losing. Finally, exasperated at myself more than the magnets, I pulled them from the fridge and held them together with two hands. It took a little effort—they were strong enough to put up a fight—but I forced them to coexist side-by-side.

“See,” I said out loud—talking to inanimate objects, never a good sign—“That’s not so horrible, is it?”

I stood there like an idiot for a second, not quite able to admit that I wasn’t having any lasting effect against scientific principles. Then, with a sigh, I put the magnets back on the fridge, a foot apart.

“There’s no need to be so inflexible,” I muttered.

It was still too early, but I decided I’d better get out of the house before the inanimate objects started talking back.

When I got to Newton’s, Mike was methodically dry mopping the aisles while his mom arranged a new counter display. I caught them in the middle of an argument, unaware that I had arrived.

“But it’s the only time that Tyler can go,” Mike complained. “You said after graduation—”

“You’re just going to have to wait,” Mrs. Newton snapped. “You and Tyler can think of something else to do. You are not going to Seattle until the police stop whatever it is that is going on there. I know Beth Crowley has told Tyler the same thing, so don’t act like I’m the bad guy—oh, good morning, Bella,” she said when she caught sight of me, brightening her tone quickly. “You’re early.”

Karen Newton was the last person I’d think to ask for help in an outdoor sports equipment store. Her perfectly highlighted blond hair was always smoothed into an elegant twist on the back of her neck, her fingernails were polished by professionals, as were her toenails—visible through the strappy high heels that didn’t resemble anything Newton’s offered on the long row of hiking boots.

“Light traffic,” I joked as I grabbed my hideous fluorescent orange vest out from under the counter. I was surprised that Mrs. Newton was as worked up about this Seattle thing as Charlie. I’d thought he was going to extremes.

“Well, er…” Mrs. Newton hesitated for a moment, playing uncomfortably with a stack of flyers she was arranging by the register.

I stopped with one arm in my vest. I knew that look.

When I’d let the Newtons know that I wouldn’t be working here this summer—abandoning them in their busiest season, in effect—they’d started training Katie Marshall to take my place. They couldn’t really afford both of us on the payroll at the same time, so when it looked like a slow day…

“I was going to call,” Mrs. Newton continued. “I don’t think we’re expecting a ton of business today. Mike and I can probably handle things. I’m sorry you got up and drove out….”

On a normal day, I would be ecstatic with this turn of events. Today… not so much.

“Okay,” I sighed. My shoulders slumped. What was I going to do now?

“That’s not fair, Mom,” Mike said. “If Bella wants to work—”
“No, it’s okay, Mrs. Newton. Really, Mike. I’ve got finals to study for and stuff….” I didn’t want to be a source of familial discord when they were already arguing.

“Thanks, Bella. Mike, you missed aisle four. Um, Bella, do you mind throwing these flyers in a Dumpster on the way out? I told the girl who left them here that I’d put them on the counter, but I really don’t have the room.”

“Sure, no problem.” I put my vest away, and then tucked the flyers under my arm and headed out into the misty rain.

The Dumpster was around the side of Newton’s, next to where we employees were supposed to park. I shuffled along, kicking pebbles petulantly on my way. I was about to fling the stack of bright yellow papers into the trash when the heading printed in bold across the top caught my eye. One word in particular seized my attention.

I clutched the papers in both hands as I stared at the picture beneath the caption. A lump rose in my throat.

**SAVE THE OLYMPIC WOLF**

Under the words, there was a detailed drawing of a wolf in front of a fir tree, its head thrown back in the act of baying at the moon. It was a disconcerting picture; something about the wolf’s plaintive posture made her look forlorn. Like she was howling in grief.

And then I was running to my truck, the flyers still locked in my grip.

Fifteen minutes—that’s all I had. But it should be long enough. It was only fifteen minutes to La Push, and surely I would cross the boundary line a few minutes before I hit the town.

My truck roared to life without any difficulty.

Archie couldn’t have seen me doing this, because I hadn’t been planning it. A snap decision, that was the key! And as long as I moved fast enough, I should be able to capitalize on it.

I’d thrown the damp flyers in my haste and they were scattered in a bright mess across the passenger seat—a hundred bolded captions, a hundred dark howling wolves outlined against the yellow background.

I barreled down the wet highway, turning the windshield wipers on high and ignoring the groan of the ancient engine. Fifty-five was the most I could coax out of my truck, and I prayed it would be enough.

I had no clue where the boundary line was, but I began to feel safer as I passed the first houses outside La Push. This must be beyond where Archie was allowed to follow.

I’d call him when I got to Angela’s this afternoon, I reasoned, so that he’d know I was fine. There was no reason for him to get worked up. He didn’t need to be mad at me—Edythe would be angry enough for two when she got back.

My truck was positively wheezing by the time it grated to a stop in front of the familiar faded red house. The lump came back to my throat as I stared at the little place that had once been my refuge.
It had been so long since I’d been here.

Before I could cut the engine, Julie was standing in the door, her face blank with shock.

In the sudden silence when the truck-roar died, I heard her gasp.

“Bella?”

“Hey, Jules!”

“Bella!” she yelled back, and the smile I’d been waiting for stretched across her face like the sun breaking free of the clouds. Her teeth gleamed bright against her russet skin. “I can’t believe it!”

She ran to the truck and half-yanked me through the open door, and then we were both jumping up and down like kids.

“How did you get here?”

“I snuck out!”

“Awesome!”

“Hey, Bella!” Billy had rolled himself into the doorway to see what all the commotion was about.

“Hey, Bil—!”

Just then my air choked off—Julie grabbed me up in a bear hug too tight to breathe and swung me around in a circle.

“Wow, it’s good to see you here!”

“Can’t… breathe,” I gasped.

She laughed and put me down.

“Welcome back, Bella,” she said, grinning. And the way she said the words made it sound like welcome home.

We started walking, too keyed up to sit still in the house. Julie was practically bouncing as she moved, and I had to remind her a few times that my legs weren’t ten feet long.

As we walked, I felt myself settling into another version of myself, the self I had been with Julie. A little younger, a little less responsible. Someone who might, on occasion, do something really stupid for no good reason.

Our exuberance lasted through the first few topics of conversation: how we were doing, what we were up to, how long I had, and what had brought me here. When I hesitantly told her about the wolf flyer, her bellowing laugh echoed back from the trees.

But then, as we ambled past the back of the store and shoved through the thick scrub that ringed the far edge of First Beach, we got to the hard parts. All too soon we had to talk about the reasons behind our long separation, and I watched as the face of my friend hardened into the bitter mask
that was already too familiar.

“So what’s the story, anyway?” Julie asked me, kicking a piece of driftwood out of her way with too much force. It sailed over the sand and then clattered against the rocks. “I mean, since the last time we… well, before, you know…” She struggled for the words. She took a deep breath and tried again. “What I’m asking is… everything is just back to the way it was before she left? You forgave her for all of that?”

I took a deep breath. “There was nothing to forgive.”

I wanted to skip past this part, the betrayals, the accusations, but I knew that we had to talk it through before we’d be able to move on to anything else.

Julie’s face puckered up like she’d just licked a lemon. “I wish Sam had taken a picture when he found you that night last September. It would be exhibit A.”

“Nobody’s on trial.”

“Maybe somebody should be.”

“Not even you would blame her for leaving, if you knew the reason why.”

She glared at me for a few seconds. “Okay,” she challenged acidly. “Amaze me.”

Her hostility was wearing on me—chafing against the raw; it hurt to have her angry with me. It reminded me of the bleak afternoon, long ago, when—under orders from Sam—she’d told me we couldn’t be friends. I took a second to compose myself.

“Edythe left me last fall because she didn’t think I should be hanging out with vampires. She thought it would be healthier for me if she left.”

Julie did a double take. She had to scramble for a minute. Whatever she’d been planning to say, it clearly no longer applied. I was glad she didn’t know the catalyst behind Edythe’s decision. I could only imagine what she’d think if she knew Jasper had tried to kill me.

“She came back, though, didn’t she?” Julie muttered. “Too bad she can’t stick to a decision.”

“If you remember, I went and got her.”

Julie stared at me for a moment, and then she backed off. Her face relaxed, and her voice was calmer when she spoke.

“That’s true. So I never did get the story. What happened?”

I hesitated, biting my lip.

“Is it a secret?” Her voice took on a taunting edge. “Are you not allowed to tell me?”

“No,” I snapped. “It’s just a really long story.”

Julie smiled, arrogant, and turned to walk up the beach, expecting me to follow.

It was no fun being with Julie if she was going to act like this. I trailed behind her automatically, not sure if I shouldn’t turn around and leave. I was going to have to face Archie, though, when I got home…. I supposed I wasn’t in any rush.
Julie walked to a huge, familiar piece of driftwood—an entire tree, roots and all, bleached white and beached deep in the sand; it was our tree, in a way.

Julie sat down on the natural bench, and patted the space next to her.

“I don’t mind long stories. Is there any action?”

I rolled my eyes as I sat next to her. “There’s some action,” I allowed.

“It wouldn’t be real horror without action.”

“Horror!” I scoffed. “Can you listen, or will you be interrupting me with rude comments about my friends?”

She pretended to lock her lips and then threw the invisible key over her shoulder. I tried not to smile, and failed.

“I’ll have to start with the stuff you were already there for,” I decided, working to organize the stories in my head before I began.

Julie raised her hand.

“Go ahead.”

“That’s good,” she said. “I didn’t understand much that was going on at the time.”

“Yeah, well, it gets complicated, so pay attention. You know how Archie sees things?”

I took her scowl—the wolves weren’t thrilled that the legends of vampires possessing supernatural gifts were true—for a yes, and proceeded with the account of my race through Italy to rescue Edythe.

I kept it as succinct as possible—leaving out anything that wasn’t essential. I tried to read Julie’s reactions, but her face was enigmatic as I explained how Archie had seen Edythe plan to kill herself when she’d heard that I was dead. Sometimes Julie seemed so deep in thought, I wasn’t sure if she was listening. She only interrupted one time.

“The fortune-telling bloodsucker can’t see us?” she echoed, her face both fierce and gleeful. “Seriously? That’s excellent!”

I clenched my teeth together, and we sat in silence, her face expectant as she waited for me to continue. I glared at her until she realized her mistake.

“Oops!” she said. “Sorry.” She locked her lips again.

Her response was easier to read when I got to the part about the Volturi. Her teeth clenched together, goose bumps rose on her arms, and her nostrils flared. I didn’t go into specifics, I just told her that Edythe had talked us out of trouble, without revealing the promise we’d had to make, or the visit we were anticipating. Julie didn’t need to have my nightmares.

“Now you know the whole story,” I concluded. “So it’s your turn to talk. What happened while I was with my mom this weekend?” I knew Julie would give me more details than Edythe had. She wasn’t afraid of scaring me.

Julie leaned forward, instantly animated. “So Embry and Quil and I were running patrol on Saturday night, just routine stuff, when out of nowhere—bam!” She threw her arms out,
impersonating an explosion. “There it is—a fresh trail, not fifteen minutes old. Sam wanted us to
wait for him, but I didn’t know you were gone, and I didn’t know if your bloodsuckers were
keeping an eye on you or not. So we took off after her at full speed, but she’d crossed the treaty
line before we caught up. We spread out along the line, hoping she’d cross back over. It was
frustrating, let me tell you.” She wagged her head and his hair—growing out from the short crop
she’d adopted when she’d joined the pack—flopped into her eyes. “We ended up too far south. The
Cullens chased her back to our side just a few miles north of us. Would have been the perfect
ambush if we’d known where to wait.”

She shook her head, grimacing now. “That’s when it got dicey. Sam and the others caught up to her
before we did, but she was dancing right along the line, and the whole coven was right there on the
other side. The big one, what’s-her-name—”

“Eleanor.”

“Yeah, her. She made a lunge for the redhead, but that leech is fast! Eleanor flew right behind her
and almost rammed into Paul. So, Paul… well, you know Paul.”

“Yeah.”

“Lost his focus. Can’t say that I blame him—the big bloodsucker was right on top of him. He
sprang—hey, don’t give me that look. The vampire was on our land.”

I tried to compose my face so that she would go on. My nails were digging into my palms with the
stress of the story, even though I knew it had turned out fine.

“Anyway, Paul missed, and the big one got back on her side. But by then the, er, well the, uh,
blonde…” Julie’s expression was a comical mix of disgust and unwilling admiration as she tried to
come up with a word to describe Edythe’s sister.

“Rosalie.”

“Whatever. She got real territorial, so Sam and I fell back to get Paul’s flanks. Then their leader and
the other blond male—”

“Carlisle and Jasper.”

She gave me an exasperated look. “You know I don’t really care. Anyway, so Carlisle spoke to
Sam, trying to calm things down. Then it was weird, because everyone got really calm really fast. It
was that other one you told me about, messing with our heads. But even though we knew what he
was doing, we couldn’t not be calm.”

“Yeah, I know how it feels.”

“Really annoying, that’s how it feels. Only you can’t be annoyed until afterwards.” She shook her
head angrily. “So Sam and the head vamp agreed that Victoria was the priority, and we started
after her again. Carlisle gave us the line, so that we could follow the scent properly, but then she
hit the cliffs just north of Makah country, right where the line hugs the coast for a few miles. She
took off into the water again. The big one and the calm one wanted permission to cross the line to
go after her, but of course we said no.”

“Good. I mean, you were being stupid, but I’m glad. Eleanor’s never cautious enough. She could
have gotten hurt.”

Julie snorted. “So did your vampire tell you we attacked for no reason and her totally innocent
“No,” I interrupted. “Edythe told me the same story, just without quite as many details.”

“Huh,” Julie said under her breath, and she bent over to pick up a rock from among the millions of pebbles at our feet. With a casual flick, she sent it flying a good hundred meters out into the bay. “Well, she’ll be back, I guess. We’ll get another shot at her.”

I shuddered; of course she would be back. Would Edythe really tell me next time? I wasn’t sure. I’d have to keep an eye on Archie, to look for the signs that the pattern was about to repeat….

Julie didn’t seem to notice my reaction. She was staring across the waves with a thoughtful expression on her face, her broad lips pursed.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked after a long, quiet time.

“I’m thinking about what you told me. About when the fortune-teller saw you cliff jumping and thought you’d committed suicide, and how it all got out of control… Do you realize that if you had just waited for me like you were supposed to, then the bl—Archie wouldn’t have been able to see you jump? Nothing would have changed. We’d probably be in my garage right now, like any other Saturday. There wouldn’t be any vampires in Forks, and you and me…” She trailed off, deep in thought.

It was disconcerting the way she said this, like it would be a good thing to have no vampires in Forks. My heart thumped unevenly at the emptiness of the picture he painted.

“Edythe would have come back anyway.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked, belligerent again as soon as I spoke Edythe’s name.

“Being apart… It didn’t work out so well for either of us.”

She started to say something, something angry from her expression, but she stopped herself, took a breath, and began again.

“Did you know Sam is mad at you?”

“Me?” It took me a second. “Oh. I see. He thinks they would have stayed away if I wasn’t here.”

“No. That’s not it.”

“What’s his problem then?”

Julie leaned down to scoop up another rock. She turned it over and over in her fingers; her eyes were riveted on the black stone while she spoke in a low voice.

“When Sam saw… how you were in the beginning, when Billy told them how Charlie worried when you didn’t get better, and then when you started jumping off cliffs…”

I made a face. No one was ever going to let me forget that.

Julie’s eyes flashed up to mine. “He thought you were the one person in the world with as much reason to hate the Cullens as he does. Sam feels sort of… betrayed that you would just let them back into your life like they never hurt you.”

I didn’t believe for a second that Sam was the only one who felt that way. And the acid in my voice
now was for both of them.

“You can tell Sam to go right to—”

“Look at that,” Julie interrupted me, pointing to an eagle in the act of plummeting down toward the ocean from an incredible height. It checked itself at the last minute, only its talons breaking the surface of the waves, just for an instant. Then it flapped away, its wings straining against the load of the huge fish it had snagged.

“You see it everywhere,” Julie said, her voice suddenly distant. “Nature taking its course—hunter and prey, the endless cycle of life and death.”

I didn’t understand the point of the nature lecture; I guessed that she was just trying to change the subject. But then she looked down at me with dark humor in her eyes.

“And yet, you don’t see the fish trying to plant a kiss on the eagle. You never see that.”

I grinned back tightly, though the acid taste was still in my mouth. “Maybe the fish was trying,” I suggested. “It’s hard to tell what a fish is thinking. Eagles are good-looking birds, you know.”

“Is that what it comes down to?” Her voice was abruptly sharper. “Good looks?”

“Don’t be stupid, Julie.”

“Is it the money, then?” she persisted.

“That’s nice,” I muttered, getting up from the tree. “I’m flattered that you think so much of me.” I turned my back on her and paced away.

“Aww, don’t get mad.” She was right behind me; she caught my wrist and spun me around. “I’m serious! I’m trying to understand here, and I’m coming up blank.”

Her eyebrows pushed together angrily, and her eyes were black in their deep shadow.

“I love her. Not because she’s beautiful or because she’s rich!” I spat the word at Julie. “I’d much rather she weren’t either one. It would even out the gap between us just a little bit—because she’d still be the most loving and unselfish and brilliant and decent person I’ve ever met. Of course I love her. How hard is that to understand?”

“It’s impossible to understand.”

“Please enlighten me, then, Julie.” I let the sarcasm flow thick. “What is a valid reason for someone to love someone else? Since apparently I’m doing it wrong.”

“I think the best place to start would be to look within your own species. That usually works.”

“Well, that just sucks!” I snapped. “I guess I’m stuck with Mike Newton after all.”

Julie flinched back and bit her lip. I could see that my words had hurt her, but I was too mad to feel bad about that yet. She dropped my wrist and folded her arms across his chest, turning from me to glare toward the ocean.

“I’m human,” she muttered, her voice almost inaudible.

“You’re not as human as Mike,” I continued ruthlessly. “Do you still think that’s the most
important consideration?"

“It’s not the same thing.” Julie didn’t look away from the gray waves. “I didn’t choose this.”

I laughed once in disbelief. “Do you think Edythe did? She didn’t know what was happening to her
any more than you did. She didn’t exactly sign up for this.”

Julie was shaking her head back and forth with a small, quick movement.

“You know, Julie, you’re awfully self-righteous—considering that you’re a werewolf and all.”

“It’s not the same,” Julie repeated, glowering at me.

“I don’t see why not. You could be a bit more understanding about the Cullens. You have no idea
how truly good they are—to the core, Julie.”

She frowned more deeply. “They shouldn’t exist. Their existence goes against nature.”

I stared at her for a long moment with one eyebrow raised incredulously. It was a while before she
noticed.

“What?”

“Speaking of unnatural…,” I hinted.

“Bella,” she said, her voice slow and different. Aged. I realized that she sounded suddenly older
than me—like a parent or a teacher. “What I am was born in me. It’s a part of who I am, who my
family is, who we all are as a tribe—it’s the reason why we’re still here.

“Besides that”—she looked down at me, her black eyes unreadable—“I am still human.”

She picked up my hand and pressed it to her fever-warm chest. Through her t-shirt, I could feel the
steady beating of her heart under my palm.

“Normal humans can’t throw motorcycles around the way you can.”

She smiled a faint, half-smile. “Normal humans run away from monsters, Bella. And I never
claimed to be normal. Just human.”

Staying angry with Julie was too much work. I started to smile as I pulled my hand away from her
chest.

“You look plenty human to me,” I allowed. “At the moment.”

“I feel human.” She stared past me, her face far away. Her lower lip trembled, and she bit down on
it hard.

“Oh, Jules,” I whispered, reaching for her hand.

This was why I was here. This was why I would take whatever reception waited for me when I got
back. Because, underneath all the anger and the sarcasm, Julie was in pain. Right now, it was very
clear in her eyes. I didn’t know how to help her, but I knew I had to try. It was more than that I
owed her. It was because her pain hurt me, too. Julie had become a part of me, and there was no
changing that now.
“ARE YOU OKAY, JULES? CHARLIE SAID YOU WERE HAVING a hard time…. Isn’t it getting any better?”

Her warm hand curled around mine. “’S not so bad,” she said, but she wouldn’t meet my eyes.

She walked slowly back to the driftwood bench, staring at the rainbow-colored pebbles, and pulling me along at her side. I sat back down on our tree, but she sat on the wet, rocky ground rather than next to me. I wondered if it was so that she could hide her face more easily. She kept my hand.

I started babbling to fill the silence. “It’s been so long since I was here. I’ve probably missed a ton of things. How are Sam and Elliott? And Embry? Did Quil—?”

I broke off mid-sentence, remembering that Julie’s friend Quil had been a sensitive subject.

“Ah, Quil,” Julie sighed.

So then it must have happened—Quil must have joined the pack.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

To my surprise, Julie snorted. “Don’t say that to him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Quil’s not looking for pity. Just the opposite—he’s jazzed. Totally thrilled.”

This made no sense to me. All the other wolves had been so depressed at the idea of their friend sharing their fate. “Huh?”

Julie tilted her head back to look at me. She smiled and rolled her eyes.

“Quil thinks it’s the coolest thing that’s ever happened to him. Part of it is finally knowing what’s going on. And he’s excited to have his friends back—to be part of the ‘in crowd.’” Julie snorted again. “Shouldn’t be surprised, I guess. It’s so Quil.”

“He likes it?”

“Honestly… most of them do,” Julie admitted slowly. “There are definitely good sides to this—the speed, the freedom, the strength… the sense of—of family…. Sam and I are the only ones who ever felt really bitter. And Sam got past that a long time ago. So I’m the crybaby now.” Julie laughed at herself.

There were so many things I wanted to know. “Why are you and Sam different? What happened to Sam anyway? What’s his problem?” The questions tumbled out without room to answer them, and Julie laughed again.

“That’s a long story.”

“I told you a long story. Besides, I’m not in any hurry to get back,” I said, and then I grimaced as I thought of the trouble I would be in.
She looked up at me swiftly, hearing the double edge in my words. “Will she be mad at you?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “She really hates it when I do things he considers… risky.”

“Like hanging out with werewolves.”

“Yeah.”

Julie shrugged. “So don’t go back. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“That’s a great idea,” I grumbled. “Because then she would come looking for me.”

Julie stiffened, and then smiled bleakly. “Would she?”

“If she was afraid I was hurt or something—probably.”

“My idea’s sounding better all the time.”

“Please, Jules. That really bugs me.”

“What does?”

“That you two are so ready to kill each other!” I complained. “It makes me crazy. Why can’t you both just be civilized?”

“Is she ready to kill me?” Julie asked with a grim smile, unconcerned by my anger.

“Not like you seem to be!” I realized I was yelling. “At least she can be a grown-up about this. She knows that hurting you would hurt me—and so she never would. You don’t seem to care about that at all!”

“Yeah, right,” Julie muttered. “I’m sure she’s quite the pacifist.”

“Ugh!” I ripped my hand out of hers and shoved her head away. Then I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms tightly around them.

I glared out toward the horizon, fuming.

Julie was quiet for a few minutes. Finally, she got up off the ground and sat beside me, putting her arm around my shoulders. I shook it off.

“Sorry,” she said quietly. “I’ll try to behave myself.”

I didn’t answer.

“Do you still want to hear about Sam?” she offered.

I shrugged.

“Like I said, it’s a long story. And very… strange. There’re so many strange things about this new life. I haven’t had time to tell you the half of it. And this thing with Sam—well, I don’t know if I’ll even be able to explain it right.”

Her words pricked my curiosity in spite of my irritation.

“I’m listening,” I said stiffly.
Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the side of her face pull up in a smile.

“Sam had it so much harder than the rest of us. Because he was the first, and he was alone, and he didn’t have anyone to tell him what was happening. Sam’s grandfather died before he was born, and his father has never been around. There was no one there to recognize the signs. The first time it happened—the first time he phased—he thought he’d gone insane. It took him two weeks to calm down enough to change back.

“This was before you came to Forks, so you wouldn’t remember. Sam’s mother and Leah Clearwater had the forest rangers searching for him, the police. People thought there had been an accident or something….”

“Leah?” I asked, surprised. Leah was Harry’s daughter. Hearing her name sent an automatic surge of pity through me. Harry Clearwater, Charlie’s life-long friend, had died of a heart attack this past spring.

Her voice changed, became heavier. “Yeah. Leah and Sam were high school sweethearts. They started dating when she was just a freshman. She was frantic when he disappeared.”

“But he and Elliott—”

“I’ll get to that—it’s part of the story,” she said. She inhaled slowly, and then exhaled in a gust.

I supposed it was silly for me to imagine that Sam had never loved anyone before Elliott. Most people fall in and out of love many times in their lives. It was just that I’d seen Sam with Elliott, and I couldn’t imagine him with someone else. The way he looked at him… well, it reminded me of a look I’d seen sometimes in Edythe’s eyes—when she was looking at me.

“Sam came back,” Julie said, “but he wouldn’t talk to anyone about where he’d been. Rumors flew—that he was up to no good, mostly. And then Sam happened to run in to Quil’s grandfather one afternoon when Old Quil Ateara came to visit Mrs. Uley. Sam shook his hand. Old Quil just about had a stroke.” Julie paused to laugh.

“Why?”

Julie put her hand on my cheek and pulled my face around to look at her—she was leaning toward me, her face was just a few inches away. Her palm burned my skin, like she had a fever.

“Oh, right,” I said. It was uncomfortable, having my face so close to hers with her hand hot against my skin. “Sam was running a temperature.”

Julie laughed again. “Sam’s hand felt like he’d left it sitting on a hot stovetop.”

She was so close, I could feel her warm breath. I reached up casually, to take her hand away and free my face, but wound my fingers through hers so that I wouldn’t hurt her feelings. She smiled and leaned back, undeceived by my attempt at nonchalance.

“So Mr. Ateara went straight to the other elders,” Julie went on. “They were the only ones left who still knew, who remembered. Mr. Ateara, Billy, and Harry had actually seen their grandfathers make the change. When Old Quil told them, they met with Sam secretly and explained.

“It was easier when he understood—when he wasn’t alone anymore. They knew he wouldn’t be the only one affected by the Cullens’ return”—she pronounced the name with unconscious bitterness—“but no one else was old enough. So Sam waited for the rest of us to join him….”
“The Cullens had no idea,” I said in a whisper. “They didn’t think that werewolves still existed here. They didn’t know that coming here would change you.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that it did.”

“Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

“You think I should be as forgiving as you are? We can’t all be saints and martyrs.”

“Grow up, Julie.”

“I wish I could,” she murmured quietly.

I stared at her, trying to make sense of her response. “What?”

Julie chuckled. “One of those many strange things I mentioned.”

“You… can’t… grow up?” I said blankly. “You’re what? Not… aging? Is that a joke?”

“Nope.” She popped her lips on the P.

I felt blood flood my face. Tears—tears of rage—filled my eyes. My teeth mashed together with an audible grinding sound.

“Bella? What did I say?”

I was on my feet again, my hands balled up into fists, my whole frame shaking.


Julie tugged my arm gently, trying to make me sit. “None of us are. What’s wrong with you?”

“Am I the only one who has to get old? I get older every stinking day!” I nearly shrieked, throwing my hands in the air. Some little part of me recognized that I was throwing a Charlie-esque fit, but that rational part was greatly overshadowed by the irrational part. “Damn it! What kind of world is this? Where’s the justice?”

“Take it easy, Bella.”

“Shut up, Julie. Just shut up! This is so unfair!”

“Did you seriously just stamp your foot? I thought girls only did that on TV.”

I growled unimpressively.

“It’s not as bad as you seem to think it is. Sit down and I’ll explain.”

“I’ll stand.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay. Whatever you want. But listen, I will get older… someday.”

“Explain.”

She patted the tree. I glowered for a second, but then sat; my temper had burned out as suddenly as it had flared and I’d calmed down enough to realize that I was making a fool of myself.

“When we get enough control to quit…,” Julie said. “When we stop phasing for a solid length of
time, we age again. It’s not easy.” She shook her head, abruptly doubtful. “It’s gonna take a really long time to learn that kind of restraint, I think. Even Sam’s not there yet. ’Course it doesn’t help that there’s a huge coven of vampires right down the road. We can’t even think about quitting when the tribe needs protectors. But you shouldn’t get all bent out of shape about it, anyway, because I’m already older than you, physically at least.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look at me, Bells. Do I look sixteen?”

I glanced up and down her mammoth frame, trying to be unbiased. “Not exactly, I guess.”

“Not at all. Because we reach full growth inside of a few months when the werewolf gene gets triggered. It’s one hell of a growth spurt.” She made a face. “Physically, I’m probably twenty-five or something. So there’s no need for you to freak out about being too old for me for at least another seven years.”

Twelve-five or something. The idea messed with my head. But I remembered that growth spurt—I remembered watching her shoot up and fill out right before my eyes. I remembered how she would look different from one day to the next…. I shook my head, feeling dizzy.

“So, did you want to hear about Sam, or did you want to scream at me some more for things that are out of my control?”

I took a deep breath. “Sorry. Age is a touchy subject for me. That hit a nerve.”

Julie’s eyes tightened, and she looked as if she were trying to decide how to word something.

Since I didn’t want to talk about the truly touchy stuff—my plans for the future, or treaties that might be broken by said plans, I prompted her. “So once Sam understood what was going on, once he had Billy and Harry and Mr. Ateara, you said it wasn’t so hard anymore. And, like you also said, there are the cool parts…. I hesitated briefly. “Why does Sam hate them so much? Why does he wish I would hate them?”

Julie sighed. “This is the really weird part.”

“I’m a pro at weird.”

“Yeah, I know.” She grinned before she continued. “So, you’re right. Sam knew what was going on, and everything was almost okay. In most ways, his life was back to, well, not normal. But better.” Then Julie’s expression tightened, like something painful was coming. “Sam couldn’t tell Leah. We aren’t supposed to tell anyone who doesn’t have to know. And it wasn’t really safe for him to be around her—but he cheated, just like I did with you. Leah was furious that he wouldn’t tell her what was going on—where he’d been, where he went at night, why he was always so exhausted—but they were working it out. They were trying. They really loved each other.”

“Did she find out? Is that what happened?”

She shook her head. “No, that wasn’t the problem. Her cousin, Elliott Young, came down from the Makah reservation to visit her one weekend.”

I gasped. “Elliott is Leah’s cousin?”

“Second cousins. They’re close, though. They were like siblings when they were kids.”
“That’s… horrible. How could Sam…?” I trailed off, shaking my head.

“Don’t judge him just yet. Did anyone ever tell you… Have you ever heard of imprinting?”

“Imprinting?” I repeated the unfamiliar word. “No. What’s that mean?”

“It’s one of those bizarre things we have to deal with. It doesn’t happen to everyone. In fact, it’s the rare exception, not the rule. Sam had heard all the stories by then, the stories we all used to think were legends. He’d heard of imprinting, but he never dreamed…”

“What is it?” I prodded.

Julie’s eyes strayed to the ocean. “Sam did love Leah. But when he saw Elliott, that didn’t matter anymore—even him being supposedly straight didn’t matter anymore. Sometimes… we don’t exactly know why… we find our mates that way.” Her eyes flashed back to me, her face reddening. “I mean… our soul mates.”


Julie wasn’t smiling. Her dark eyes were critical of my reaction. “It’s a little bit more powerful than that. More absolute.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Love at first sight? But more powerful?” My voice still sounded dubious, and she could hear that.

“It’s not easy to explain. It doesn’t matter, anyway.” She shrugged indifferently. “You wanted to know what happened to Sam to make him hate the vampires for changing him, to make him hate himself. And that’s what happened. He broke Leah’s heart. He went back on every promise he’d ever made her. Every day he has to see the accusation in her eyes, and know that she’s right.”

She stopped talking abruptly, as if she’d said something she hadn’t meant to.

“How did Elliott deal with this? If he was so close to Leah…? Sam and Elliott were utterly right together, two puzzle pieces, shaped for each other exactly. Still… how had Elliott gotten past the fact that Sam had belonged to someone else—his sister, almost?

“He was real angry, in the beginning. But it’s hard to resist that level of commitment and adoration.” Julie sighed. “And then, Sam could tell him everything. There are no rules that can bind you when you find your other half. You know how he got hurt?”

“Yeah.” The story in Forks was that he was mauled by a bear, but I was in on the secret.

_Werewolves are unstable_, Edythe had said. _The people near them get hurt._

“Well, weirdly enough, that was sort of how they resolved things. Sam was so horrified, so sickened by himself, so full of hate for what he’d done…. He would have thrown himself under a bus if it would have made Elliott feel better. He might have anyway, just to escape what he’d done. He was shattered…. Then, somehow, _Elliott_ was the one comforting _Sam_, and after that….”

Julie didn’t finish her thought, and I sensed the story had gotten too personal to share.

“Poor Elliott,” I whispered. “Poor Sam. Poor Leah….”
“Yeah, Leah got the worst end of the stick,” she agreed. “She puts on a brave face. She’s going to be a bridesmaid.”

I gazed away, toward the jagged rocks that rose from the ocean like stubby broken-off fingers on the south rim of the harbor, while I tried to make sense of it all. I could feel her eyes on my face, waiting for me to say something.

“Did it happen to you?” I finally asked, still looking away. “This love-at-first-sight thing?”

“No,” she answered briskly. “Sam and Jared are the only ones.”

“Hmm,” I said, trying to sound only politely interested. I was relieved, and I tried to explain my reaction to myself. I decided I was just glad she didn’t claim there was some mystical, wolfy connection between the two of us. Our relationship was confusing enough as it was. I didn’t need any more of the supernatural than I already had to deal with.

She was quiet, too, and the silence felt a little awkward. My intuition told me that I didn’t want to hear what she was thinking.

“How did that work out for Jared?” I asked to break the silence.

“No drama there. It was just a girl he’d sat next to in school every day for a year and never looked at twice. And then, after he changed, he saw her again and never looked away. Kim was thrilled. She’d had a huge crush on him. She’d had his last name tacked on to the end of hers all over in her diary.” She laughed mockingly.

I frowned. “Did Jared tell you that? He shouldn’t have.”

Julie bit her lip. “I guess I shouldn’t laugh. It was funny, though.”

“Some soul mate.”

She sighed. “Jared didn’t tell us anything on purpose. I already told you this part, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. You can hear each other’s thoughts, but only when you’re wolves, right?”

“Right. Just like your bloodsucker.” She glowered.

“Edythe,” I corrected.

“Sure, sure. That’s how come I know so much about how Sam felt. It’s not like he would have told us all that if he’d had a choice. Actually, that’s something we all hate.” The bitterness was abruptly harsh in his voice. “It’s awful. No privacy, no secrets. Everything you’re ashamed of, laid out for everyone to see.” She shuddered.

“It sounds horrible,” I whispered.

“It is sometimes helpful when we need to coordinate,” she said grudgingly. “Once in a blue moon, when some bloodsucker crosses into our territory. Laurent was fun. And if the Cullens hadn’t gotten in our way last Saturday… ugh!” she groaned. “We could have had her!” Her fists clenched into angry balls.

I flinched. As much as I worried about Jasper or Eleanor getting hurt, it was nothing like the panic I felt at the idea of Julie going up against Victoria. Eleanor and Jasper were the closest thing to indestructible I could imagine. Julie was still warm, still comparatively human. Mortal. I thought of
Julie facing Victoria, her brilliant hair blowing around her oddly feline face… and shuddered.

Julie looked up at me with a curious expression. “But isn’t it like that for you all the time? Having her in your head?”

“Oh, no. Edythe’s never in my head. She only wishes.”

Julie’s expression became confused.

“She can’t hear me,” I explained, my voice a tiny bit smug from old habit. “I’m the only one like that, for her. We don’t know why she can’t.”

“Weird,” Julie said.

“Yeah.” The smugness faded. “It probably means there’s something wrong with my brain,” I admitted.

“I already knew there was something wrong with your brain,” Julie muttered.

“Thanks.”

The sun broke through the clouds suddenly, a surprise I hadn’t been expecting, and I had to narrow my eyes against the glare off the water. Everything changed color—the waves turned from gray to blue, the trees from dull olive to brilliant jade, and the rainbow-hued pebbles glittered like jewels.

We squinted for a moment, letting our eyes adjust. There were no sounds besides the hollow roar of the waves that echoed from every side of the sheltered harbor, the soft grinding of the stones against each other under the water’s movement, and the cry of gulls high overhead. It was very peaceful.

Julie settled closer to me, so that she was leaning against my arm. She was so warm. After a minute of this, I shrugged out of my rain jacket. She made a little sound of contentment in the back of her throat, and rested her cheek on the top of my head. I could feel the sun heat my skin—thought it was not quite as warm as Julie—and I wondered idly how long it would take me to burn.

Absently, I twisted my right hand to the side, and watched the sunlight glitter subtly off the scar James had left there.

“What are you thinking about?” she murmured.

“The sun.”

“Mmm. It’s nice.”

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

She chuckled to herself. “I was remembering that moronic movie you took me to. And Mike Newton puking all over everything.”

I laughed, too, surprised by how time had changed the memory. It used to be one of stress, of confusion. So much had changed that night…. And now I could laugh. It was the last night Julie and I had had before she’d learned the truth about her heritage. The last human memory. An oddly pleasant memory now.

“I miss that,” Julie said. “The way it used to be so easy… uncomplicated. I’m glad I’ve got a good memory.” She sighed.
She felt the sudden tension in my body as her words triggered a memory of my own.

“What is it?” he asked.

“About that good memory of yours…” I pulled away from her so that I could read her face. At the moment, it was confused. “Do you mind telling me what you were doing Monday morning? You were thinking something that bothered Edythe.” Bothered wasn’t quite the word for it, but I wanted an answer, so I thought it was best not to start out too severely.

Julie’s face brightened with understanding, and she laughed. “I was just thinking about you. Didn’t like that much, did she?”

“Me? What about me?”

Julie laughed, with a harder edge this time. “I was remembering the way you looked that night Sam found you—I’ve seen it in his head, and it’s like I was there; that memory has always haunted Sam, you know. And then I remembered how you looked the first time you came to my place. I bet you don’t even realize what a mess you were then, Bella. It was weeks before you started to look human again. And I remembered how you always used to have your arms wrapped around yourself, trying to hold yourself together….” Julie winced, and then shook her head. “It’s hard for me to remember how sad you were, and it wasn’t my fault. So I figured it would be harder for her. And I thought she ought to get a look at what she’d done.”

I smacked her shoulder. It hurt my hand. “Julie Black, don’t you ever do that again! Promise me you won’t.”

“No way. I haven’t had that much fun in months.”

“So help me, Jules—”

“Oh, get a grip, Bella. When am I ever going to see her again? Don’t worry about it.”

I got to my feet, and she caught my hand as I started to walk away. I tried to tug free.

“I’m leaving, Julie.”

“No, don’t go yet,” she protested, her hand tightening around mine. “I’m sorry. And… okay, I won’t do it again. Promise.”

I sighed. “Thanks, Jules.”

“Come on, we’ll go back to my house,” she said eagerly.

“Actually, I think I really do need to go. Angela Weber is expecting me, and I know Archie is worried. I don’t want to upset him too much.”

“But you just got here!”

“It feels that way,” I agreed. I glared up at the sun, somehow already directly overhead. How had the time passed so quickly?

Her eyebrows pulled down over his eyes. “I don’t know when I’ll see you again,” she said in a hurt voice.

“I’ll come back the next time she’s away,” I promised impulsively.
“Away?” Julie rolled her eyes. “That’s a nice way to describe what she’s doing. Disgusting parasites.”

“If you can’t be nice, I won’t come back at all!” I threatened, trying to pull my hand free. She refused to let go.

“Aw, don’t be mad,” she said, grinning. “Knee-jerk reaction.”

“If I’m going to try to come back again, you’re going to have to get something straight, okay?”

She waited.

“See,” I explained. “I don’t care who’s a vampire and who’s a werewolf. That’s irrelevant. You are Julie, and she is Edythe, and I am Bella. And nothing else matters.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “But I am a werewolf,” she said unwillingly. “And she is a vampire,” she added with obvious revulsion.

“And I’m a Virgo!” I shouted, exasperated.

She raised her eyebrows, measuring my expression with curious eyes. Finally, she shrugged.

“If you can really see it that way…”

“I can. I do.”

“Okay. Just Bella and Julie. None of those freaky Virgos here.” She smiled at me, the warm, familiar smile that I had missed so much. I felt the answering smile spread across my face.

“I’ve really missed you, Jules,” I admitted impulsively.

“Me, too,” her smile widened. Her eyes were happy and clear, free for once of the angry bitterness. “More than you know. Will you come back soon?”

“As soon as I can,” I promised.
AS I DROVE HOME, I WASN'T PAYING MUCH ATTENTION TO the road that shimmered wetly in the sun. I was thinking about the flood of information Julie had shared with me, trying to sort it out, to force it all to make sense. Despite the overload, I felt lighter. Seeing Julie smile, having all the secrets thrashed out… it didn’t make things perfect, but it made them better. I was right to have gone. Julie needed me. And obviously, I thought as I squinted into the glare, there was no danger.

It came out of nowhere. One minute there was nothing but bright highway in my rearview mirror. The next minute, the sun was glinting off a silver Volvo right on my tail.

“Aw, crap,” I whimpered.

I considered pulling over. But I was too much of a coward to face her right away. I’d been counting on some prep time… and having Charlie nearby as a buffer. At least that would force her to keep her voice down.

The Volvo followed inches behind me. I kept my eyes on the road ahead.

Chicken through and through, I drove straight to Angela’s without once meeting the gaze I could feel burning a hole in my mirror.

She followed me until I pulled to the curb in front of the Webers’ house. She didn’t stop, and I didn’t look up as she passed. I didn’t want to see the expression on her face. I ran up the short concrete walk to Angela’s door as soon as she was out of sight.

Ben answered the door before I could finish knocking, like he’d been standing right behind it.

“Hey, Bella!” he said, surprised.

“Hi, Ben. Er, is Angela here?” I wondered if Angela had forgotten our plans, and cringed at the thought of going home early.

“Sure,” Ben said just as Angela called, “Bella!” and appeared at the top of the stairs.

Ben peered around me as we both heard the sound of a car on the road; the sound didn’t scare me—this engine stuttered to a stop, followed by the loud pop of a backfire. Nothing like the purr of the Volvo. This must be the visitor Ben had been waiting for.

“Austin’s here,” Ben said as Angela reached his side.

A horn honked on the street.

“I’ll see you later,” Ben promised. “Miss you already.”

He threw his arm around Angela’s neck and pulled her face down to his height so that he could kiss her enthusiastically. After a second of this, Austin honked again.

“'Bye, Ang! Love you!” Ben shouted as he dashed past me.

Angela swayed, her face slightly pink, then recovered herself and waved until Ben and Austin were out of sight. Then she turned to me and grinned ruefully.
“Thank you for doing this, Bella,” she said. “From the bottom of my heart. Not only are you saving my hands from permanent injury, you also just spared me two long hours of a plot-less, badly dubbed martial arts film.” She sighed in relief.

“Happy to be of service.” I was feeling a bit less panicked, able to breathe a little more evenly. It felt so ordinary here. Angela’s easy human dramas were oddly reassuring. It was nice to know that life was normal somewhere.

I followed Angela up the stairs to her room. She kicked toys out of the way as she went. The house was unusually quiet.

“Where’s your family?”

“My parents took the twins to a birthday party in Port Angeles. I can’t believe you’re really going to help me with this. Ben’s pretending he has tendonitis.” She made a face.

“I don’t mind at all,” I said, and then I walked into Angela’s room and saw the stacks of waiting envelopes.

“Oh!” I gasped. Angela turned to look at me, apologies in her eyes. I could see why she’d been putting this off, and why Ben had weaseled out.

“I thought you were exaggerating,” I admitted.

“I wish. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Put me to work. I’ve got all day.”

Angela divided a pile in half and put her mother’s address book between us on her desk. For a while we concentrated, and there was just the sound of our pens scratching quietly across the paper.

“What’s Edythe doing tonight?” she asked after a few minutes.

My pen dug into the envelope I was working on. “Eleanor’s home for the weekend. They’re supposed to be hiking.”

“You say that like you’re not sure.”

I shrugged.

“You’re lucky Edythe has her sisters for all the hiking and camping. I don’t know what I’d do if Ben didn’t have Austin for the outdoorsy stuff.”

“Yeah, the outdoors thing is not really for me. And there’s no way I’d ever be able to keep up.”

Angela laughed. “I prefer the indoors myself.”

She focused on her pile for a minute. I wrote out four more addresses. There was never any pressure to fill a pause with meaningless chatter around Angela. Like Charlie, she was comfortable with silence.

But, like Charlie, she was also too observant sometimes.

“Is something wrong?” she asked in a low voice now. “You seem… anxious.”
I smiled sheepishly. “Is it that obvious?”

“Not really.”

She was probably lying to make me feel better.

“You don’t have to talk about it unless you want to,” she assured me. “I’ll listen if you think it will help.”

I was about to say thanks, but no thanks. After all, there were just too many secrets I was bound to keep. I really couldn’t discuss my problems with someone human. That was against the rules.

And yet, with a strange, sudden intensity, that’s exactly what I wanted. I wanted to talk to a normal human friend. I wanted to moan a little bit, like any other teenage girl. I wanted my problems to be that simple. It would also be nice to have someone outside the whole vampire-werewolf mess to put things in perspective. Someone unbiased.

“I’ll mind my own business,” Angela promised, smiling down at the address she was working on.

“No,” I said. “You’re right. I am anxious. It’s… it’s Edythe.”

“What’s wrong?”

It was so easy to talk to Angela. When she asked a question like that, I could tell that she wasn’t just morbidly curious or looking for gossip, like Jessica would have been. She cared that I was upset.

“Oh, she’s mad at me.”

“That’s hard to imagine,” she said. “What’s she mad about?”

I sighed. “Do you remember Julie Black?”

“Ah,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“She’s jealous.”

“No, not jealous…” I should have kept my mouth shut. There was no way to explain this right. But I wanted to keep talking anyway. I hadn’t realized I was so starved for human conversation. “Edythe thinks Julie is… a bad influence, I guess. Sort of… dangerous. You know how much trouble I got in a few months back… It’s all ridiculous, though.”

I was surprised to see Angela shaking her head.

“What?” I asked.

“Bella, I’ve seen how Julie Black looks at you. I’d bet the real problem is jealousy.”

“It’s not like that with Julie.”

“For you, maybe. But for Julie…”

I frowned. “Julie knows how I feel. I’ve told her everything.”
“Edythe’s only human, Bella. She’s going to react like any other teenager.”

I grimaced. I didn’t have a response to that.

She patted my hand. “She’ll get over it.”

“I hope so. Julie’s going through kind of a tough time. She needs me.”

“You and Julie are pretty close, aren’t you?”

“Like family,” I agreed.

“And Edythe doesn’t like her…. That must be hard. I wonder how Ben would handle that?” she mused.

I half-smiled. “Probably just like any other teenager.”

She grinned. “Probably.”

Then she changed the subject. Angela wasn’t one to pry, and she seemed to sense I wouldn’t—couldn’t—say any more.

“I got my dorm assignment yesterday. The farthest building from campus, naturally.”

“Does Ben know where he’s staying yet?”

“The closest dorm to campus. He’s got all the luck. How about you? Did you decide where you’re going?”

I stared down, concentrating on the clumsy scrawl of my handwriting. For a second I was distracted by the thought of Angela and Ben at the University of Washington. They would be off to Seattle in just a few months. Would it be safe then? Would the wild young vampire menace have moved elsewhere? Would there be a new place by then, some other city flinching from horror-movie headlines?

Would those new headlines be *my* fault?

I tried to shake it off and answered her question a beat late. “Alaska, I think. The university there in Juneau.”

I could hear the surprise in her voice. “Alaska? Oh. Really? I mean, that’s great. I just figured you’d go somewhere… warmer.”

I laughed a little, still staring at the envelope. “Yeah. Forks has really changed my perspective on life.”

“And Edythe?”

Though her name set butterflies fluttering in my stomach, I looked up and grinned at her. “Alaska’s not too cold for Edythe, either.”

She grinned back. “Of course not.” And then she sighed. “It’s so far. You won’t be able to come home very often. I’ll miss you. Will you e-mail me?”

A swell of quiet sadness crashed over me; maybe it was a mistake to get closer to Angela now. But wouldn’t it be sadder still to miss out on these last chances? I shook off the unhappy thoughts, so
that I could answer her teasingly.

“If I can type again after this.” I nodded toward the stack of envelopes I’d done.

We laughed, and it was easy then to chat cheerfully about classes and majors while we finished the rest—all I had to do was not think about it. Anyway, there were more urgent things to worry about today.

I helped her put the stamps on, too. I was afraid to leave.

“How’s your hand?” she asked.

I flexed my fingers. “I think I’ll recover the full use of it… someday.”

The door banged downstairs, and we both looked up.

“Ang?” Ben called.

I tried to smile, but my lips trembled. “I guess that’s my cue to leave.”

“You don’t have to go. Though he’s probably going to describe the movie for me… in detail.”

“Charlie will be wondering where I am anyway.”

“Thanks for helping me.”

“I had a good time, actually. We should do something like this again. It was nice to have some girl time.”

“Definitely.”

There was a light knock on the bedroom door.

“Come in, Ben,” Angela said.

I got up and stretched.

“Hey, Bella! You survived,” Ben greeted me quickly before going to take my place by Angela. He eyed our work. “Nice job. Too bad there’s nothing left to do, I would have…” He let the thought trail off, and then restarted excitedly. “Ang, I can’t believe you missed this one! It was awesome. There was this final fight sequence—the choreography was unbelievable! This one guy—well, you’re going to have to see it to know what I’m talking about—”

Angela rolled her eyes at me.

“See you at school,” I said with a nervous laugh.

She sighed. “See you.”

I was jumpy on the way out to my truck, but the street was empty. I spent the whole drive glancing anxiously in all my mirrors, but there was never any sign of the silver car.

His car was not in front of the house, either, though that meant little.

“Bella?” Charlie called when I opened the front door.

“Hey, Dad.”
I found him in the living room, in front of the TV.

“So, how was your day?”

“Good,” I said. Might as well tell him everything—he’d hear it from Billy soon enough. Besides, it would make him happy. “They didn’t need me at work, so I went down to La Push.”

There wasn’t enough surprise in his face. Billy had already talked to him.

“How’s Julie?” Charlie asked, attempting to sound indifferent.

“Good,” I said, just as casual.

“You get over to the Webers’?”

“Yep. We got all her announcements addressed.”

“That’s nice.” Charlie smiled a wide smile. He was strangely focused, considering that there was a game on. “I’m glad you spent some time with your friends today.”

“Me, too.”

I ambled toward the kitchen, looking for busy work. Unfortunately, Charlie had already cleaned up his lunch. I stood there for a few minutes, staring at the bright patch of light the sun made on the floor. But I knew I couldn’t delay this forever.

“I’m going to go study,” I announced glumly as I headed up the stairs.

“See you later,” Charlie called after me.

If I survive, I thought to myself.

I shut my bedroom door carefully before I turned to face my room.

Of course she was there. She stood against the wall across from me, in the shadow beside the open window. Her face was hard and her posture tense. She glared at me wordlessly.

I cringed, waiting for the torrent, but it didn’t come. She just continued to glare, possibly too angry to speak.

“Hi,” I finally said.

Her face could have been carved from stone. I counted to a hundred in my head, but there was no change.

“Er… so, I’m still alive,” I began.

A growl rumbled low in her chest, but her expression didn’t change.

“No harm done,” I insisted with a shrug.

She moved. Her eyes closed, and she pinched the bridge of her nose between the fingers of her right hand.

“Bella,” she whispered. “Do you have any idea how close I came to crossing the line today? To breaking the treaty and coming after you? Do you know what that would have meant?”
I gasped and her eyes opened. They were as cold and hard as night.

“You can’t!” I said too loudly. I worked to modulate the volume of my voice so Charlie wouldn’t hear, but I wanted to shout the words. “Edythe, they’d use any excuse for a fight. They’d love that. You can’t ever break the rules!”

“Maybe they aren’t the only ones who would enjoy a fight.”

“Don’t you start,” I snapped. “You made the treaty—you stick to it.”

“If she’d hurt you—”

“Enough!” I cut her off. “There’s nothing to worry about. Julie isn’t dangerous.”

“Bella.” She rolled her eyes. “You aren’t exactly the best judge of what is or isn’t dangerous.”

“I know I don’t have to worry about Jules. And neither do you.”

She ground her teeth together. Her hands were balled up in fists at her sides. She was still standing against the wall, and I hated the space between us.

I took a deep breath, and crossed the room. She didn’t move when I wrapped my arms around her. Next to the warmth of the last of the afternoon sun streaming through the window, her skin felt especially icy. She seemed like ice, too, frozen the way she was.

“I’m sorry I made you anxious,” I muttered.

She sighed, and relaxed a little. Her arms wound around my waist.

“Anxious is a bit of an understatement,” she murmured. “It was a very long day.”

“You weren’t supposed to know about it,” I reminded her. “I thought you’d be hunting longer.”

I looked up at her face, at her defensive eyes; I hadn’t noticed in the stress of the moment, but they were too dark. The rings under them were deep purple. I frowned in disapproval.

“When Archie saw you disappear, I came back,” she explained.

“You shouldn’t have done that. Now you’ll have to go away again.” My frown intensified.

“That’s ridiculous. I mean, I know he couldn’t see me with Julie, but you should have known—”

“But I didn’t,” she broke in. “And you can’t expect me to let you—”

“Oh, yes, I can,” I interrupted her. “That’s exactly what I expect—”

“This won’t happen again.”

“That’s right! Because you’re not going to overreact next time.”

“Because there isn’t going to be a next time.”

“I understand when you have to leave, even if I don’t like it—”

“That’s not the same. I’m not risking my life.”
“Neither am I.”

“Werewolves constitute a risk.”

“I disagree.”

“I’m not negotiating this, Bella.”

“Neither am I.”

Her hands were in fists again. I could feel them against my back.

The words popped out thoughtlessly. “Is this really just about my safety?”

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“You aren’t…” Angela’s theory seemed sillier now than before. It was hard to finish the thought. “I mean, you know better than to be jealous, right?”

She raised one eyebrow. “Do I?”

“Be serious.”

“Easily—there’s nothing remotely humorous about this.”

I frowned suspiciously. “Or… is this something else altogether? Some vampires-and-werewolves-are-always-enemies nonsense? Is this just a hormone-fueled—”

Her eyes blazed. “This is only about you. All I care is that you’re safe.”

The black fire in her eyes was impossible to doubt.

“Okay,” I sighed. “I believe that. But I want you to know something—when it comes to all this enemies nonsense, I’m out. I am a neutral country. I am Switzerland. I refuse to be affected by territorial disputes between mythical creatures. Julie is family. You are… well, not exactly the love of my life, because I expect to love you for much longer than that. The love of my existence. I don’t care who’s a werewolf and who’s a vampire. If Angela turns out to be a witch, she can join the party, too.”

She stared at me silently through narrowed eyes.

“Switzerland,” I repeated again for emphasis.

She frowned at me, and then sighed. “Bella…,” she began, but she paused, and her nose wrinkled in disgust.

“What now?”

“Well… don’t be offended, but you smell like a dog,” she told me.

And then she smiled crookedly, so I knew the fight was over. For now.

Edythe had to make up for the missed hunting trip, and so she was leaving Friday night with
Jasper, Eleanor, and Carlisle to hit some reserve in Northern California with a mountain lion problem.

We’d come to no agreement on the werewolf issue, but I didn’t feel guilty calling Jules—during my brief window of opportunity when Edythe took the Volvo home before climbing back in through my window—to let her know I’d be coming over on Saturday again. It wasn’t sneaking around. Edythe knew how I felt. And if she broke my truck again, then I’d have Julie pick me up. Forks was neutral, just like Switzerland—just like me.

So when I got off work Thursday and it was Archie rather than Edythe waiting for me in the Volvo, I was not suspicious at first. The passenger door was open, and music I didn’t recognize was shaking the frame when the bass played.

“Hey, Archie,” I shouted over the wailing as I climbed in. “Where’s your brother?”

He was singing along to the song, his voice an octave higher than the melody, weaving through it with a complicated harmony. He nodded at me, ignoring my question as he concentrated on the music.

I shut my door and put my hands over my ears. He grinned, and turned the volume down until it was just background. Then he hit the locks and the gas in the same second.

“What’s going on?” I asked, starting to feel uneasy. “Where is Edythe?”

He shrugged. “They left early.”

“Oh.” I tried to control the absurd disappointment. If she left early, that meant she’d be back sooner, I reminded myself.

“They’re all gone, and we’re having a slumber party!” he announced in a trilling, singsong voice.

“A slumber party?” I repeated, the suspicion finally settling in.

“Aren’t you excited?” he crowed.

I met his animated gaze for a long second.

“You’re kidnapping me, aren’t you?”

He laughed and nodded. “Till Saturday. Earnest cleared it with Charlie; you’re staying with me two nights, and I will drive you to and from school tomorrow.”

I turned my face to the window, my teeth grinding together.

“Sorry,” Archie said, not sounding in the least bit penitent. “She paid me off.”

“How?” I hissed through my teeth.

“The Porsche. It’s exactly like the one I stole in Italy.” He sighed happily. “I’m not supposed to drive it around Forks, but if you want, we could see how long it takes to get from here to L.A.—I bet I could have you back by midnight.”

I took a deep breath. “I think I’ll pass,” I sighed, repressing a shudder.

We wound, always too fast, down the long drive. Archie pulled around to the garage, and I quickly looked over the cars. Eleanor’s big jeep was there, with a shiny canary yellow Porsche between it
and Rosalie’s red convertible.

Archie hopped out gracefully and went to stroke his hand along the length of his bribe. “Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Pretty over-the-top,” I grumbled, incredulous. “She gave you *that* just for two days of holding me hostage?”

Archie made a face.

A second later, comprehension came and I gasped in horror. “It’s for every time she’s gone, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

I slammed my door and stomped toward the house. He danced along next to me, still unrepentant.

“Archie, don’t you think this is just a little bit controlling? Just a tiny bit psychotic, maybe?”

“Not really.” He sniffed. “You don’t seem to grasp how dangerous a young werewolf can be. Especially when I can’t see them. Edythe has no way to know if you’re safe. You shouldn’t be so reckless.”

My voice turned acidic. “Yes, because a vampire slumber party is the pinnacle of safety conscious behavior.”

Archie laughed. “I’ll give you a pedicure and everything,” he promised.

It wasn’t so bad, except for the fact that I was being held against my will. Earnest brought Italian food—the good stuff, all the way from Port Angeles—and Archie was prepared with my favorite movies. Even Rosalie was there, quietly in the background. Archie did insist on the pedicure, and I wondered if he was working from a list—maybe something he’d compiled from watching bad sitcoms.

“How late do you want to stay up?” he asked when my toenails were glistening a bloody red. His enthusiasm remained untouched by my mood.

“I don’t want to stay up. We have school in the morning.”

He pouted.

“Where am I supposed to sleep, anyway?” I measured the couch with my eyes. It was a little short. “Can’t you just keep me under surveillance at my house?”

“What kind of a slumber party would that be?” Archie shook his head in exasperation. “You’re sleeping in Edythe’s room.”

I sighed. Her black leather sofa *was* longer than this one. Actually, the gold carpet in her room was probably thick enough that the floor wouldn’t be half bad either.

“Can I go back to my place to get my things, at least?”

He grinned. “Already taken care of.”

“Am I allowed to use your phone?”
“Charlie knows where you are.”

“I wasn’t going to call Charlie.” I frowned. “Apparently, I have some plans to cancel.”

“Oh.” He deliberated. “I’m not sure about that.”

“Archie!” I whined loudly. “C’mon!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, flitting from the room. He was back in half a second, cell phone in hand.

“She didn’t specifically prohibit this…,” he murmured to himself as he handed it to me.

I dialed Julie’s number, hoping she wasn’t out running with her friends tonight. Luck was with me—Julie was the one to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Jules, it’s me.” Archie watched me with expressionless eyes for a second, before he turned and went to sit between Rosalie and Earnest on the sofa.

“Hi, Bella,” Julie said, suddenly cautious. “What’s up?”

“Nothing good. I can’t come over Saturday after all.”

It was silent for a minute. “Stupid bloodsucker,” she finally muttered. “I thought she was leaving. Can’t you have a life when she’s gone? Or does she lock you in a coffin?”

I laughed.

“I don’t think that’s funny.”

“I’m only laughing because you’re close,” I told her. “But she’s going to be here Saturday, so it doesn’t matter.”

“She left early.”

“Oh. Well, hey, come over now, then,” she said with sudden enthusiasm. “It’s not that late. Or I’ll come up to Charlie’s.”

“I wish. I’m not at Charlie’s,” I said sourly. “I’m kind of being held prisoner.”

She was silent as that sunk in, and then she growled. “We’ll come and get you,” she promised in a flat voice, slipping automatically into a plural.

A chill slid down my spine, but I answered in a light and teasing voice. “Tempting. I have been tortured—Archie painted my toenails.”

“I’m serious.”

“Don’t be. They’re just trying to keep me safe.”

She growled again.

“I know it’s silly, but their hearts are in the right place.”
“Their hearts!” she scoffed.

“Sorry about Saturday,” I apologized. “I’ve got to hit the sack”—the couch, I corrected mentally—“but I’ll call you again soon.”

“Are you sure they’ll let you?” she asked in a scathing tone.

“Not completely.” I sighed. “‘Night, Jules.”

“See you around.”

Archie was abruptly at my side, his hand held out for the phone, but I was already dialing. He saw the number.

“I don’t think she’ll have her phone on her,” he said.

“I’ll leave a message.”

The phone rang four times, followed by a beep. There was no greeting.

“You are in trouble,” I said slowly, emphasizing each word. “Enormous trouble. Angry grizzly bears are going to look tame next to what is waiting for you at home.”

I snapped the phone shut and placed it in his waiting hand. “I’m done.”

He grinned. “This hostage stuff is fun.”

“I’m going to sleep now,” I announced, heading for the stairs. Archie tagged along.

“Archie,” I sighed. “I’m not going to sneak out. You would know if I was planning to, and you’d catch me if I tried.”

“I’m just going to show you where your things are,” he said innocently.

Edythe’s room was at the farthest end of the third floor hallway, hard to mistake even when the huge house had been less familiar. But when I switched the light on, I paused in confusion. Had I picked the wrong door?

Archie giggled.

It was the same room, I realized quickly; the furniture had just been rearranged. The couch was pushed to the north wall and the stereo shoved up against the vast shelves of CDs—to make room for the colossal bed that now dominated the central space.

The southern wall of glass reflected the scene back like a mirror, making it look twice as bad.

It matched. The coverlet was a dull gold, just lighter than the walls; the frame was black, made of intricately patterned wrought iron. Sculpted metal roses wound in vines up the tall posts and formed a bowery lattice overhead. My pajamas were folded neatly on the foot of the bed, my bag of toiletries to one side.

“What the hell is all this?” I spluttered.

“You didn’t really think she would make you sleep on the couch, did you?”

I mumbled unintelligibly as I stalked forward to snatch my things off the bed.
“I’ll give you some privacy,” Archie laughed. “See you in the morning.”

After my teeth were brushed and I was dressed, I grabbed a puffy feather pillow off the huge bed and dragged the gold cover to the couch. I knew I was being silly, but I didn’t care. Porsches as bribes and king-sized beds in houses where nobody slept—it was beyond irritating. I flipped off the lights and curled up on the sofa, wondering if I was too annoyed to sleep.

In the dark, the glass wall was no longer a black mirror, doubling the room. The light of the moon brightened the clouds outside the window. As my eyes adjusted, I could see the diffused glow highlighting the tops of the trees, and glinting off a small slice of the river. I watched the silver light, waiting for my eyes to get heavy.

There was a light knock on the door.

“What, Archie?” I hissed. I was on the defensive, imagining his amusement when he saw my makeshift bed.

“It’s me,” Rosalie said softly, opening the door enough that I could see the silver glow touch her perfect face. “Can I come in?”
Rosalie hesitated in the doorway, her breathtaking face unsure.

“Of course,” I replied, my voice an octave high with surprise. “Come on in.”

I sat up, sliding to the end of the sofa to make room. My stomach twisted nervously as the one Cullen who did not like me moved silently to sit down in the open space. I tried to come up with a reason why she would want to see me, but my mind was a blank on that point.

“Do you mind talking to me for a few minutes?” she asked. “I didn’t wake you or anything, did I?” Her eyes shifted to the stripped bed and back to my couch.

“No, I was awake. Sure, we can talk.” I wondered if she could hear the alarm in my voice as clearly as I could.

She laughed lightly, and it sounded like a chorus of bells. “She so rarely leaves you alone,” she said. “I figured I’d better make the best of this opportunity.”

What did she want to say that couldn’t be said in front of Edythe? My hands twisted and untwisted around the edge of the comforter.

“Please don’t think I’m horribly interfering,” Rosalie said, her voice gentle and almost pleading. She folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them as she spoke. “I’m sure I’ve hurt your feelings enough in the past, and I don’t want to do that again.”

“Don’t worry about it, Rosalie. My feelings are great. What is it?”

She laughed again, sounding oddly embarrassed. “I’m going to try to tell you why I think you should stay human—why I would stay human if I were you.”

“Oh.”

She smiled at the shocked tone of my voice, and then she sighed.

“Did Edythe ever tell you what led to this?” she asked, gesturing to her glorious immortal body.

I nodded slowly, suddenly somber. “She said it was close to what happened to me that time in Port Angeles, only no one was there to save you.” I shuddered at the memory.

“Is that really all she told you?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, my voice blank with confusion. “Was there more?”

She looked up at me and smiled; it was a harsh, bitter—but still stunning—expression.

“Yes,” she said. “There was more.”

I waited while she stared out the window. She seemed to be trying to calm herself.

“Would you like to hear my story, Bella? It doesn’t have a happy ending—but which of ours does? If we had happy endings, we’d all be under gravestones now.”

I nodded, though I was frightened by the edge in her voice.
“I lived in a different world than you do, Bella. My human world was a much simpler place. It was nineteen thirty-three. I was eighteen, and I was beautiful. My life was perfect.”

She stared out the window at the silver clouds, her expression far away.

“My parents were thoroughly middle class. My father had a stable job in a bank, something I realize now that he was smug about—he saw his prosperity as a reward for talent and hard work, rather than acknowledging the luck involved. I took it all for granted then; in my home, it was as if the Great Depression was only a troublesome rumor. Of course I saw the poor people, the ones who weren’t as lucky. My father left me with the impression that they’d brought their troubles on themselves.

“It was my mother’s job to keep our house—and myself and my two younger brothers—in spotless order. It was clear that I was both her first priority and her favorite. I didn’t fully understand at the time, but I was always vaguely aware that my parents weren’t satisfied with what they had, even if it was so much more than most. They wanted more. They had social aspirations—social climbers, I suppose you could call them. My beauty was like a gift to them. They saw so much more potential in it than I did.

“They weren’t satisfied, but I was. I was thrilled to be me, to be Rosalie Hale. Pleased that men’s eyes watched me everywhere I went, from the year I turned twelve. Delighted that my friends sighed with envy when they touched my hair. Happy that my mother was proud of me and that my father liked to buy me pretty dresses.

“I knew what I wanted out of life, and there didn’t seem to be any way that I wouldn’t get exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be loved, to be adored. I wanted to have a huge, flowery wedding, where everyone in town would watch me walk down the aisle on my father’s arm and think I was the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen. Admiration was like air to me, Bella. I was silly and shallow, but I was content.” She smiled, amused at her own evaluation. “It didn’t bother me in the slightest that I wasn’t particularly interested in the men who looked at me, not them themselves. I didn’t devote any thought to the fact that I preferred to steal glances at their pretty wives. I just liked being looked at.

“My parents’ influence had been such that I also wanted the material things of life. I wanted a big house with elegant furnishings that someone else would clean and a modern kitchen that someone else would cook in. As I said, shallow. Young and very shallow. And I didn’t see any reason why I wouldn’t get these things.

“There were a few things I wanted that were more meaningful. One thing in particular. My very closest friend was a girl named Vera. We had been… very close, when we were girls. She married young, just seventeen. She married a man my parents would never have considered for me—a carpenter. A year later she had a son, a beautiful little boy with dimples and curly black hair. It was the first time I’d ever felt truly jealous of anyone else in my entire life.”

She looked at me with unfathomable eyes. “It was a different time. I was the same age as you, but I was ready for it all. I yearned for my own little baby. I wanted my own house and a husband who would kiss me when he got home from work—just like Vera. Only I had a very different kind of house in mind….”

It was hard for me to imagine the world that Rosalie had known. Her story sounded more like a fairy tale than history to me. With a slight shock, I realized that this was very close to the world that Edythe would have experienced when she was human, the world she had grown up in. I wondered—while Rosalie sat silent for a moment—if my world seemed as baffling to her as Rosalie’s did to me?
Rosalie sighed, and when she spoke again her voice was different, the wistfulness gone.

“In Rochester, there was one royal family—the Kings, ironically enough. Royce King owned the bank my father worked at, and nearly every other really profitable business in town. That’s how his son, Royce King the Second”—her mouth twisted around the name, it came out through her teeth—“saw me the first time. He was going to take over at the bank, and so he began overseeing the different positions. Two days later, my mother conveniently forgot to send my father’s lunch to work with him. I remember being confused when she insisted that I wear my white organza and roll my hair up just to run over to the bank.” Rosalie laughed without humor.

“I didn’t notice Royce watching me particularly. Everyone watched me. But that night the first of the roses came. Every night of our courtship, he sent a bouquet of roses to me. My room was always overflowing with them. It got to the point that I would smell like roses when I left the house.

“Royce was handsome, too. He had lighter hair than I did, and pale blue eyes. He said my eyes were like violets, and then those started showing up alongside the roses.

“My parents approved—that’s putting it mildly. This was everything they’d dreamed of. And Royce seemed to be everything I’d dreamed of. The fairy tale prince, come to make me a princess. Everything I wanted, yet it was still no more than I expected. We were engaged before I’d known him for two months.

“We didn’t spend a great deal of time alone with each other. Royce told me he had many responsibilities at work, and, when we were together, he liked people to look at us, to see me on his arm. I liked that, too. There were lots of parties, dancing, and pretty dresses. When you were a King, every door was open for you, every red carpet rolled out to greet you.

“It wasn’t a long engagement. Plans went ahead for the most lavish wedding. It was going to be everything I’d ever wanted. I was completely happy. When I called at Vera’s, I no longer felt jealous. I pictured my fair-haired children playing on the huge lawns of the Kings’ estate, and I pitied her.”

Rosalie broke off suddenly, clenching her teeth together. It pulled me out of her story, and I realized that the horror was not far off. There would be no happy ending, as she’d promised. I wondered if this was why she had so much more bitterness in her than the rest of them—because she’d been within reach of everything she’d wanted when her human life was cut short.

“I was at Vera’s that night,” Rosalie whispered. Her face was smooth as marble, and as hard. “Her little Henry really was adorable, all smiles and dimples—he was just sitting up on his own. Vera walked me to the door as I was leaving, her baby in her arms and her husband at her side, his arm around her waist. He kissed her on the cheek when he thought I wasn’t looking. That bothered me. When Royce kissed me, it wasn’t quite the same—not so sweet somehow…. I shoved that thought aside. Royce was my prince. Someday, I would be queen.”

It was hard to tell in the moonlight, but it looked like her bone white face got paler.

“It was dark in the streets, the lamps already on. I hadn’t realized how late it was.” She continued to whisper almost inaudibly. “It was cold, too. Very cold for late April. The wedding was only a week away, and I was worrying about the weather as I hurried home—I can remember that clearly. I remember every detail about that night. I clung to it so hard… in the beginning. I thought of nothing else. And so I remember this, when so many pleasant memories have faded away completely…. ”
She sighed, and began whispering again. “Yes, I was worrying about the weather…. I didn’t want to have to move the wedding indoors….

“I was a few streets from my house when I heard them. A cluster of men under a broken streetlamp, laughing too loud. Drunk. I wished I’d called my father to escort me home, but the way was so short, it seemed silly. And then he called my name.

“‘Rose!’ he yelled, and the others laughed stupidly.

“I hadn’t realized the drunks were so well dressed. It was Royce and some of his friends, sons of other rich men.

“‘Here’s my Rose!’ Royce shouted, laughing with them, sounding just as stupid. ‘You’re late. We’re cold, you’ve kept us waiting so long.’”

“I’d never seen him drink before. A toast, now and then, at a party. He’d told me he didn’t like champagne. I hadn’t realized that he preferred something much stronger.

“He had a new friend—the friend of a friend, come up from Atlanta.

“‘What did I tell you, John,’ Royce crowed, grabbing my arm and pulling me closer. ‘Isn’t she lovelier than all your Georgia peaches?’

“The man named John was dark-haired and suntanned. He looked me over like I was a horse he was buying.

“‘It’s hard to tell,’ he drawled slowly. ‘She’s all covered up.’

“They laughed, Royce like the rest.

“Suddenly, Royce ripped my jacket from my shoulders—it was a gift from him—popping the brass buttons off. They scattered all over the street.

“‘Show him what you look like, Rose!’ He laughed again and then he tore my hat out of my hair. The pins wrenched my hair from the roots, and I cried out in pain. They seemed to enjoy that—the sound of my pain….”

Rosalie looked at me suddenly, as if she’d forgotten I was there. I was sure my face was as white as hers. Unless it was green.

“I won’t make you listen to the rest,” she said quietly. “They left me in the street, still laughing as they stumbled away. They thought I was dead. They were teasing Royce that he would have to find a new bride. He laughed and said he’d have to learn some patience first.

“I waited in the road to die. It was cold, though there was so much pain that I was surprised it bothered me. It started to snow, and I wondered why I wasn’t dying. I was impatient for death to come, to end the pain. It was taking so long….

“Carlisle found me then. He’d smelled the blood, and come to investigate. I remember being vaguely irritated as he worked over me, trying to save my life. I’d never liked Dr. Cullen or his ‘friend’” —Rosalie smiled— “People suspected. And Earnest’s sister, as Edythe pretended to be then. It had upset me that they were all more beautiful than I was, especially that the men were. It annoyed me that Dr. Cullen didn’t give my beauty a second glance. But they didn’t mingle in society, so I’d only seen them once or twice.
“I thought I’d died when he pulled me from the ground and ran with me—because of the speed—it felt like I was flying. I remembered being horrified that the pain didn’t stop.…

“Then I was in a bright room, and it was warm. I was slipping away, and I was grateful as the pain began to dull. But suddenly something sharp was cutting me, my throat, my wrists, my ankles. I screamed in shock, thinking he’d brought me there to hurt me more. Then fire started burning through me, and I didn’t care about anything else. I begged him to kill me. When Earnest and Edythe returned home, I begged them to kill me, too. Carlisle sat with me. He held my hand and said that he was so sorry, promising that it would end. He told me everything, and sometimes I listened. He told me what he was, what I was becoming. I didn’t believe him. He apologized each time I screamed.

“Edythe wasn’t happy. I remember hearing them discuss me. I stopped screaming sometimes. It did no good to scream.

“‘What were you thinking, Carlisle?’ Edythe said. ‘Rosalie Hale?’” Rosalie imitated Edythe’s irritated tone to perfection. “I didn’t like the way she said my name, like there was something wrong with me.

“‘I couldn’t just let her die,’ Carlisle said quietly. ‘It was too much—too horrible, too much waste.’

“‘I know,’ Edythe said, and I thought she sounded dismissive. It angered me. I didn’t know then that he really could see exactly what Carlisle had seen.

“‘It was too much waste. I couldn’t leave her,’ Carlisle repeated in a whisper.

“‘Of course you couldn’t,’ Earnest agreed.

“‘People die all the time,’ Edythe reminded him in a hard voice. ‘Don’t you think she’s just a little recognizable, though? The Kings will have to put up a huge search—not that anyone suspects the fiend,’ she growled.

“It pleased me that they seemed to know that Royce was guilty.

“I didn’t realize that it was almost over—that I was getting stronger and that was why I was able to concentrate on what they were saying. The pain was beginning to fade from my fingertips.

“‘What are we going to do with her?’ Edythe said disgustedly—or that’s how it sounded to me, at least.

“Carlisle sighed. ‘That’s up to her, of course. She may want to go her own way.’

“I’d believed enough of what he’d told me that his words terrified me. I knew that my life was ended, and there was no going back for me. I couldn’t stand the thought of being alone.…

“The pain finally ended and they explained to me again what I was. This time I believed. I felt the thirst, my hard skin; I saw my brilliant red eyes.

“Shallow as I was, I felt better when I saw my reflection in the mirror the first time. Despite the eyes, I was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.” She laughed at herself for a moment. “It took some time before I began to blame the beauty for what had happened to me—for me to see the curse of it. To wish that I had been… well, not ugly, but normal. Like Vera. So I could have been allowed to marry a man who was kind, and have pretty babies. That’s what I’d really wanted, all along. It still doesn’t seem like too much to have asked for.”
She was thoughtful for a moment, and I wondered if she’d forgotten my presence again. But then she smiled at me, her expression suddenly triumphant.

“You know, my record is almost as clean as Carlisle’s,” she told me. “Better than Earnest. A thousand times better than Edythe. I’ve never tasted human blood,” she announced proudly.

She understood my puzzled expression as I wondered why her record was only almost as clean.

“I did murder five humans,” she told me in a complacent tone. “If you can really call them human. But I was very careful not to spill their blood—I knew I wouldn’t be able to resist that, and I didn’t want any part of them in me, you see.

“I saved Royce for last. I hoped that he would hear of his friends’ deaths and understand, know what was coming for him. I hoped the fear would make the end worse for him. I think it worked. He was hiding inside a windowless room behind a door as thick as a bank vault’s, guarded outside by armed men, when I caught up with him. Oops—seven murders,” she corrected herself. “I forgot about his guards. They only took a second.”

“I was overly theatrical. It was kind of childish, really. I wore a wedding dress I’d stolen for the occasion. He screamed when he saw me. He screamed a lot that night. Saving him for last was a good idea—it made it easier for me to control myself, to make it slower—”

She broke off suddenly, and she glanced down at me. “I’m sorry,” she said in a chagrined voice. “I’m frightening you, aren’t I?”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“I got carried away.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m surprised Edythe didn’t tell you more about it.”

“She doesn’t like to tell other people’s stories—she feels like she’s betraying confidences, because she hears so much more than just the parts they mean for her to hear.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I probably ought to give her more credit. She’s really quite decent, isn’t she?”

“I think so.”

“I can tell.” Then she sighed. “I haven’t been fair to you, either, Bella. Did he tell you why? Or was that too confidential?”

“She said it was because I was human. She said it was harder for you to have someone on the outside who knew.”

Rosalie’s musical laughter interrupted me. “Now I really feel guilty. She’s been much, much kinder to me than I deserve.” She seemed warmer as she laughed, like she’d let down some guard that had never been absent in my presence before. “What a liar that girl is.” She laughed again.

“She was lying?” I asked, suddenly wary.

“Well, that’s probably putting it too strongly. She just didn’t tell you the whole story. What she told you was true, even truer now than it was before. However, at the time…” She broke off,
chuckling nervously. “It’s embarrassing. You see, at first, I was mostly jealous because she wanted you and not me.”

Her words sent a thrill of fear through me. Sitting there in the silver light, she was more beautiful than anything else I could imagine. I could not compete with Rosalie.

“But you love Eleanor…,” I mumbled.

She shook her head back and forth, amused. “I don’t want Edythe that way, Bella. I never did—I love her as a sister, but she’s irritated me from the first moment I heard her speak. You have to understand, though… I was so used to people wanting me. I didn’t care that Edythe was… I believe the people in town used the word deviant—all I knew was that anyone who liked to look at women should like to look at me. And Edythe wasn’t the least bit interested. It frustrated me, even offended me in the beginning. But she never wanted anyone, so it didn’t bother me long. Even when we first met Tanya’s clan in Denali—all those females!—Edythe never showed the slightest preference. And then she met you.” She looked at me with confused eyes. I was only half paying attention. I was thinking about Edythe and Tanya and all those females, and my lips pressed together in a hard line.

“But you aren’t pretty, Bella,” she said, misreading my expression. “But it just meant that she found you more attractive than me. I’m vain enough that I minded.”

“But you said ‘at first.’ That doesn’t still… bother you, does it? I mean, we both know you’re the most beautiful person on the planet.”

I laughed at having to say the words—it was so obvious. How odd that Rosalie should need such reassurances.

Rosalie laughed, too. “Thanks, Bella. And no, it doesn’t really bother me anymore. Edythe has always been a little strange.” She laughed again.

“But you still don’t like me,” I whispered.

Her smile faded. “I’m sorry about that.”

We sat in silence for a moment, and she didn’t seem inclined to go on.

“Would you tell me why? Did I do something…?” Was she angry that I’d put her family—her Eleanor—in danger? Time and time again. James, and now Victoria…

“No, you haven’t done anything,” she murmured. “Not yet.”

I stared at her, perplexed.

“Don’t you see, Bella?” Her voice was suddenly more passionate than before, even while she’d told her unhappy story. “You already have everything. You have a whole life ahead of you—everything I want. And you’re going to just throw it away. Can’t you see that I’d trade everything I have to be you? You have the choice that I didn’t have, and you’re choosing wrong!”

I flinched back from her fierce expression. I realized my mouth had fallen open and I snapped it shut.

She stared at me for a long moment and, slowly, the fervor in her eyes dimmed. Abruptly, she was abashed.
“And I was so sure that I could do this calmly.” She shook her head, seeming a little dazed by the flood of emotion. “It’s just that it’s harder now than it was then, when it was no more than vanity.”

She stared at the moon in silence. It was a few moments before I was brave enough to break into her reverie.

“Would you like me better if I chose to stay human?”

She turned back to me, her lips twitching into a hint of a smile. “Maybe.”

“You did get some of your happy ending, though,” I reminded her. “You got Eleanor.”

“I got half.” She grinned. “You know that I saved Eleanor from a bear that was mauling her, and carried her home to Carlisle. But can you guess why I stopped the bear from eating her?”

I shook my head.

“With the dark curls… the dimples that showed even while she was grimacing in pain… the strange innocence on her face, the naïveté… she reminded me of Vera. I didn’t want her to die—so much that, even though I hated this life, I was selfish enough to ask Carlisle to change her for me.

“I got luckier than I deserved. Eleanor is everything I would have asked for if I’d known myself well enough to know what to ask for. She’s exactly the kind of person someone like me needs. And, oddly enough, she needs me, too. That part worked out better than I could have hoped. But there will never be more than the two of us. And I’ll never sit on a porch somewhere, with her gray-haired by my side, surrounded by our grandchildren.”

Her smile was kind now. “That sounds quite bizarre to you, doesn’t it? In some ways, you are much more mature than I was at eighteen. But in other ways… there are many things you’ve probably never thought about seriously. You’re too young to know what you’ll want in ten years, fifteen years—and too young to give it all up without thinking it through. You don’t want to be rash about permanent things, Bella.” She patted my head, but the gesture didn’t feel condescending.

I sighed.

“Just think about it a little. Once it’s done, it can’t be undone. Earnest’s made do with us as substitutes… and Archie doesn’t remember anything human so he can’t miss it…. You will remember, though. It’s a lot to give up.”

But more to get in return, I didn’t say aloud. “Thanks, Rosalie. It’s nice to understand… to know you better.”

“I apologize for being such a monster.” She grinned. “I’ll try to behave myself from now on.”

I grinned back at her.

We weren’t friends yet, but I was pretty sure she wouldn’t always hate me so much.

“I’ll let you sleep now.” Rosalie’s eyes flickered to the bed, and her lips twitched. “I know you’re frustrated that she’s keeping you locked up like this, but don’t give her too bad a time when she gets back. She loves you more than you know. It terrifies her to be away from you.” She got up silently and ghosted to the door. “Goodnight, Bella,” she whispered as she shut it behind herself.

“Goodnight, Rosalie,” I murmured a second too late.
It took me a long time to fall asleep after that.

When I did sleep, I had a nightmare. I was crawling across the dark, cold stones of an unfamiliar street, under lightly falling snow, leaving a trail of blood smeared behind me. A shadowy angel in a long white dress watched my progress with resentful eyes.

The next morning, Archie drove me to school while I stared grumpily out the windshield. I was feeling sleep-deprived, and it made the irritation of my imprisonment that much stronger.

“Tonight we’ll go out to Olympia or something,” he promised. “That would be fun, right?”

“Why don’t you just lock me in the basement,” I suggested, “and forget the sugar coating?”

Archie frowned. “She’s going to take the Porsche back. I’m not doing a very good job. You’re supposed to be having fun.”

“It’s not your fault,” I muttered. I couldn’t believe I actually felt guilty. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

I trudged off to English. Without Edythe, the day was guaranteed to be unbearable. I sulked through my first class, well aware that my attitude wasn’t helping anything.

When the bell rang, I got up without much enthusiasm. Mike was there at the door, holding it open for me.

“Edythe hiking this weekend?” he asked sociably as we walked out into the light rain.

“Yeah.”

“You want to do something tonight?”

How could he still sound hopeful?

“Can’t. I’ve got a slumber party,” I grumbled. He gave me a strange look as he processed my mood.

“Who are you—”

Mike’s question was cut short as a loud, growling roar erupted from behind us in the parking lot. Everyone on the sidewalk turned to look, staring in disbelief as the noisy black motorcycle screeched to a stop on the edge of the concrete, the engine still snarling.

Julie waved to me urgently.

“Run, Bella!” she yelled over the engine’s roar.

I was frozen for a second before I understood.

I looked at Mike quickly. I knew I only had seconds.

How far would Archie go to restrain me in public?

“I got really sick and went home, okay?” I said to Mike, my voice filled with sudden excitement.

“Fine,” he muttered.

I pecked Mike swiftly on the cheek. “Thanks, Mike. I owe you one!” I called as I sprinted away.
Julie revved her engine, grinning. I jumped on the back of her seat, wrapping my arms tightly around her waist.

I caught sight of Archie, frozen at the edge of the cafeteria, his eyes sparkling with fury, his lip curled back over his teeth.

I shot him one pleading glance.

Then we were racing across the blacktop so fast that my stomach got lost somewhere behind me.

“Hold on,” Julie shouted.

I hid my face in her back as she sped down the highway. I knew she would slow down when we hit the Quileute border. I just had to hold on till then. I prayed silently and fervently that Archie wouldn’t follow, and that Charlie wouldn’t happen to see me.…

It was obvious when we had reached the safe zone. The bike slowed, and Julie straightened up and howled with laughter. I opened my eyes.

“We made it,” she shouted. “Not bad for a prison break, eh?”

“Good thinking, Jules.”

“I remembered what you said about the psychic leech not being about to predict what I’m going to do. I’m glad you didn’t think of this—he wouldn’t have let you go to school.”

“That’s why I didn’t consider it.”

She laughed triumphantly. “What do you want to do today?”

“Anything!” I laughed back. It felt great to be free.
WE ENDED UP ON THE BEACH AGAIN, WANDERING AIMLESSLY. Julie was still full of herself for engineering my escape.

“Do you think they’ll come looking for you?” she asked, sounding hopeful.

“No.” I was certain about that. “They’re going to be furious with me tonight, though.”

She picked up a rock and chucked it into the waves. “Don’t go back, then,” she suggested again.

“Charlie would love that,” I said sarcastically.

“I bet he wouldn’t mind.”

I didn’t answer. Julie was probably right, and that made me grind my teeth together. Charlie’s blatant preference for my Quileute friends was so unfair. I wondered if he would feel the same if he knew the choice was really between vampires and werewolves.

“So what’s the latest pack scandal?” I asked lightly.

Julie skidded to a halt, and she stared down at me with shocked eyes.

“What? That was a joke.”

“Oh.” She looked away.

I waited for her to start walking again, but she seemed lost in thought.

“Is there a scandal?” I wondered.

Julie chuckled once. “I forget what it’s like, not having everyone know everything all the time. Having a quiet, private place inside my head.”

We walked along the stony beach quietly for a few minutes.

“So what is it?” I finally asked. “That everyone in your head already knows?”

She hesitated for a moment, as if she weren’t sure how much she was going to tell me. Then she sighed and said, “Quil imprinted. That’s three now. The rest of us are starting to get worried. Maybe it’s more common than the stories say....” She frowned, and then turned to stare at me. She gazed into my eyes without speaking, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

“What are you staring at?” I asked, feeling self-conscious.

She sighed. “Nothing.”

Julie started walking again. Without seeming to think about it, she reached out and took my hand. We paced silently across the rocks.

I thought of how we must look walking hand and hand down the beach—like a couple, certainly—and wondered if I should object. But this was the way it had always been with Julie.... No reason to get worked up about it now.
“Why is Quil’s imprinting such a scandal?” I asked when it didn’t look like she was going to go on.
“Is it because he’s the newest one?”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“It’s another one of those legend things. I wonder when we’re going to stop being surprised that they’re all true?” she muttered to himself.

“Aren’t you going to tell me? Or do I have to guess?”

“You’d never get it right. See, Quil hasn’t been hanging out with us, you know, until just recently. So he hadn’t been around Elliott’s place much.”

“Quil imprinted on Elliott, too?” I gasped.

“No! I told you not to guess. Elliott had his two nieces down for a visit… and Quil met Claire.”

She didn’t continue. I thought about that for a moment.

“Elliott doesn’t want his niece with a werewolf? That’s a little hypocritical,” I said.

But I could understand why he of all people might feel that way. I thought again of the long scars that marred his face and extended all the way down his right arm. Sam had lost control just once when he was standing too close. Once was all it took…. I’d seen the pain in Sam’s eyes when he looked at what he’d done to Elliott. I could understand why Elliott might want to protect his niece from that.

“Would you please stop guessing? You’re way off. Elliott doesn’t mind that part, it’s just, well, a little early.”

“What do you mean early?”

Julie appraised me with narrowed eyes. “Try not to be judgmental, okay?”

I nodded cautiously.

“Claire is two,” Julie told me.

Rain started to fall. I blinked furiously as the drops pelted my face.

Julie waited in silence. She wore no jacket, as usual; the rain left a spatter of dark spots on her black T-shirt, and dripped through his shaggy hair. Her face was expressionless as she watched mine.

“Quil… imprinted… with a two-year-old?” I was finally able to ask.

“It happens.” Julie shrugged. She bent to grab another rock and sent it flying out into the bay. “Or so the stories say.”

“But she’s a baby,” I protested.

She looked at me with dark amusement. “Quil’s not getting any older,” she reminded me, a bit of acid in her tone. “He’ll just have to be patient for a few decades.”
“I… don’t know what to say.”

I was trying my hardest not to be critical, but, in truth, I was horrified. Until now, nothing about the werewolves had bothered me since the day I’d found out they weren’t committing the murders I’d suspected them of.

“You’re making judgments,” she accused. “I can see it on your face.”


“It’s not like that; you’ve got it all wrong,” Julie defended her friend, suddenly vehement. “I’ve seen what it’s like, through his eyes. There’s nothing romantic about it at all, not for Quil, not now.” She took a deep breath, frustrated. “It’s so hard to describe. It’s not like love at first sight, really. It’s more like… gravity moves. When you see her, suddenly it’s not the earth holding you here anymore. She does. And nothing matters more than her. And you would do anything for her, be anything for her…. You become whatever she needs you to be, whether that’s a protector, or a lover, or a friend, or a brother.

“Quil will be the best, kindest big brother any kid ever had. There isn’t a toddler on the planet that will be more carefully looked after than that little girl will be. And then, when she’s older and needs a friend, he’ll be more understanding, trustworthy, and reliable than anyone else she knows. And then, when she’s grown up, they’ll be as happy as Elliott and Sam.” A strange, bitter edge sharpened his tone at the very end, when he spoke of Sam.

“Doesn’t Claire get a choice here?”

“Oh, of course. But why wouldn’t she choose him, in the end? He’ll be her perfect match. Like he was designed for her alone.”

We walked in silence for a moment, till I paused to toss a rock toward the ocean. It fell to the beach several meters short. Julie laughed at me.

“We can’t all be freakishly strong,” I muttered.

She sighed.

“When do you think it will happen for you?” I asked quietly.

Her answer was flat and immediate. “Never.”

“It’s not something you can control, is it?”

She was silent for a few minutes. Unconsciously, we both walked slower, barely moving at all.

“It’s not supposed to be,” She admitted. “But you have to see them—the one that’s supposedly meant for you.”

“And you think that if you haven’t seen them yet, then they’re not out there?” I asked skeptically. “Julie, you haven’t really seen much of the world—less than me, even.”

“No, I haven’t,” she said in a low voice. She looked at my face with suddenly piercing eyes. “But I’ll never see anyone else, Bella. I only see you. Even when I close my eyes and try to see something else. Ask Quil or Embry. It drives them all crazy.”

I dropped my eyes to the rocks.
We weren’t walking anymore. The only sound was of the waves beating against the shore. I couldn’t hear the rain over their roar.

“Maybe I’d better go home,” I whispered.

“No!” she protested, surprised by this conclusion.

I looked up at her again, and her eyes were anxious now.

“You have the whole day off, right? The bloodsucker won’t be home yet.”

I glared at her.

“No offense intended,” she said quickly.

“Yes, I have the whole day. But, Jules…”

She held up her hands. “Sorry,” she apologized. “I won’t be like that anymore. I’ll just be Julie.”

I sighed. “But if that’s what you’re thinking…”

“Don’t worry about me,” she insisted, smiling with deliberate cheer, too brightly. “I know what I’m doing. Just tell me if I’m upsetting you.”

“I don’t know…”

“C’mon, Bella. Let’s go back to the house and get our bikes. You’ve got to ride a motorcycle regularly to keep it in tune.”

“I really don’t think I’m allowed.”

“By who? Charlie or the blood—or her?”

“Both.”

Julie grinned my grin, and she was suddenly the Julie I missed the most, sunny and warm.

I couldn’t help grinning back.

The rain softened, turned to mist.

“I won’t tell anyone,” she promised.

“Except every one of your friends.”

She shook her head soberly and raised her right hand. “I promise not to think about it.”

I laughed. “If I get hurt, it was because I tripped.”

“Whatever you say.”

We rode our motorcycles on the back roads around La Push until the rain made them too muddy and Julie insisted that she was going to pass out if she didn’t eat soon. Billy greeted me easily when we got to the house, as if my sudden reappearance meant nothing more complicated than that I’d wanted to spend the day with my friend. After we ate the sandwiches Julie made, we went out to the garage and I helped her clean up the bikes. I hadn’t been here in months—since Edythe had returned—but there was no sense of import to it. It was just another afternoon in the garage.
“This is nice,” I commented when she pulled the warm sodas from the grocery bag. “I’ve missed this place.”

She smiled, looking around at the plastic sheds bolted together over our heads. “Yeah, I can understand that. All the splendor of the Taj Mahal, without the inconvenience and expense of traveling to India.”

“To Washington’s little Taj Mahal,” I toasted, holding up my can.

She touched her can to mine.

“Do you remember last Valentine’s Day? I think that was the last time you were here—the last time when things were still… normal, I mean.”

I laughed. “Of course I remember. I traded a lifetime of servitude for a box of conversation hearts. That’s not something I’m likely to forget.”

She laughed with me. “That’s right. Hmm, servitude. I’ll have to think of something good.” Then she sighed. “It feels like it was years ago. Another era. A happier one.”

I couldn’t agree with her. This was my happy era now. But I was surprised to realize how many things I missed from my own personal dark ages. I stared through the opening at the murky forest. The rain had picked up again, but it was warm in the little garage, sitting next to Julie. She was as good as a furnace.

Her fingers brushed my hand. “Things have really changed.”

“Yeah,” I said, and then I reached out and patted the back tire of my bike. “Charlie used to like me. I hope Billy doesn’t say anything about today…” I bit my lip.

“He won’t. He doesn’t get worked up about things the way Charlie does. Hey, I never did apologize officially for that stupid move with the bike. I’m real sorry about ratting you out to Charlie. I wish I hadn’t.”

I rolled my eyes. “Me, too.”

“I’m really, really sorry.”

She looked at me hopefully, her wet, tangled black hair sticking up in every direction around her pleading face.

“Oh, fine! You’re forgiven.”

“Thanks, Bells!”

We grinned at each other for a second, and then her face clouded over.

“You know that day, when I brought the bike over… I’ve been wanting to ask you something,” she said slowly. “But also… not wanting to.”

I held very still—a reaction to stress. It was a habit I’d picked up from Edythe.

“Were you just being stubborn because you were mad at me, or were you really serious?” she whispered.

“About what?” I whispered back, though I was sure I knew what she meant.
She glared at me. “You know. When you said it was none of my business… if—if she bit you.” She cringed visibly at the end.

“Jules…” My throat felt swollen. I couldn’t finish.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Were you serious?”

She was trembling just slightly. Her eyes stayed closed.

“Yes,” I whispered.

Julie inhaled, slow and deep. “I guess I knew that.”

I stared at her face, waiting for her eyes to open.

“You know what this will mean?” She demanded suddenly. “You do understand that, don’t you? What will happen if they break the treaty?”

“We’ll leave first,” I said in a small voice.

Her eyes flashed open, their black depths full of anger and pain. “There wasn’t a geographic limit to the treaty, Bella. Our great-grandfathers only agreed to keep the peace because the Cullens swore that they were different, that humans weren’t in danger from them. They promised they would never kill or change anyone ever again. If they go back on their word, the treaty is meaningless, and they are no different than any other vampires. Once that’s established, when we find them again—”

“But, Jules, didn’t you break the treaty already?” I asked, grasping at straws. “Wasn’t part of it that you not tell people about the vampires? And you told me. So isn’t the treaty sort of moot, anyhow?”

Julie didn’t like the reminder; the pain in her eyes hardened into animosity. “Yeah, I broke the treaty—back before I believed any of it. And I’m sure they were informed of that.” She glared sourly at my forehead, not meeting my shamed gaze. “But it’s not like that gives them a freebie or anything. There’s no fault for a fault. They have only one option if they object to what I did. The same option we’ll have when they break the treaty: to attack. To start the war.”

She made it sound so inevitable. I shuddered.

“Jules, it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Her teeth ground together. “It is that way.”

The silence after her declaration felt very loud.

“Will you never forgive me, Julie?” I whispered. As soon as I said the words, I wished I hadn’t. I didn’t want to hear her answer.

“You won’t be Bella anymore,” she told me. “My friend won’t exist. There’ll be no one to forgive.”

“That sounds like a no,” I whispered.

We faced each other for an endless moment.

“Is this goodbye then, Jules?”
She blinked rapidly, her fierce expression melting in surprise. “Why? We still have a few years. Can’t we be friends until we’re out of time?”

“Years? No, Jules, not years.” I shook my head, and laughed once without humor. “Weeks is more accurate.”

I was not expecting her reaction.

She was suddenly on her feet, and there was a loud pop as the soda can exploded in his hand. Soda flew everywhere, soaking me, like it was spraying from a hose.

“Jules!” I started to complain, but I fell silent when I realized that her whole body was quivering with anger. She glared at me wildly, a growling sound building in her chest.

I froze in place, too shocked to remember how to move.

The shaking rolled through her, getting faster, until it looked like she was vibrating. Her shape blurred….

And then Julie gritted her teeth together, and the growling stopped. She squeezed her eyes tight in concentration; the quivering slowed until only her hands were shaking.

“Weeks,” Julie said in a flat monotone.

I couldn’t respond; I was still frozen.

She opened her eyes. They were beyond fury now.

“She’s going to change you into a filthy bloodsucker in just a few weeks!” Julie hissed through her teeth.

Too stunned to take offense at her words, I just nodded mutely.

Her face turned green under the russet skin.

“And then, Jules,” I whispered after a long minute of silence. “She’s seventeen, Julie. And I get closer to nineteen every day. Besides, what’s the point in waiting? She’s all I want. What else can I do?”

I’d meant that as a rhetorical question.

Her words cracked like snaps of a whip. “Anything. Anything else. You’d be better off dead. I’d rather you were.”

I recoiled like she’d slapped me. It hurt worse than if she had.

And then, as the pain shot through me, my own temper burst into flame.

“Maybe you’ll get lucky,” I said bleakly, lurching to my feet. “Maybe I’ll get hit by a truck on my way back.”

I grabbed my motorcycle and pushed it out into the rain. She didn’t move as I passed her. As soon as I was on the small, muddy path, I climbed on and kicked the bike to life. The rear tire spit a fountain of mud toward the garage, and I hoped that it hit her.

I got absolutely soaked as I sped across the slick highway toward the Cullens’ house. The wind felt
like it was freezing the rain against my skin, and my teeth were chattering before I was halfway there.

Motorcycles were too impractical for Washington. I would sell the stupid thing first chance I got.

I walked the bike into the Cullens’ cavernous garage and was unsurprised to find Archie waiting for me, perched lightly on the hood of his Porsche. Archie stroked the glossy yellow paint.

“I haven’t even had a chance to drive it.” He sighed.

“Sorry,” I spit through my rattling teeth.

“You look like you could use a hot shower,” he said, offhand, as he sprang lightly to his feet.

“Yep.”

He pursed his lips, taking in my expression carefully. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nope.”

He nodded in assent, but his eyes were raging with curiosity.

“Do you want to go to Olympia tonight?”

“Not really. Can’t I go home?”

He grimaced.

“Never mind, Archie,” I said. “I’ll stay if it makes things easier for you.”

“Thanks,” he sighed in relief.

I went to bed early that night, curling up on her sofa again.

It was still dark when I woke. I was groggy, but I knew it wasn’t near morning yet. My eyes closed, and I stretched, rolling over. It took me a second before I realized that the movement should have dumped me onto the floor. And that I was much too comfortable.

I rolled back over, trying to see. It was darker than last night—the clouds were too thick for the moon to shine through.

“Sorry,” she murmured so softly that her voice was part of the darkness. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

I tensed, waiting for the fury—both hers and mine—but it was only quiet and calm in the darkness of her room. I could almost taste the sweetness of reunion in the air, a separate fragrance from the perfume of her breath; the emptiness when we were apart left its own bitter aftertaste, something I didn’t consciously notice until it was removed.

There was no friction in the space between us. The stillness was peaceful—not like the calm before the tempest, but like a clear night untouched by even the dream of a storm.

And I didn’t care that I was supposed to be angry with her. I didn’t care that I was supposed to be angry with everyone. I reached out for her, found her hands in the darkness, and pulled myself closer to her. Her arms encircled me, cradling me to her chest. My lips searched, hunting along her throat, to her chin, till I finally found her lips.
Edythe kissed me softly for a moment, and then she chuckled.

“I was all braced for the wrath that was going to put grizzlies to shame, and this is what I get? I should infuriate you more often.”

“Give me a minute to work up to it,” I teased, kissing her again.

“I’ll wait as long as you want,” she whispered against my lips. Her fingers knotted in my hair.

My breath was becoming uneven. “Maybe in the morning.”

“Whatever you prefer.”

“Welcome home,” I said while her cold lips pressed under my jaw. “I’m glad you came back.”

“That’s a very good thing.”

“Mmm,” I agreed, tightening my arms around her neck.

Her hand curved around my elbow, moving slowly down my arm, across my ribs and over my waist, tracing along my hip and down my leg, around my knee. She paused there, her hand curling around my calf. She pulled my leg up suddenly, hitching it around her hip.

I stopped breathing. This wasn’t the kind of thing she usually allowed. Despite her cold hands, I felt suddenly warm. Her lips moved in the hollow at the base of my throat.

“Not to bring on the ire prematurely,” she whispered, “but do you mind telling me what it is about this bed that you object to?”

Before I could answer, before I could even concentrate enough to make sense of her words, she rolled to the side, pulling me on top of her. She held my face in her hands, angling it up so that her mouth could reach my throat. My breathing was too loud—it was almost embarrassing, but I couldn’t care quite enough to be ashamed.

“The bed?” she asked again. “I think it’s nice.”

“It’s unnecessary,” I managed to gasp.

She pulled my face back to hers, and my lips shaped themselves around hers. Slowly this time, she rolled till she hovered over me. She held herself carefully so that I felt none of her weight, but I could feel the cool marble of her body press against mine. My heart was hammering so loudly that it was hard to hear her quiet laughter.

“That’s debatable,” she disagreed. “This would be difficult on a couch.”

Cold as ice, her tongue lightly traced the shape of my lips.

My head was spinning—the air was coming too fast and shallow.

“Did you change your mind?” I asked breathlessly. Maybe she’d rethought all her careful rules. Maybe there was more significance to this bed than I’d originally guessed. My heart pounded almost painfully as I waited for her answer.

Edythe sighed, rolling back so that we were on our sides again.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Bella,” she said, disapproval strong in her voice—clearly, she understood
what I meant. “I was just trying to illustrate the benefits of the bed you don’t seem to like. Don’t get carried away.”

“Too late,” I muttered. “And I like the bed,” I added.

“Good.” I could hear the smile in her voice as she kissed my forehead. “I do, too.”

“But I still think it’s unnecessary,” I continued. “If we’re not going to get carried away, what’s the point?”

She sighed again. “For the hundredth time, Bella—it’s too dangerous.”

“I like danger,” I insisted.

“I know.” There was a sour edge to her voice, and I realized that she would have seen the motorcycle in the garage.

“I’ll tell you what’s dangerous,” I said quickly, before she could move to a new topic of discussion. “I’m going to spontaneously combust one of these days—and you’ll have no one but yourself to blame.”

She started to push me away.

“What are you doing?” I objected, clinging to her.

“Protecting you from combustion. If this too much for you….”

“I can handle it,” I insisted.

She let me worm myself back into the circle of her arms.

“I’m sorry I gave you the wrong impression,” she said. “I didn’t mean to make you unhappy. That wasn’t nice.”

“Actually, it was very, very nice.”

She took a deep breath. “Aren’t you tired? I should let you sleep.”

“No, I’m not. I don’t mind if you want to give me the wrong impression again.”

“That’s probably a bad idea. You’re not the only one who gets carried away.”

“Yes, I am,” I grumbled.

She chuckled. “You have no idea, Bella. It doesn’t help that you are so eager to undermine my self-control, either.”

“I’m not going to apologize for that.”

“Can I apologize?”

“For what?”

“You were angry with me, remember?”

“Oh, that.”
“I’m sorry. I was wrong. It’s much easier to have the proper perspective when I have you safely here.” Her arms tightened around me. “I go a little berserk when I try to leave you. I don’t think I’ll go so far again. It’s not worth it.”

I smiled. “Didn’t you find any mountain lions?”

“Yes, I did, actually. Still not worth the anxiety. I’m sorry I had Archie hold you hostage, though. That was a bad idea.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“I won’t do it again.”

“Okay,” I said easily. She was already forgiven. “But slumber parties do have their advantages….” I curled myself closer to her, pressing my lips into the indentation over her collarbone. “You can hold me hostage any time you want.”

“Mmm,” she sighed. “I may take you up on that.”

“So is it my turn now?”

“Your turn?” her voice was confused.

“To apologize.”

“What do you have to apologize for?”

“Aren’t you mad at me?” I asked blankly.

“No.”

It sounded like she really meant it.

I felt my eyebrows pull together. “Didn’t you see Archie when you got home?”

“Yes—why?”

“Are you going to take his Porsche back?”

“Of course not. It was a gift.”

I wished I could see her expression. Her voice sounded as if I’d insulted her.

“Don’t you want to know what I did?” I asked, starting to be puzzled by her apparent lack of concern.

I felt her shrug. “I’m always interested in everything you do—but you don’t have to tell me unless you want to.”

“But I went to La Push.”

“I know.”

“And I ditched school.”

“So did I.”
I stared toward the sound of her voice, tracing her features with my fingers, trying to understand her mood. “Where did all this tolerance come from?” I demanded.

She sighed.

“I decided that you were right. My problem before was more about my… prejudice against werewolves than anything else. I’m going to try to be more reasonable and trust your judgment. If you say it’s safe, then I’ll believe you.”

“Wow.”

“And… most importantly… I’m not willing to let this drive a wedge between us.”

I rested my head against her chest and closed my eyes, totally content.

“So,” she murmured in a casual tone. “Did you make plans to go back to La Push again soon?”

I didn’t answer. Her question brought back the memory of Julie’s words, and my throat was suddenly tight.

She misread my silence and the tension in my body.

“Just so that I can make my own plans,” she explained quickly. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to hurry back because I’m sitting around waiting for you.”

“No,” I said in a voice that sounded strange to me. “I don’t have plans go back.”

“Oh. You don’t have to do that for me.”

“I don’t think I’m welcome anymore,” I whispered.

“Did you run over someone’s cat?” she asked lightly. I knew she didn’t want to force the story out of me, but I could hear the curiosity burning behind her words.

“No.” I took a deep breath, and then mumbled quickly through the explanation. “I thought Julie would have realized… I didn’t think it would surprise her.”

Edythe waited while I hesitated.

“She wasn’t expecting… that it was so soon.”

“Ah,” Edythe said quietly.

“She said she’d rather see me dead.” My voice broke on the last word.

Edythe was too still for a moment, controlling whatever reaction she didn’t want me to see.

Then she crushed me gently to her chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“I thought you’d be glad,” I whispered.

“Glad over something that’s hurt you?” she murmured into my hair. “I don’t think so, Bella.”

I sighed and relaxed, fitting myself to the stone shape of her. But she was motionless again, tense.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.
“It’s nothing.”

“You can tell me.”

She paused for a minute. “It might make you angry.”

“I still want to know.”

She sighed. “I could quite literally kill her for saying that to you. I want to.”

I laughed halfheartedly. “I guess it’s a good thing you’ve got so much self-control.”

“I could slip.” Her tone was thoughtful.

“If you’re going to have a lapse in control, I can think of a better place for it.” I reached for her face, trying to pull myself up to kiss her. Her arms held me tighter, restraining.

She sighed. “Must I always be the responsible one?”

I grinned in the darkness. “No. Let me be in charge of responsibility for a few minutes… or hours.”

“Goodnight, Bella.”

“Wait—there was something else I wanted to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“I was talking to Rosalie last night….”

Her body tensed again. “Yes. She was thinking about that when I got in. She gave you quite a lot to consider, didn’t she?”

Her voice was anxious, and I realized that she thought I wanted to talk about the reasons Rosalie’d given me for staying human. But I was interested in something much more pressing.

“She told me a little bit… about the time your family lived in Denali.”

There was a short pause; this beginning took her by surprise. “Yes?”

“She mentioned something about a bunch of female vampires… and you.”

She didn’t answer, though I waited for a long moment.

“Don’t worry,” I said, after the silence had grown uncomfortable. “She told me you didn’t… show any preference. But I was just wondering, you know, if any of them had. Shown a preference for you, I mean.”

Again she said nothing.

“Which one?” I asked, trying to keep my voice casual, and not quite managing. “Or was there more than one?”

No answer. I wished I could see her face, so I could try to guess what this silence meant.

“Archie will tell me,” I said. “I’ll go ask him right now.”

Her arms tightened; I was unable to squirm even an inch away.
“It’s late,” she said. Her voice had a little edge to it that was something new. Sort of nervous, maybe a little embarrassed. “Besides, I think Archie stepped out….”

“It’s bad,” I guessed. “It’s really bad, isn’t it?” I started to panic, my heart accelerating as I imagined the gorgeous immortal rival I’d never realized I had.

“Calm down, Bella,” she said, kissing the tip of my nose. “You’re being absurd.”

“Am I? Then why won’t you tell me?”

“Because there’s nothing to tell. You’re blowing this wildly out of proportion.”

“Which one?” I insisted.

She sighed. “Tanya expressed a little interest. I let her know, in a very courteous, ladylike fashion, that I did not return that interest. End of story.”

I kept my voice as even as possible. “Tell me something—what does Tanya look like?”

“Just like the rest of us—white skin, gold eyes,” she answered too quickly.

“And, of course, extraordinarily beautiful.”

I felt her shrug.

“I suppose, to human eyes,” she said, indifferent. “You know what, though?”

“What?” My voice was petulant.

She put her lips right to my ear; her cold breath tickled. “I prefer brunettes.”

“She’s a blonde. That figures.”

“Strawberry blonde—not at all my type.”

I thought about that for a while, trying to concentrate as her lips moved slowly along my cheek, down my throat, and back up again. She made the circuit three times before I spoke.

“I guess that’s okay, then,” I decided.

“Hmm,” she whispered against my skin. “You’re quite adorable when you’re jealous. It’s surprisingly enjoyable.”

I scowled into the darkness.

“It’s late,” she said again, murmuring, almost crooning now, her voice smoother than silk. “Sleep, my Bella. Dream happy dreams. You are the only one who has ever touched my heart. It will always be yours. Sleep, my only love.”

She started to hum my lullaby, and I knew it was only a matter of time till I succumbed, so I closed my eyes and snuggled closer into her chest.
ARCHIE DROPPED ME OFF IN THE MORNING, IN KEEPING with the slumber party charade. It wouldn’t be long until Edythe showed up, officially returning from her “hiking” trip. All of the pretenses were starting to wear on me. I wouldn’t miss this part of being human.

Charlie peeked through the front window when he heard me slam the car door. He waved to Archie, and then went to get the door for me.

“Did you have fun?” Charlie asked.

“Sure, it was great. Very… girlie.”

I carried my stuff in, dumped it all at the foot of the stairs, and wandered into the kitchen to look for a snack.

“You’ve got a message,” Charlie called after me.

On the kitchen counter, the phone message pad was propped up conspicuously against a saucepan.

*Julie called*, Charlie had written.

*She said she didn’t mean it, and that she’s sorry. She wants you to call her. Be nice and give her a break. She sounded upset.*

I grimaced. Charlie didn’t usually editorialize on my messages.

Julie could just go ahead and be upset. I didn’t want to talk to her. Last I’d heard, they weren’t big on allowing phone calls from the other side. If Julie preferred me dead, then maybe she should get used to the silence.

My appetite evaporated. I turned an about face and went to put my things away.

“Aren’t you going to call Julie?” Charlie asked. He was leaning around the living room wall, watching me pick up.

“No.”

I started up the stairs.

“That’s not very attractive behavior, Bella,” he said. “Forgiveness is divine.”

“Mind your own business,” I muttered under my breath, much too low for him to hear.

I knew the laundry was building up, so after I put my toothpaste away and threw my dirty clothes in the hamper, I went to strip Charlie’s bed. I left his sheets in a pile at the top of the stairs and went to get mine.

I paused beside the bed, cocking my head to the side.
Where was my pillow? I turned in a circle, scanning the room. No pillow. I noticed that my room looked oddly tidy. Hadn’t my gray sweatshirt been draped over the low bedpost on the footboard? And I would swear there had been a pair of dirty socks behind the rocking chair, along with the red blouse I’d tried on two mornings ago, but decided was too dressy for school, hanging over the arm. … I spun around again. My hamper wasn’t empty, but it wasn’t overflowing, the way I thought it had been.

Was Charlie doing laundry? That was out of character.

“Dad, did you start the wash?” I shouted out my door.

“Um, no,” he shouted back, sounding guilty. “Did you want me to?”

“No, I got it. Were you looking for something in my room?”

“No. Why?”

“I can’t find… a shirt….”

“I haven’t been in there.”

And then I remembered that Archie had been here to get my pajamas. I hadn’t noticed that he’d borrowed my pillow, too—probably since I’d avoided the bed. It looked like he had cleaned while he was passing through. I blushed for my slovenly ways.

But that red shirt really wasn’t dirty, so I went to save it from the hamper.

I expected to find it near the top, but it wasn’t there. I dug through the whole pile and still couldn’t find it. I knew I was probably getting paranoid, but it seemed like something else was missing, or maybe more than one something. I didn’t even have half a load here.

I ripped my sheets off and headed for the laundry closet, grabbing Charlie’s on the way. The washing machine was empty. I checked the dryer, too, half-expecting to find a washed load waiting for me, courtesy of Archie. Nothing. I frowned, mystified.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Charlie yelled.

“Not yet.”

I went back upstairs to search under my bed. Nothing but dust bunnies. I started to dig through my dresser. Maybe I’d put the red shirt away and forgotten.

I gave up when the doorbell rang. That would be Edythe.

“Door,” Charlie informed me from the couch as I skipped past him.

“Don’t strain yourself, Dad.”

I pulled the door open with a big smile on my face.

Edythe’s golden eyes were wide, her nostrils flared, her lips pulled back over her teeth.

“Edythe?” My voice was sharp with shock as I read her expression. “What—?”

She put his finger to my lips. “Give me two seconds,” she whispered. “Don’t move.”
I stood frozen on the doorstep and she… disappeared. She moved so quickly that Charlie wouldn’t even have seen her pass.

Before I could compose myself enough to count to two, she was back. She put her arm around my waist and pulled me swiftly toward the kitchen. Her eyes darted around the room, and she held me against her body as if she were shielding me from something. I threw a glance toward Charlie on the couch, but he was studiously ignoring us.

“Someone’s been here,” she murmured in my ear after she pulled me to the back of the kitchen. Her voice was strained; it was difficult to hear her over the thumping of the washing machine.

“I swear that no werewolves—” I started to say.

“Not one of them,” she interrupted me quickly, shaking her head. “One of us.”

Her tone made it clear that she didn’t mean a member of her family.

I felt the blood empty from my face.

“Victoria?” I choked.

“It’s not a scent I recognize.”

“One of the Volturi,” I guessed.

“Probably.”

“When?”

“That’s why I think it must have been them—it wasn’t long ago, early this morning while Charlie was sleeping. And whoever it was didn’t touch him, so there must have been another purpose.”

“Looking for me.”

She didn’t answer. Her body was frozen, a statue.

“What are you two hissing about in here?” Charlie asked suspiciously, rounding the corner with an empty popcorn bowl in his hands.

I felt green. A vampire had been in the house looking for me while Charlie slept. Panic overwhelmed me, closed my throat. I couldn’t answer, I just stared at him in horror.

Charlie’s expression changed. Abruptly, he was grinning. “If you two are having a fight… well, don’t let me interrupt.”

Still grinning, he put his bowl in the sink and sauntered out of the room.

“Let’s go,” Edythe said in a low hard voice.

“But Charlie!” The fear was squeezing my chest, making it hard to breathe.

She deliberated for a short second, and then her phone was in her hand.

“Eleanor,” she muttered into the receiver. She began talking so fast that I couldn’t understand the words. It was over in half a minute. She started pulling me toward the door.
“Eleanor and Jasper are on their way,” she whispered when she felt my resistance. “They’ll sweep the woods. Charlie is fine.”

I let her drag me along then, too panicked to think clearly. Charlie met my frightened eyes with a smug grin, which suddenly turned to confusion. Edythe had me out the door before Charlie could say anything.

“Where are we going?” I couldn’t stop whispering, even after we were in the car.

“We’re going to talk to Archie,” she told me, her volume normal but her voice bleak.

“You think maybe he saw something?”

She stared at the road through narrowed eyes. “Maybe.”

They were waiting for us, on alert after Edythe’s call. It was like walking into a museum, everyone still as statues in various poses of stress.

“What happened?” Edythe demanded as soon as we were through the door. I was shocked to see that she was glowering at Archie, her hands fisted in anger.

Archie stood with his arms folded tight across his chest. Only his lips moved. “I have no idea. I didn’t see anything.”

“How is that possible?” she hissed.

“Edythe,” I said, a quiet reproof. I didn’t like her talking to Archie this way.

Carlisle interrupted in a calming voice. “It’s not an exact science, Edythe.”

“He was in her room, Archie. He could have still been there—waiting for her.”

“I would have seen that.”

Edythe threw her hands up in exasperation. “Really? You’re sure?”

Archie’s voice was cold when he answered. “You’ve already got me watching the Volturi’s decisions, watching for Victoria’s return, watching Bella’s every step. You want to add another? Do I just have to watch Charlie, or Bella’s room, or the house, or the whole street, too? Edythe, if I try to do too much, things are going to start slipping through the cracks.”

“It looks like they already are,” Edythe snapped.

“She was never in any danger. There was nothing to see.”

“If you’re watching Italy, why didn’t you see them send—”

“I don’t think it’s them,” Archie insisted. “I would have seen that.”

“Who else would leave Charlie alive?”

I shuddered.

“I don’t know,” Archie said.

“Helpful.”
“Stop it, Edythe,” I whispered.

She turned on me, her face still livid, her teeth clenched together. She glared at me for half a second, and then, suddenly, she exhaled. Her eyes widened and his jaw relaxed.

“You’re right, Bella. I’m sorry.” She looked at Archie. “Forgive me, Archie. I shouldn’t be taking this out on you. That was inexcusable.”

“I understand,” Archie assured her. “I’m not happy about it, either.”

Edythe took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s look at this logically. What are the possibilities?”

Everyone seemed to thaw out at once. Archie relaxed and leaned against the back of the couch. Carlisle walked slowly toward him, his eyes far away. Earnest sat on the sofa in front of Archie, curling his legs up on the seat. Only Rosalie remained unmoving, her back to us, staring out the glass wall.

Edythe pulled me to the sofa and I sat next to Earnest, who shifted to put his arm around me. Edythe held one of my hands tightly in both of hers.

“Victoria?” Carlisle asked.

Edythe shook her head. “No. I didn’t know the scent. She might have been from the Volturi, someone I’ve never met….”

Archie shook his head. “Aro hasn’t asked anyone to look for her yet. I will see that. I’m waiting for it.”

Edythe’s head snapped up. “You’re watching for an official command.”

“You think someone’s acting on their own? Why?”

“Caius’s idea,” Edythe suggested, her face tightening again.

“Or Jane’s…,” Archie said. “They both have the resources to send an unfamiliar face….”

Edythe scowled. “And the motivation.”

“It doesn’t make sense, though,” Earnest said. “If whoever it was meant to wait for Bella, Archie would have seen that. He—or she—had no intention of hurting Bella. Or Charlie, for that matter.”

I cringed at my father’s name.

“It’s going to be fine, Bella,” Earnest murmured, smoothing my hair.

“But what was the point then?” Carlisle mused.

“Checking to see if I’m still human?” I guessed.

“Possible,” Carlisle said.

Rosalie breathed out a sigh, loud enough for me to hear. She’d unfrozen, and her face was turned expectantly toward the kitchen. Edythe, on the other hand, looked discouraged.

Eleanor burst through the kitchen door, Jasper right behind her.
“Long gone, hours ago,” Eleanor announced, disappointed. “The trail went East, then South, and disappeared on a side road. Had a car waiting.”

“That’s bad luck,” Edythe muttered. “If he’d gone west… well, it would be nice for those dogs to make themselves useful.”

I winced, and Earnest rubbed my shoulder.

Jasper looked at Carlisle. “Neither of us recognized him. But here.” He held out something green and crumpled. Carlisle took it from him and held it to his face. I saw, as it exchanged hands, that it was a broken fern frond. “Maybe you know the scent.”

“No,” Carlisle said. “Not familiar. No one I’ve ever met.”

“Perhaps we’re looking at this the wrong way. Maybe it’s a coincidence…,” Earnest began, but stopped when he saw everyone else’s incredulous expressions. “I don’t mean a coincidence that a stranger happened to pick Bella’s house to visit at random. I meant that maybe someone was just curious. Our scent is all around her. Was he wondering what draws us there?”

“Why wouldn’t he just come here then? If he was curious?” Eleanor demanded.

“You would,” Earnest said with a sudden, fond smile. “The rest of us aren’t always so direct. Our family is very large—he or she might be frightened. But Charlie wasn’t harmed. This doesn’t have to be an enemy.”

Just curious. Like James and Victoria had been curious, in the beginning? The thought of Victoria made me tremble, though the one thing they seemed certain of was that it had not been her. Not this time. She would stick to her obsessed pattern. This was just someone else, a stranger.

I was slowly realizing that vampires were much bigger participants in this world than I’d once thought. How many times did the average human cross paths with them, completely unaware? How many deaths, obliviously reported as crimes and accidents, were really due to their thirst? How crowded would this new world be when I finally joined it?

The shrouded future sent a shiver down my spine.

The Cullens pondered Earnest’s words with varying expressions. I could see that Edythe did not accept his theory, and that Carlisle very much wanted to.

Archie pursed his lips. “I don’t think so. The timing of it was too perfect…. This visitor was so careful to make no contact. Almost like he or she knew that I would see….”

“He could have other reasons for not making contact,” Earnest reminded him.

“Does it really matter who it was?” I asked. “Just the chance that someone was looking for me… isn’t that reason enough? We shouldn’t wait for graduation.”

“No, Bella,” Edythe said quickly. “It’s not that bad. If you’re really in danger, we’ll know.”

“Think of Charlie,” Carlisle reminded me. “Think of how it would hurt him if you disappeared.”

“I am thinking of Charlie! He’s the one I’m worried about! What if my little guest had happened to be thirsty last night? As long as I’m around Charlie, he’s a target, too. If anything happened to him, it would be all my fault!”
“Hardly, Bella,” Earnest said, patting my hair again. “And nothing will happen to Charlie. We’re just going to have to be more careful.”

“More careful?” I repeated in disbelief.

“It’s all going to be fine, Bella,” Archie promised; Edythe squeezed my hand.

And I could see, looking at all of their beautiful faces one by one, that nothing I could say was going to change their minds.

It was a quiet ride home. I was frustrated. Against my better judgment, I was still human.

“You won’t be alone for a second,” Edythe promised as she drove me to Charlie’s. “Someone will always be there. Eleanor, Archie, Jasper…”

I sighed. “This is ridiculous. They’ll get so bored, they’ll have to kill me themselves, just for something to do.”

Edythe gave me a sour look. “Hilarious, Bella.”

Charlie was in a good mood when we got back. He could see the tension between me and Edythe, and he was misinterpreting it. He watched me throw together his dinner with a smug smile on his face. Edythe had excused herself for a moment, to do some surveillance, I assumed, but Charlie waited till she was back to pass on my messages.

“Julie called again,” Charlie said as soon as Edythe was in the room. I kept my face empty as I set the plate in front of him.

“Is that a fact?”

Charlie frowned. “Don’t be petty, Bella. She sounded really low.”

“Is Julie paying you for all the P.R., or are you a volunteer?”

Charlie grumbled incoherently at me until the food cut off his garbled complaint.

Though he didn’t realize it, he’d found his mark.

My life was feeling a lot like a game of dice right now—would the next roll come up snake eyes? What if something did happen to me? It seemed worse than petty to leave Julie feeling guilty about what he’d said.

But I didn’t want to talk to her with Charlie around, to have to watch my every word so I didn’t let the wrong thing slip. Thinking about this made me jealous of Julie and Billy’s relationship. How easy it must be when you had no secrets from the person you lived with.

So I would wait for the morning. I most likely wasn’t going to die tonight, after all, and it wouldn’t hurt her to feel guilty for twelve more hours. It might even be good for her.

When Edythe officially left for the evening, I wondered who was out in the downpour, keeping an eye on Charlie and me. I felt awful for Archie or whoever else it might be, but still comforted. I had to admit it was nice, knowing I wasn’t alone. And Edythe was back in record time.
She sang me to sleep again and—aware even in unconsciousness that she was there—I slept free of nightmares.

In the morning, Charlie left to go fishing with Deputy Mark before I was up. I decided to use this lack of supervision to be divine.

“I’m going to let Julie off the hook,” I warned Edythe after I’d eaten breakfast.

“I knew you’d forgive her,” she said with an easy smile. “Holding grudges is not one of your many talents.”

I rolled my eyes, but I was pleased. It seemed like Edythe really was over the whole anti-werewolf thing.

I didn’t look at the clock until after I’d dialed. It was a little early for calls, and I worried that I would wake Billy and Jules, but someone picked up before the second ring, so she couldn’t have been too far from the phone.

“Hello?” a dull voice said.

“Julie?”

“Bella!” she exclaimed. “Oh, Bella, I’m so sorry!” she tripped over the words as she hurried to get them out. “I swear I didn’t mean it. I was just being stupid. I was angry—but that’s no excuse. It was the stupidest thing I’ve ever said in my life and I’m sorry. Don’t be mad at me, please? Please. Lifetime of servitude up for grabs—all you have to do is forgive me.”

“I’m not mad. You’re forgiven.”

“Thank you,” she breathed fervently. “I can’t believe I was such a jerk.”

“Don’t worry about that—I’m used to it.”

She laughed, exuberant with relief. “Come down to see me,” she begged. “I want to make it up to you.”

I frowned. “How?”


“Oh, there’s a brilliant idea.”

“I’ll keep you safe,” she promised. “No matter what you want to do.”

I glanced at Edythe. Her face was very calm, but I was sure this was not the time.

“Not right now.”

“She’s not thrilled with me, is she?” Julie’s voice was ashamed, rather than bitter, for once.

“That’s not the problem. There’s… well, there’s this other problem that’s slightly more worrisome than a bratty teenage werewolf…” I tried to keep my tone joking, but I didn’t fool her.
“What’s wrong?” she demanded.

“Um.” I wasn’t sure what I should tell her.

Edythe held her hand out for the phone. I looked at her face carefully. She seemed calm enough.

“Bella?” Julie asked.

Edythe sighed, holding her hand closer.

“Do you mind speaking to Edythe?” I asked apprehensively. “She wants to talk to you.”

There was a long pause.

“Okay,” Julie finally agreed. “This should be interesting.”

I handed the phone to Edythe; I hoped she could read the warning in my eyes.

“Hello, Julie,” Edythe said, perfectly polite.

There was a silence. I bit my lip, trying to guess how Julie would answer.

“Someone was here—not a scent I know,” Edythe explained. “Has your pack come across anything new?”

Another pause, while Edythe nodded to herself, unsurprised.

“Here’s the crux, Julie. I won’t be letting Bella out of my sight till I get this taken care of. It’s nothing personal—”

Julie interrupted her then, and I could hear the buzz of her voice from the receiver. Whatever she was saying, she was more intense than before. I tried unsuccessfully to make out the words.

“You might be right—,” Edythe began, but Julie was arguing again. Neither of them sounded angry, at least.

“That’s an interesting suggestion. We’re quite willing to renegotiate. If Sam is amenable.”

Julie’s voice was quieter now. I started chewing on my thumbnail as I tried to read Edythe’s expression.

“Thank you,” Edythe replied.

Then Julie said something that caused a surprised expression to flicker across Edythe’s face.

“I’d planned to go alone, actually,” Edythe said, answering the unexpected question. “And leave her with the others.”

Julie’s voice rose in pitch, and it sounded to me like she was trying to be persuasive.

“I’ll try to consider it objectively,” Edythe promised. “As objectively as I’m capable of.”

The pause was shorter this time.

“That’s not a half-bad idea. When?… No, that’s fine. I’d like a chance to follow the trail personally, anyway. Ten minutes… Certainly,” Edythe said. She held the phone out to me.

“Bella?”
I took it slowly, feeling confused.

“What was that all about?” I asked Julie, my voice peeved. I knew it was juvenile, but I felt excluded.

“A truce, I think. Hey, do me a favor,” Julie suggested. “Try to convince your bloodsucker that the safest place for you to be—especially when she leaves—is on the reservation. We’re well able to handle anything.”

“Is that what you were trying to sell her?”

“Yes. It makes sense. Charlie’s probably better off here, too. As much as possible.”

“Get Billy on it,” I agreed. I hated that I was putting Charlie within the range of the crosshairs that always seemed to be centered on me. “What else?”

“Just rearranging some boundaries, so we can catch anyone who gets too near Forks. I’m not sure if Sam will go for it, but until he comes around, I’ll keep an eye on things.”

“What do you mean by ‘keep an eye on things’?”

“I mean that if you see a wolf running around your house, don’t shoot at it.”

“Of course not. You really shouldn’t do anything… risky, though.”

She snorted. “Don’t be stupid. I can take care of myself.”

I sighed.

“I also tried to convince her to let you visit. She’s prejudiced, so don’t let her give you any crap about safety. She knows as well as I do that you’d be safe here.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“See you in a few,” Julie said.

“You’re coming up?”

“Yeah. I’m going to get the scent of your visitor so we can track him if he comes back.”

“Jules, I really don’t like the idea of you tracking—”

“Oh please, Bella,” she interrupted. Julie laughed, and then hung up.
IT WAS ALL VERY CHILDISH. WHY ON EARTH SHOULD EDYTHER have to leave for Julie to come over? Weren’t we past this kind of immaturity?

“It’s not that I feel any personal antagonism toward her, Bella, it’s just easier for both of us,” Edythe told me at the door. “I won’t be far away. You’ll be safe.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

She smiled, and then a sly look came into her eye. She pulled me close, burying her face in my hair. I could feel her cool breath saturate the strands as she exhaled; it raised goose bumps on my neck.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, and then she laughed aloud as if I’d just told a good joke.

“What’s so funny?”

But Edythe just grinned and loped off toward the trees without answering.

Grumbling to myself, I went to clean up the kitchen. Before I even had the sink full of water, the doorbell rang. It was hard to get used to how much faster Julie was without her car. How everyone seemed to be so much faster than me.…

“Come in, Jules!” I shouted.

I was concentrating on piling the dishes into the bubbly water, and I’d forgotten that Julie moved like a ghost these days. So it made me jump when her voice was suddenly there behind me.

“Should you really leave your door unlocked like that? Oh, sorry.”

I’d slopped myself with the dishwater when she’d startled me.

“I’m not worried about anyone who would be deterred by a locked door,” I said while I wiped the front of my shirt with a dishtowel.

“Good point,” she agreed.

I turned to look at her, eyeing her critically. “Is it really so impossible to wear clothes, Julie?” I asked. Once again, Julie was half-naked, wearing the same pair of old cut-off jeans. Today she was wearing a sports bra. Secretly, I wondered if she was just so proud of her new muscles that she couldn’t stand to cover them up. I had to admit, they were impressive—but I’d never thought of her as vain. “I mean, I know you don’t get cold anymore, but still.”

She ran a hand through her wet hair; it was falling in her eyes.

“It’s just easier,” she explained.

“What’s easier?”

She smiled condescendingly. “It’s enough of a pain to carry this stuff around with me, let alone a complete outfit. What do I look like, a pack mule?”

I frowned. “What are you talking about, Julie?”
Her expression was superior, like I was missing something obvious. “My clothes don’t just pop in and out of existence when I change—I have to carry them with me while I run. The guys are lucky—they don’t have to wear a shirt. Pardon me for keeping my burden light.”

I changed color. “I guess I didn’t think about that,” I muttered.

She laughed and pointed to a black leather cord, thin as a strand of yarn, that was wound three times below her left calf like an anklet. I hadn’t noticed before that her feet were bare, too. “That’s more than just a fashion statement—it sucks to carry jeans in your mouth.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

She grinned. “Does my being half-naked bother you?”

“No.”

Julie laughed again, and I turned my back on her to focus on the dishes. I hoped she realized my blush was left over from embarrassment at my own stupidity, and had nothing to do with her question.

“Well, I suppose I should get to work.” She sighed. “I wouldn’t want to give her an excuse to say I’m slacking on my side.”

“Julie, it’s not your job—”

She raised a hand to cut me off. “I’m working on a volunteer basis here. Now, where is the intruder’s scent the worst?”

“My bedroom, I think.”

Her eyes narrowed. She didn’t like that any more than Edythe had.

“I’ll just be a minute.”

I methodically scrubbed the plate I was holding. The only sound was the brush’s plastic bristles scraping round and round on the ceramic. I listened for something from above, a creak of the floorboard, the click of a door. There was nothing. I realized I’d been cleaning the same plate far longer than necessary, and I tried to pay attention to what I was doing.

“Whew!” Julie said, inches behind me, scaring me again.

“Yeesh, Jules, cut that out!”

“Sorry. Here—” Julie took the towel and mopped up my new spill. “I’ll make it up to you. You wash, I’ll rinse and dry.”

“Fine.” I gave her the plate.

“Well, the scent was easy enough to catch. By the way, your room reeks.”

“I’ll buy some air freshener.”

She laughed.

I washed and she dried in companionable silence for a few minutes.
“Can I ask you something?”

I handed her another plate. “That depends on what you want to know.”

“I’m not trying to be a jerk or anything—I’m honestly curious,” Julie assured me.

“Fine. Go ahead.”

She paused for half a second. “What’s it like—having a vampire for a girlfriend?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s the best.”

“I’m serious. The idea doesn’t bother you—it never creeps you out?”

“Never.”

She was silent as she reached for the bowl in my hands. I peeked up at her face—she was frowning, her lower lip jutting out.

“Anything else?” I asked.

She wrinkled her nose again. “Well… I was wondering… do you… y’know, kiss her?”

I laughed. “Yes.”

She shuddered. “Ugh.”

“To each her own,” I murmured.

“You don’t worry about the fangs?”

I smacked her arm, splashing her with dishwater. “Shut up, Julie! You know she doesn’t have fangs!”

“Close enough,” she muttered.

I gritted my teeth and scrubbed a boning knife with more force than necessary.

“Can I ask another one?” she asked softly when I passed the knife to her. “Just curious, again.”

“Fine,” I snapped.

She turned the knife over and over in her hands under the stream of water. When she spoke, it was only a whisper. “You said a few weeks.… When, exactly…?” She couldn’t finish.

“Graduation,” I whispered back, watching her face warily. Would this set her off again?

“So soon,” she breathed, her eyes closing. It didn’t sound like a question. It sounded like a lament. The muscles in her arms tightened and her shoulders were stiff.

“OW!” she shouted; it had gotten so still in the room that I jumped a foot in the air at her outburst.

Her right hand had curled into a tense fist around the blade of the knife—she unclenched her hand and the knife clattered onto the counter. Across her palm was a long, deep gash. The blood streamed down her fingers and dripped on the floor.

“Damn it! Ouch!” she complained.
My head spun and my stomach rolled. I clung to the countertop with one hand, took a deep breath through my mouth, and forced myself to get a grip so that I could take care of her.

“Oh, no, Julie! Oh, crap! Here, wrap this around it!” I shoved the dish towel at her, reaching for her hand. She shrugged away from me.

“It’s nothing, Bella, don’t worry about it.”

The room started to shimmer a little around the edges.

I took another deep breath. “Don’t worry?! You sliced your hand open!”

She ignored the dish towel I pushed at her. She put her hand under the faucet and let the water wash over the wound. The water ran red. My head whirled.

“Bella,” she said.

I looked away from the wound, up to her face. She was frowning, but her expression was calm.

“What?”

“You look like you’re going to pass out, and you’re biting your lip off. Stop it. Relax. Breathe. I’m fine.”

I inhaled through my mouth and removed my teeth from my lower lip. “Don’t be brave.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Let’s go. I’ll drive you to the ER.” I was pretty sure I would be okay to drive. The walls were holding steady now, at least.

“Not necessary.” Jules turned off the water and took the towel from my hand. She twisted it loosely around her palm.

“Wait,” I protested. “Let me look at it.” I clutched the counter more firmly, to hold myself upright if the wound made me woozy again.

“Do you have a medical degree that you never told me about?”

“Just give me the chance to decide whether or not I’m going to throw a fit over taking you to the hospital.”

She made a face of mock horror. “Please, not a fit!”

“If you don’t let me see your hand, a fit is guaranteed.”

She inhaled deeply, and then let out a gusty sigh. “Fine.”

She unwound the towel and, when I reached out to take the cloth, she laid her hand in mine.

It took me a few seconds. I even flipped her hand over, though I was sure she’d cut her palm. I turned her hand back up, finally realizing that the angry pink, puckered line was all that was left of her wound.

“But… you were bleeding… so much.”
She pulled her hand back, her eyes steady and somber on mine.

“I heal fast.”

“I’ll say,” I mouthed.

I’d seen the long gash clearly, seen the blood that flowed into the sink. The rust-and-salt smell of it had almost pulled me under. It should have needed stitches. It should have taken days to scab over and then weeks to fade into the shiny pink scar that marked her skin now.

She screwed her mouth up into half a smile and thumped her fist once against her chest. “Werewolf, remember?”

Her eyes held mine for an immeasurable moment.

“Right,” I finally said.

She laughed at my expression. “I told you this. You saw Paul’s scar.”

I shook my head to clear it. “It’s a little different, seeing the action sequence firsthand.”

I kneeled down and dug the bleach out of the cabinet under the sink. Then I poured some on a dusting rag and started scrubbing the floor. The burning scent of the bleach cleared the last of the dizziness from my head.

“Let me clean up,” Julie said.

“I got this. Throw that towel in the wash, will you?”

When I was sure the floor smelled of nothing but bleach, I got up and rinsed the right side of the sink with bleach, too. Then I went to the laundry closet beside the pantry, and poured a cupful into the washing machine before starting it. Julie watched me with a disapproving look on her face.

“Do you have obsessive-compulsive disorder?” she asked when I was done.

Huh. Maybe. But at least I had a good excuse this time. “We’re a bit sensitive to blood around here. I’m sure you can understand that.”

“Oh.” She wrinkled her nose again.

“Why not make it as easy as possible for her? What she’s doing is hard enough.”

“Sure, sure. Why not?”

I pulled the plug, and let the dirty water drain from the sink.

“Can I ask you something, Bella?”

I sighed.

“What’s it like—having a werewolf for a best friend?”

The question caught me off guard. I laughed out loud.

“Does it creep you out?” she pressed before I could answer.

“No. When the werewolf is being nice,” I qualified, “it’s the best.”
She grinned widely, her teeth bright against her russet skin. “Thanks, Bella,” she said, and then she grabbed my hand and wrenched me into one of her bone-crushing hugs.

Before I had time to react, she dropped her arms and stepped away.

“Ugh,” she said, her nose wrinkling. “Your hair stinks worse than your room.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. I suddenly understood what Edythe had been laughing about earlier, after breathing on me.

“One of the many hazards of socializing with vampires,” Julie said, shrugging. “It makes you smell bad. A minor hazard, comparatively.”

I glared at her. “I only smell bad to you, Jules.”

She grinned. “See you around, Bells.”

“Are you leaving?”

“She’s waiting for me to go. I can hear her outside.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll go out the back,” she said, and then she paused. “Hold up a sec—hey, do you think you can come to La Push tonight? We’re having a bonfire party. Elliott will be there, and you could meet Kim… And I know Quil wants to see you, too. He’s pretty peeved that you found out before he did.”

I grinned at that. I could just imagine how that would have irked Quil—Julie’s little human gal pal down with the werewolves while he was still clueless. And then I sighed. “Yeah, Jules, I don’t know about that. See, it’s a little tense right now…."

“C’mon, you think somebody’s going to get past all—all six of us?”

There was a strange pause as she stuttered over the end of her question. I wondered if she had trouble saying the word werewolf aloud, the way I often had difficulty with vampire.

Her big dark eyes were full of unashamed pleading.

“I’ll ask,” I said doubtfully.

She made a noise in the back of her throat. “Is she your warden, now, too? You know, I saw this story on the news last week about controlling, abusive teenage relationships and—”

“Okay!” I cut her off, and then shoved her arm. “Time for the werewolf to get out!”

She grinned. “Bye, Bells. Be sure you ask permission.”

She ducked out the back door before I could find something to throw at her. I growled incoherently at the empty room.

Seconds after she was gone, Edythe walked slowly into the kitchen, raindrops glistening like diamonds set into the bronze of her hair. Her eyes were wary.

“Did you two get into a fight?” she asked.
“Edythe!” I sang, throwing myself at her.

“Hi, there.” She laughed and wrapped her arms around me. “Are you trying to distract me? It’s working.”

“No, I didn’t fight with Julie. Much. Why?”

“I was just wondering why you stabbed her. Not that I object.” With her chin, she gestured to the knife on the counter.

“Dang! I thought I got everything.”

I pulled away from her and ran to put the knife in the sink before I doused it with bleach.

“I didn’t stab her,” I explained as I worked. “She forgot she had a knife in her hand.”

Edythe chuckled. “That’s not nearly as fun as the way I imagined it.”

“Be nice.”

She took a big envelope from her jacket pocket and tossed it on the counter. “I got your mail.”

“ Anything good?”

“I think so.”

My eyes narrowed suspiciously at her tone. I went to investigate.

She’d folded the legal-sized envelope in half. I smoothed it open, surprised at the weight of the expensive paper, and read the return address.

“Dartmouth? Is this a joke?”

“I’m sure it’s an acceptance. It looks exactly like mine.”

“Good grief, Edythe—what did you do?”

“I sent in your application, that’s all.”

“I may not be Dartmouth material, but I’m not stupid enough to believe that.”

“Dartmouth seems to think that you’re Dartmouth material.”

I took a deep breath and counted slowly to ten. “That’s very generous of them,” I finally said. “However, accepted or not, there is still the minor matter of tuition. I can’t afford it, and I’m not letting you throw away enough money to buy yourself another sports car just so that I can pretend to go to Dartmouth next year.”

“I don’t need another sports car. And you don’t have to pretend anything,” she murmured. “One year of college wouldn’t kill you. Maybe you’d even like it. Just think about it, Bella. Imagine how excited Charlie and Renée would be….”

Her velvet voice painted the picture in my head before I could block it. Of course Charlie would explode with pride—no one in the town of Forks would be able to escape the fallout from his excitement. And Renée would be hysterical with joy at my triumph—though she’d swear she wasn’t at all surprised….
I tried to shake the image out of my head. “Edythe. I’m worried about living through graduation, let alone this summer or next fall.”

Her arms wrapped around me again. “No one is going to hurt you. You have all the time in the world.”

I sighed. “I’m mailing the contents of my bank account to Alaska tomorrow. It’s all the alibi I need. It’s far enough away that Charlie won’t expect a visit until Christmas at the earliest. And I’m sure I’ll think of some excuse by then. You know,” I teased halfheartedly, “this whole secrecy and deception thing is kind of a pain.”

Edythe’s expression hardened. “It gets easier. After a few decades, everyone you know is dead. Problem solved.”

I flinched.

“Sorry, that was harsh.”

I stared down at the big white envelope, not seeing it. “But still true.”

“If I get this resolved, whatever it is we’re dealing with, will you please... wait?”

“Nope.”

“Always so stubborn.”

“Yep.”

The washing machine thumped and stuttered to a halt.

“Stupid piece of junk,” I muttered as I pulled away from her. I moved the one small towel that had unbalanced the otherwise empty machine, and started it again.

“This reminds me,” I said. “Could you ask Archie what he did with my stuff when he cleaned my room? I can’t find it anywhere.”

She looked at me with confused eyes. “Archie cleaned your room?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what he was doing. When he came to get my pajamas and pillow and stuff to hold me hostage.” I glowered at her briefly. “He picked up everything that was lying around, my shirts, my socks, and I don’t know where he put them.”

Edythe continued to look confused for one short moment, and then, abruptly, she was rigid.

“When did you notice your things were missing?”

“When I got back from the fake slumber party. Why?”

“I don’t think Archie took anything. Not your clothes, or your pillow. The things that were taken, these were things you’d worn... and touched... and slept on?”

“Yes. What is it, Edythe?”

Her expression was strained. “Things with your scent.”

“Oh!”
We stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment.

“My visitor,” I muttered.

“He was gathering traces… evidence. To prove that he’d found you?”

“Why?” I whispered.

“I don’t know. But, Bella, I swear I will find out. I will.”

“I know you will,” I said, laying my head against her chest. Leaning there, I felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

She pulled out her phone and glanced at the number. “Just the person I need to talk to,” she murmured, and then she flipped it open. “Carlisle, I—” She broke off and listened, her face taut with concentration for a few minutes. “I’ll check it out. Listen…”

She explained about my missing things, but from the side I was hearing, it sounded like Carlisle had no insights for us.

“Maybe I’ll go…,” Edythe said, trailing off as her eyes drifted toward me. “Maybe not. Don’t let Eleanor go alone, you know how she gets. At least ask Archie keep an eye on things. We’ll figure this out later.”

She snapped the phone shut. “Where’s the paper?” she asked me.

“Um, I’m not sure. Why?”

“I need to see something. Did Charlie already throw it out?”

“Maybe….”

Edythe disappeared.

She was back in half a second, new diamonds in her hair, a wet newspaper in her hands. She spread it out on the table, her eyes scanning quickly across the headlines. She leaned in, intent on something she was reading, one finger tracing passages that interested her most.

“Carlisle’s right… yes… very sloppy. Young and crazed? Or a death wish?” she muttered to herself.

I went to peek over her shoulder.

The headline of the Seattle Times read: “Murder Epidemic Continues—Police Have No New Leads.”

It was almost the same story Charlie had been complaining about a few weeks ago—the big-city violence that was pushing Seattle up the national murder hot-spot list. It wasn’t exactly the same story, though. The numbers were a lot higher.

“It’s getting worse,” I murmured.

She frowned. “Altogether out of control. This can’t be the work of just one newborn vampire. What’s going on? It’s as if they’ve never heard of the Volturi. Which is possible, I guess. No one has explained the rules to them… so who is creating them, then?”
“The Volturi?” I repeated, shuddering.

“This is exactly the kind of thing they routinely wipe out—immortals who threaten to expose us. They just cleaned up a mess like this a few years ago in Atlanta, and it hadn’t gotten nearly this bad. They will intervene soon, very soon, unless we can find some way to calm the situation. I’d really rather they didn’t come to Seattle just now. As long as they’re this close… they might decide to check on you.”

I shuddered again. “What can we do?”

“We need to know more before we can decide that. Perhaps if we can talk to these young ones, explain the rules, it can be resolved peacefully.” She frowned, like she didn’t think the chances of that were good. “We’ll wait until Archie has an idea of what’s going on…. We don’t want to step in until it’s absolutely necessary. After all, it’s not our responsibility. But it’s good we have Jasper,” she added, almost to herself. “If we are dealing with newborns, he’ll be helpful.”

“Jasper? Why?”

Edythe smiled darkly. “Jasper is sort of an expert on young vampires.”

“What do you mean, an expert?”

“You’ll have to ask him—the story is involved.”

“What a mess,” I mumbled.

“It does feel that way, doesn’t it? Like it’s coming at us from all sides these days.” She sighed. “Do you ever think that your life might be easier if you weren’t in love with me?”

“Maybe. It wouldn’t be much of a life, though.”

“For me,” she amended quietly. “And now, I suppose,” she continued with a wry smile, “you have something you want to ask me?”

I stared at her blankly. “I do?”

“Or maybe not.” She grinned. “I was rather under the impression that you’d promised to ask my permission to go to some kind of werewolf soirée tonight.”

“Eavesdropping again?”

She grinned. “Just a bit, at the very end.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to ask you anyway. I figured you had enough to stress about.”

She put her hand under my chin, and held my face so that she could read my eyes. “Would you like to go?”

“It’s no big thing. Don’t worry about it.”

“You don’t have to ask my permission, Bella. I’m not your mother—thank heaven for that. Perhaps you should ask Charlie, though.”

“But you know Charlie will say yes.”

“I do have a bit more insight into his probable answer than most people would, it’s true.”
I just stared at her, trying to understand what she wanted, and trying to put out of my mind the yearning I felt to go to La Push so that I wouldn’t be swayed by my own wishes. It was stupid to want to go hang out with a bunch of big idiot wolves right now when there was so much that was frightening and unexplained going on. Of course, that was exactly why I wanted to go. I wanted to escape the death threats, for just a few hours… to be the less-mature, more-reckless Bella who could laugh it off with Julie, if only briefly. But that didn’t matter.

“Bella,” Edythe said. “I told you that I was going to be reasonable and trust your judgment. I meant that. If you trust the werewolves, then I’m not going to worry about them.”

“Wow,” I said, as I had last night.

“And Julie’s right—about one thing, anyway—a pack of werewolves ought to be enough to protect even you for one evening.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Only…”

I braced myself.

“I hope you won’t mind taking a few precautions? Allowing me to drive you to the boundary line, for one. And then taking a cell phone, so that I’ll know when to pick you up?”

“That sounds… very reasonable.”

“Excellent.”

She smiled at me, and I could see no trace of apprehension in her jewel-like eyes.

To no one’s surprise, Charlie had no problem at all with me going to La Push for a bonfire. Julie crowed with undisguised exultation when I called to give her the news, and she seemed eager enough to embrace Edythe’s safety measures. She promised to meet us at the line between territories at six.

I had decided, after a short internal debate, that I would not sell my motorcycle. I would take it back to La Push where it belonged and, when I no longer needed it anymore… well, then, I would insist that Julie profit from her work somehow. She could sell it or give it to a friend. It didn’t matter to me.

Tonight seemed like a good opportunity to return the bike to Julie’s garage. As gloomy as I was feeling about things lately, every day seemed like a possible last chance. I didn’t have time to procrastinate any task, no matter how minor.

Edythe only nodded when I explained what I wanted, but I thought I saw a flicker of consternation in her eyes, and I knew she was no happier about the idea of me on a motorcycle than Charlie was.

I followed her back to her house, to the garage where I’d left the bike. It wasn’t until I pulled the truck in and got out that I realized the consternation might not be entirely about my safety this time.

Next to my little antique motorcycle, overshadowing it, was another vehicle. To call this other
vehicle a motorcycle hardly seemed fair, since it didn’t seem to belong to the same family as my suddenly shabby-looking bike.

It was big and sleek and silver and—even totally motionless—it looked fast.

“What is *that*?”

“Nothing,” Edythe murmured.

“It doesn’t *look* like nothing.”

Edythe’s expression was casual; she seemed determined to blow it off. “Well, I didn’t know if you were going to forgive your friend, or she you, and I wondered if you would still want to ride your bike anyway. It sounded like it was something that you enjoyed. I thought I could go with you, if you wished.” She shrugged.

I stared at the beautiful machine. Beside it, my bike looked like a broken tricycle. I felt a sudden wave of sadness when I realized that this was not a bad analogy for the way I probably looked next to Edythe.

“I wouldn’t be able to keep up with you,” I whispered.

Edythe put her hand under my chin and pulled my face around so that she could see it straight on. With one finger, she tried to push the corner of my mouth up.

“I’d keep pace with you, Bella.”

“That wouldn’t be much fun for you.”

“Of course it would, if we were together.”

I bit my lip and imagined it for a moment. “Edythe, if you thought I was going too fast or losing control of the bike or something, what would you do?”

She hesitated, obviously trying to find the right answer. I knew the truth: she’d find some way to save me before I crashed.

Then she smiled. It looked effortless, except for the tiny defensive tightening of her eyes.

“This is something you do with Julie. I see that now.”

“It’s just that, well, I don’t slow her down so much, you know. I could try, I guess.…”

I eyed the silver motorcycle doubtfully.

“Don’t worry about it,” Edythe said, and then she laughed lightly. “I saw Jasper admiring it. Perhaps it’s time he discovered a new way to travel. After all, Archie has his Porsche now.”

“Edythe, I—”

She interrupted me with a quick kiss. “I said not to worry. But would you do something for me?”

“Whatever you need,” I promised quickly.

She dropped my face and leaned over the far side of the big motorcycle, retrieving something she had stashed there.
She came back with one object that was black and shapeless, and another that was red and easily identifiable.

“Please?” she asked, flashing the crooked smile that always destroyed my resistance.

I took the red helmet, weighing it in my hands. “I’ll look stupid.”

“No, you’ll look smart. Smart enough not to get yourself hurt.” She threw the black thing, whatever it was, over her arm and then took my face in his hands. “There are things between my hands right now that I can’t live without. You could take care of them.”

“Okay, fine. What’s that other thing?” I asked suspiciously.

She laughed and shook out some kind of padded jacket. “It’s a riding jacket. I hear road rash is quite uncomfortable, not that I would know myself.”

She held it out for me. With a deep sigh, I flipped my hair back and stuffed the helmet on my head. Then I shoved my arms through the sleeves of the jacket. She zipped me in, a smile playing around the corners of her lips, and took a step back.

I felt bulky.

“Be honest, how hideous do I look?”

She took another step back and pursed her lips.

“That bad, huh?” I muttered.

“No, no, Bella. Actually…” she seemed to be struggling for the right word. “You look… sexy.”

I laughed out loud. “Right.”

“Very sexy, really.”

“You are just saying that so that I’ll wear it,” I said. “But that’s okay. You’re right, it’s smarter.”

She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me against her chest. “You’re silly. I suppose that’s part of your charm. Though, I’ll admit it, this helmet does have its drawbacks.”

And then she pulled the helmet off so that she could kiss me.

As Edythe drove me toward La Push a little while later, I realized that this unprecedented situation felt oddly familiar. It took me a moment of thought to pinpoint the source of the déjà vu.

“You know what this reminds me of?” I asked. “It’s just like when I was a kid and Renée would pass me off to Charlie for the summer. I feel like a seven-year-old.”

Edythe laughed.

I didn’t mention it out loud, but the biggest difference between the two circumstances was that Renée and Charlie had been on better terms.
About halfway to La Push, we rounded the corner and found Julie leaning against the side of the red Volkswagen she’d built for herself out of scraps. Julie’s carefully neutral expression dissolved into a smile when I waved from the front seat.

Edythe parked the Volvo thirty yards away.

“Call me whenever you’re ready to come home,” she said. “And I’ll be here.”

“I won’t be out late,” I promised.

Edythe pulled the bike and my new gear out of the trunk of her car—I’d been quite impressed that it had all fit. But it wasn’t so hard to manage when you were strong enough to juggle full-sized vans, let alone small motorcycles.

Julie watched, making no move to approach, her smile gone and her dark eyes indecipherable.

I tucked the helmet under my arm and threw the jacket across the seat.

“Do you have it all?” Edythe asked.

“No problem,” I assured her.

She sighed and leaned toward me. I turned my face up for a goodbye peck, but Edythe took me by surprise, fastening her arms tightly around me and kissing me with as much enthusiasm as she had in the garage—before long, I was gasping for air.

Edythe laughed quietly at something, and then let me go.

“Goodbye,” she said. “I really do like the jacket.”

As I turned away from her, I thought I saw a flash of something in her eyes that I wasn’t supposed to see. I couldn’t tell for sure what it was exactly. Worry, maybe. For a second I thought it was panic. But I was probably just making something out of nothing, as usual.

I could feel her eyes on my back as I pushed my bike toward the invisible vampire-werewolf treaty line to meet Julie.

“What’s all that?” Julie called to me, her voice wary, scrutinizing the motorcycle with an enigmatic expression.

“I thought I should put this back where it belongs,” I told her.

She pondered that for one short second, and then her wide smile stretched across her face.

I knew the exact point that I was in werewolf territory because Julie shoved away from her car and loped quickly over to me, closing the distance in three long strides. She took the bike from me, balanced it on the kickstand, and grabbed me up in another vice-tight hug.

I heard the Volvo’s engine growl, and I struggled to get free.

“Cut it out, Jules!” I gasped breathlessly.

She laughed and set me down. I turned to wave goodbye, but the silver car was already disappearing around the curve in the road.

“Nice,” I commented, allowing some acid to leak into my voice.
Her eyes widened in false innocence. “What?”

“She’s being pretty dang pleasant about this; you don’t need to push your luck.”

She laughed again, louder than before—she found what I’d said very funny indeed. I tried to see the joke as she walked around the Rabbit to hold my door open for me.

“Bella,” she finally said—still chuckling—as she shut the door behind me, “you can’t push what you don’t have.”
“ARE YOU GONNA EAT THAT HOT DOG?” PAUL ASKED JULIE, his eyes locked on the last remnant of the huge meal the werewolves had consumed.

Julie leaned back against my knees and toyed with the hot dog she had spitted on a straightened wire hanger; the flames at the edge of the bonfire licked along its blistered skin. She heaved a sigh and patted her stomach. It was somehow still flat, though I’d lost count of how many hot dogs she’d eaten after her tenth. Not to mention the super-sized bag of chips or the two-liter bottle of root beer.

“I guess,” Jules said slowly. “I’m so full I’m about to puke, but I think I can force it down. I won’t enjoy it at all, though.” She sighed again sadly.

Despite the fact that Paul had eaten at least as much as Julie, he glowered and his hands balled up into fists.


She flipped the homemade skewer across the circle. I expected it to land hot-dog-first in the sand, but Paul caught it neatly on the right end without difficulty.

Hanging out with no one but extremely dexterous people all the time was going to give me a complex.

“Thanks, man,” Paul said, already over his brief fit of temper.

The fire crackled, settling lower toward the sand. Sparks blew up in a sudden puff of brilliant orange against the black sky. Funny, I hadn’t noticed that the sun had set. For the first time, I wondered how late it had gotten. I’d lost track of time completely.

It was easier being with my Quileute friends than I’d expected.

While Julie and I had dropped off my bike at the garage—and she had admitted ruefully that the helmet was a good idea that she should have thought of herself—I’d started to worry about showing up with her at the bonfire, wondering if the werewolves would consider me a traitor now. Would they be angry with Julie for inviting me? Would I ruin the party?

But when Julie had towed me out of the forest to the clifftop meeting place—where the fire already roared brighter than the cloud-obscured sun—it had all been very casual and light.

“Hey, vampire girl!” Embry had greeted me loudly. Quil had jumped up to give me a high five and kiss me on the cheek. Elliott had squeezed my hand when we’d sat on the cool stone ground beside him and Sam.

Other than a few teasing complaints—mostly by Paul—about keeping the bloodsucker stench downwind, I was treated like someone who belonged.

It wasn’t just kids in attendance, either. Billy was here, his wheelchair stationed at what seemed the natural head of the circle. Beside him on a folding lawn chair, looking quite brittle, was Quil’s ancient, white-haired grandfather, Old Quil. Sue Clearwater, widow of Charlie’s friend Harry, had a chair on his other side; her two children, Leah and Seth, were also there, sitting on the ground like the rest of us. This surprised me, but all three were clearly in on the secret now. From the way
Billy and Old Quil spoke to Sue, it sounded to me like she’d taken Harry’s place on the council. Did that make her children automatic members of La Push’s most secret society?

I wondered how horrible it was for Leah to sit across the circle from Sam and Elliott. Her lovely face betrayed no emotion, but she never looked away from the flames. Looking at the perfection of Leah’s features, I couldn’t help but compare them to Elliott’s ruined face. What did Leah think of Elliott’s scars, now that she knew the truth behind them? Did it seem like justice in her eyes?

Little Seth Clearwater wasn’t so little anymore. With his huge, happy grin and his long, gangly build, he reminded me very much of a younger Julie. The resemblance made me smile, and then sigh. Was Seth doomed to have his life change as drastically as the rest of these kids? Was that future why he and his family were allowed to be here?

The whole pack was there: Sam with his Elliott, Paul, Embry, Quil, and Jared with Kim, the girl he’d imprinted upon.

My first impression of Kim was that she was a nice girl, a little shy, and a little plain. She had a wide face, mostly cheekbones, with eyes too small to balance them out. Her nose and mouth were both too broad for traditional beauty. Her flat black hair was thin and wispy in the wind that never seemed to let up atop the cliff.

That was my first impression. But after a few hours of watching Jared watch Kim, I could no longer find anything plain about the girl.

The way he stared at her! It was like a blind man seeing the sun for the first time. Like a collector finding an undiscovered Da Vinci, like a mother looking into the face of her newborn child.

His wondering eyes made me see new things about her—how her skin looked like russet-colored silk in the firelight, how the shape of her lips was a perfect double curve, how white her teeth were against them, how long her eyelashes were, brushing her cheek when she looked down.

Kim’s skin sometimes darkened when she met Jared’s awed gaze, and her eyes would drop as if in embarrassment, but she had a hard time keeping her eyes away from his for any length of time.

Watching them, I felt like I better understood what Julie had told me about imprinting before—*it’s hard to resist that level of commitment and adoration.*

Kim was nodding off now against Jared’s chest, his arms around her. I imagined she would be very warm there.

“It’s getting late,” I murmured to Julie.

“Don’t start *that* yet,” Julie whispered back—though certainly half the group here had hearing sensitive enough to hear us anyway. “The best part is coming.”

“What’s the best part? You swallowing an entire cow whole?”

Julie chuckled her low, throaty laugh. “No. That’s the finale. We didn’t meet just to eat through a week’s worth of food. This is technically a council meeting. It’s Quil’s first time, and he hasn’t heard the stories yet. Well, he’s *heard* them, but this will be the first time he knows they’re true. That tends to make a guy pay closer attention. Kim and Seth and Leah are all first-timers, too.”

“What stories?”

Julie scooted back beside me, where I rested against a low ridge of rock. She put her arm over my
shoulder and spoke even lower into my ear.

“The histories we always thought were legends,” she said. “The stories of how we came to be. The first is the story of the spirit warriors.”

It was almost as if Julie’s soft whisper was the introduction. The atmosphere changed abruptly around the low-burning fire. Paul and Embry sat up straighter. Jared nudged Kim and then pulled her gently upright.

Elliott produced a spiral-bound notebook and a pen, looking exactly like a student set for an important lecture. Sam twisted just slightly beside him—so that he was facing the same direction as Old Quil, who was on his other side—and suddenly I realized that the elders of the council here were not three, but four in number.

Leah Clearwater, her face still a beautiful and emotionless mask, closed her eyes—not like she was tired, but as if to help her concentration. Her brother leaned in toward the elders eagerly.

The fire crackled, sending another explosion of sparks glittering up against the night.

Billy cleared his throat, and, with no more introduction than his daughter’s whisper, began telling the story in his rich, deep voice. The words poured out with precision, as if he knew them by heart, but also with feeling and a subtle rhythm. Like poetry performed by its author.

“The Quileutes have been a small people from the beginning,” Billy said. “And we are a small people still, but we have never disappeared. This is because there has always been magic in our blood. It wasn’t always the magic of shape-shifting—that came later. First, we were spirit warriors.”

Never before had I recognized the ring of majesty that was in Billy Black’s voice, though I realized now that this authority had always been there.

Elliott’s pen sprinted across the sheets of paper as he tried to keep up.

“In the beginning, the tribe settled in this harbor and became skilled ship builders and fishermen. But the tribe was small, and the harbor was rich in fish. There were others who coveted our land, and we were too small to hold it. A larger tribe moved against us, and we took to our ships to escape them.

“Kaheleha was not the first spirit warrior, but we do not remember the stories that came before his. We do not remember who was the first to discover this power, or how it had been used before this crisis. Kaheleha was the first great Spirit Chief in our history. In this emergency, Kaheleha used the magic to defend our land.

“He and all his warriors left the ship—not their bodies, but their spirits. Their women watched over the bodies and the waves, and the men took their spirits back to our harbor.

“They could not physically touch the enemy tribe, but they had other ways. The stories tell us that they could blow fierce winds into their enemy’s camps; they could make a great screaming in the wind that terrified their foes. The stories also tell us that the animals could see the spirit warriors and understand them; the animals would do their bidding.

“Kaheleha took his spirit army and wreaked havoc on the intruders. This invading tribe had packs of big, thick-furred dogs that they used to pull their sleds in the frozen north. The spirit warriors turned the dogs against their masters and then brought a mighty infestation of bats up from the cliff caverns. They used the screaming wind to aid the dogs in confusing the men. The dogs and bats
won. The survivors scattered, calling our harbor a cursed place. The dogs ran wild when the spirit warriors released them. The Quileutes returned to their bodies and their wives, victorious.

“The other nearby tribes, the Hohs and the Makahs, made treaties with the Quileutes. They wanted nothing to do with our magic. We lived in peace with them. When an enemy came against us, the spirit warriors would drive them off.

“Generations passed. Then came the last great Spirit Chief, Taha Aki. He was known for his wisdom, and for being a man of peace. The people lived well and content in his care.

“But there was one man, Utlapa, who was not content.”

A low hiss ran around the fire. I was too slow to see where it came from. Billy ignored it and went on with the legend.

“Utlapa was one of Chief Taha Aki’s strongest spirit warriors—a powerful man, but a grasping man, too. He thought the people should use their magic to expand their lands, to enslave the Hohs and the Makahs and build an empire.

“Now, when the warriors were their spirit selves, they knew each other’s thoughts. Taha Aki saw what Utlapa dreamed, and was angry with Utlapa. Utlapa was commanded to leave the people, and never use his spirit self again. Utlapa was a strong man, but the chief’s warriors outnumbered him. He had no choice but to leave. The furious outcast hid in the forest nearby, waiting for a chance to get revenge against the chief.

“Even in times of peace, the Spirit Chief was vigilant in protecting his people. Often, he would go to a sacred, secret place in the mountains. He would leave his body behind and sweep down through the forests and along the coast, making sure no threat approached.

“One day when Taha Aki left to perform this duty, Utlapa followed. At first, Utlapa simply planned to kill the chief, but this plan had its drawbacks. Surely the spirit warriors would seek to destroy him, and they could follow faster than he could escape. As he hid in the rocks and watched the chief prepare to leave his body, another plan occurred to him.

“Taha Aki left his body in the secret place and flew with the winds to keep watch over his people. Utlapa waited until he was sure the chief had traveled some distance with his spirit self.

“Taha Aki knew it the instant that Utlapa had joined him in the spirit world, and he also knew Utlapa’s murderous plan. He raced back to his secret place, but even the winds weren’t fast enough to save him. When he returned, his body was already gone. Utlapa’s body lay abandoned, but Utlapa had not left Taha Aki with an escape—he had cut his own body’s throat with Taha Aki’s hands.

“Taha Aki followed his body down the mountain. He screamed at Utlapa, but Utlapa ignored him as if he were mere wind.

“Taha Aki watched with despair as Utlapa took his place as chief of the Quileutes. For a few weeks, Utlapa did nothing but make sure that everyone believed he was Taha Aki. Then the changes began—Utlapa’s first edict was to forbid any warrior to enter the spirit world. He claimed that he’d had a vision of danger, but really he was afraid. He knew that Taha Aki would be waiting for the chance to tell his story. Utlapa was also afraid to enter the spirit world himself, knowing Taha Aki would quickly claim his body. So his dreams of conquest with a spirit warrior army were impossible, and he sought to content himself with ruling over the tribe. He became a burden—seeking privileges that Taha Aki had never requested, refusing to work alongside his warriors,
taking a young second wife and then a third, though Taha Aki’s wife lived on—something unheard of in the tribe. Taha Aki watched in helpless fury.

“Eventually, Taha Aki tried to kill his body to save the tribe from Utlapa’s excesses. He brought a fierce wolf down from the mountains, but Utlapa hid behind his warriors. When the wolf killed a young man who was protecting the false chief, Taha Aki felt horrible grief. He ordered the wolf away.

“All the stories tell us that it was no easy thing to be a spirit warrior. It was more frightening than exhilarating to be freed from one’s body. This is why they only used their magic in times of need. The chief’s solitary journeys to keep watch were a burden and a sacrifice. Being bodiless was disorienting, uncomfortable, horrifying. Taha Aki had been away from his body for so long at this point that he was in agony. He felt he was doomed—never to cross over to the final land where his ancestors waited, stuck in this torturous nothingness forever.

“The great wolf followed Taha Aki’s spirit as he twisted and writhed in agony through the woods. The wolf was very large for its kind, and beautiful. Taha Aki was suddenly jealous of the dumb animal. At least it had a body. At least it had a life. Even life as an animal would be better than this horrible empty consciousness.

“And then Taha Aki had the idea that changed us all. He asked the great wolf to make room for him, to share. The wolf complied. Taka Aki entered the wolf’s body with relief and gratitude. It was not his human body, but it was better than the void of the spirit world.

“As one, the man and the wolf returned to the village on the harbor. The people ran in fear, shouting for the warriors to come. The warriors ran to meet the wolf with their spears. Utlapa, of course, stayed safely hidden.

“Taha Aki did not attack his warriors. He retreated slowly from them, speaking with his eyes and trying to yelp the songs of his people. The warriors began to realize that the wolf was no ordinary animal, that there was a spirit influencing it. One older warrior, a man name Yut, decided to disobey the false chief’s order and try to communicate with the wolf.

“As soon as Yut crossed to the spirit world, Taha Aki left the wolf—the animal waited tamely for his return—to speak to him. Yut gathered the truth in an instant, and welcomed his true chief home.

“At this time, Utlapa came to see if the wolf had been defeated. When he saw Yut lying lifeless on the ground, surrounded by protective warriors, he realized what was happening. He drew his knife and raced forward to kill Yut before he could return to his body.

“‘Traitor,’ he screamed, and the warriors did not know what to do. The chief had forbidden spirit journeys, and it was the chief’s decision how to punish those who disobeyed.

“Yut jumped back into his body, but Utlapa had his knife at his throat and a hand covering his mouth. Taha Aki’s body was strong, and Yut was weak with age. Yut could not say even one word to warn the others before Utlapa silenced him forever.

“Taha Aki watched as Yut’s spirit slipped away to the final lands that were barred to Taha Aki for all eternity. He felt a great rage, more powerful than anything he’d felt before. He entered the big wolf again, meaning to rip Utlapa’s throat out. But, as he joined the wolf, the greatest magic happened.

“Taha Aki’s anger was the anger of a man. The love he had for his people and the hatred he had
for their oppressor were too vast for the wolf’s body, too human. The wolf shuddered, and—before the eyes of the shocked warriors and Utlapa—transformed into a man.

“The new man did not look like Taha Aki’s body. He was far more glorious. He was the flesh interpretation of Taha Aki’s spirit. The warriors recognized him at once, though, for they had flown with Taha Aki’s spirit.

“Utlapa tried to run, but Taha Aki had the strength of the wolf in his new body. He caught the thief and crushed the spirit from him before he could jump out of the stolen body.

“The people rejoiced when they understood what had happened. Taha Aki quickly set everything right, working again with his people and giving the young wives back to their families. The only change he kept in place was the end of the spirit travels. He knew that it was too dangerous now that the idea of stealing a life was there. The spirit warriors were no more.

“From that point on, Taha Aki was more than either wolf or man. They called him Taha Aki the Great Wolf, or Taha Aki the Spirit Man. He led the tribe for many, many years, for he did not age. When danger threatened, he would resume his wolf-self to fight or frighten the enemy. The people dwelt in peace. Taha Aki fathered many sons, and some of these found that, after they had reached the age of manhood, they, too, could transform into wolves. The wolves were all different, because they were spirit wolves and reflected the man they were inside.”

“So that’s why Sam is all black,” Quil muttered under his breath, grinning. “Black heart, black fur.”

I was so involved in the story, it was a shock to come back to the present, to the circle around the dying fire. With another shock, I realized that the circle was made up of Taha Aki’s great—to however many degrees—grandchildren.

The fire threw a volley of sparks into the sky, and they shivered and danced, making shapes that were almost decipherable.

“And your chocolate fur reflects what?” Sam whispered back to Quil. “How sweet you are?”

Billy ignored their jibes. “Some of the sons became warriors with Taha Aki, and they no longer aged. Others, who did not like the transformation, refused to join the pack of wolf-men. These began to age again, and the tribe discovered that the wolf-men could grow old like anyone else if they gave up their spirit wolves. Taha Aki had lived the span of three old men’s lives. He had married a third wife after the deaths of the first two, and found in her his true spirit wife. Though he had loved the others, this was something else. He decided to give up his spirit wolf so that he would die when she did.

“That is how the magic came to us, but it is not the end of the story….”

He looked at Old Quil Ateara, who shifted in his chair, straightening his frail shoulders. Billy took a drink from a bottle of water and wiped his forehead. Elliott’s pen never hesitated as he scribbled furiously on the paper.

“That was the story of the spirit warriors,” Old Quil began in a thin tenor voice. “This is the story of the third wife’s sacrifice.

“Many years after Taha Aki gave up his spirit wolf, when he was an old man, trouble began in the north, with the Makahs. Several young women of their tribe had disappeared, and they blamed it on the neighboring wolves, who they feared and mistrusted. The wolf-men could still read each
other’s thoughts while in their wolf forms, just like their ancestors had while in their spirit forms. They knew that none of their number was to blame. Taha Aki tried to pacify the Makah chief, but there was too much fear. Taha Aki did not want to have a war on his hands. He was no longer a warrior to lead his people. He charged his oldest wolf-son, Taha Wi, with finding the true culprit before hostilities began.

“Taha Wi led the five other wolves in his pack on a search through the mountains, looking for any evidence of the missing Makahs. They came across something they had never encountered before—a strange, sweet scent in the forest that burned their noses to the point of pain.”

I shrank a little closer to Julie’s side. I saw the corner of her mouth twitch with humor, and her arm tightened around me.

“They did not know what creature would leave such a scent, but they followed it,” Old Quil continued. His quavering voice did not have the majesty of Billy’s, but it had a strange, fierce edge of urgency about it. My pulse jumped as his words came faster.

“They found faint traces of human scent, and human blood, along the trail. They were sure this was the enemy they were searching for.

“The journey took them so far north that Taha Wi sent half the pack, the younger ones, back to the harbor to report to Taha Aki.

“Taha Wi and his two brothers did not return.

“The younger brothers searched for their elders, but found only silence. Taha Aki mourned for his sons. He wished to avenge his sons’ death, but he was old. He went to the Makah chief in his mourning clothes and told him everything that had happened. The Makah chief believed his grief, and tensions ended between the tribes.

“A year later, two Makah maidens disappeared from their homes on the same night. The Makahs called on the Quileute wolves at once, who found the same sweet stink all through the Makah village. The wolves went on the hunt again.

“Only one came back. He was Yaha Uta, the oldest son of Taka Aki’s third wife, and the youngest in the pack. He brought something with him that had never been seen in all the days of the Quileutes—a strange, cold, stony corpse that he carried in pieces. All who were of Taha Aki’s blood, even those who had never been wolves, could smell the piercing smell of the dead creature. This was the enemy of the Makahs.

“Yaha Uta described what had happened: he and his brothers had found the creature, who looked like a man but was hard as a granite rock, with the two Makah daughters. One girl was already dead, white and bloodless on the ground. The other was in the creature’s arms, his mouth at her throat. She may have been alive when they came upon the hideous scene, but the creature quickly snapped her neck and tossed her lifeless body to the ground when they approached. His white lips were covered in her blood, and his eyes glowed red.

“Yaha Uta described the fierce strength and speed of the creature. One of his brothers quickly became a victim when he underestimated that strength. The creature ripped him apart like a doll. Yaha Uta and his other brother were more wary. They worked together, coming at the creature from the sides, outmaneuvering it. They had to reach the very limits of their wolf strength and speed, something that had never been tested before. The creature was hard as stone and cold as ice. They found that only their teeth could damage it. They began to rip small pieces of the creature apart while it fought them.
“But the creature learned quickly, and soon was matching their maneuvers. It got its hands on Yaha Uta’s brother. Yaha Uta found an opening on the creature’s throat, and he lunged. His teeth tore the head off the creature, but the hands continued to mangle his brother.

“Yaha Uta ripped the creature into unrecognizable chunks, tearing pieces apart in a desperate attempt to save his brother. He was too late, but, in the end, the creature was destroyed.

“Or so they thought. Yaha Uta laid the reeking remains out to be examined by the elders. One severed hand lay beside a piece of the creature’s granite arm. The two pieces touched when the elders poked them with sticks, and the hand reached out towards the arm piece, trying to reassemble itself.

“Horrified, the elders set fire to the remains. A great cloud of choking, vile smoke polluted the air. When there was nothing but ashes, they separated the ashes into many small bags and spread them far and wide—some in the ocean, some in the forest, some in the cliff caverns. Taha Aki wore one bag around his neck, so he would be warned if the creature ever tried to put himself together again.”

Old Quil paused and looked at Billy. Billy pulled out a leather thong from around his neck. Hanging from the end was a small bag, blackened with age. A few people gasped. I might have been one of them.

“They called it The Cold One, the Blood Drinker, and lived in fear that it was not alone. They only had one wolf protector left, young Yaha Uta.

“They did not have long to wait. The creature had a mate, another blood drinker, who came to the Quileutes seeking revenge.

“The stories say that the Cold Woman was the most beautiful thing human eyes had ever seen. She looked like the goddess of the dawn when she entered the village that morning; the sun was shining for once, and it glittered off her white skin and lit the golden hair that flowed down to her knees. Her face was magical in its beauty, her eyes black in her white face. Some fell to their knees to worship her.

“She asked something in a high, piercing voice, in a language no one had ever heard. The people were dumbfounded, not knowing how to answer her. There was none of Taha Aki’s blood among the witnesses but one small boy. He clung to his mother and screamed that the smell was hurting his nose. One of the elders, on his way to council, heard the boy and realized what had come among them. He yelled for the people to run. She killed him first.

“There were twenty witnesses to the Cold Woman’s approach. Two survived, only because she grew distracted by the blood, and paused to sate her thirst. They ran to Taha Aki, who sat in counsel with the other elders, his sons, and his third wife.

“Yaha Uta transformed into his spirit wolf as soon as he heard the news. He went to destroy the blood drinker alone. Taha Aki, his third wife, his sons, and his elders followed behind him.

“At first they could not find the creature, only the evidence of her attack. Bodies lay broken, a few drained of blood, strewn across the road where she’d appeared. Then they heard the screams and hurried to the harbor.

“A handful of the Quileutes had run to the ships for refuge. She swam after them like a shark, and broke the bow of their boat with her incredible strength. When the ship sank, she caught those trying to swim away and broke them, too.
“She saw the great wolf on the shore, and she forgot the fleeing swimmers. She swam so fast she was a blur and came, dripping and glorious, to stand before Yaha Uta. She pointed at him with one white finger and asked another incomprehensible question. Yaha Uta waited.

“It was a close fight. She was not the warrior her mate had been. But Yaha Uta was alone—there was no one to distract her fury from him.

“When Yaha Uta lost, Taha Aki screamed in defiance. He limped forward and shifted into an ancient, white-muzzled wolf. The wolf was old, but this was Taha Aki the Spirit Man, and his rage made him strong. The fight began again.

“Taha Aki’s third wife had just seen her son die before her. Now her husband fought, and she had no hope that he could win. She’d heard every word the witnesses to the slaughter had told the council. She’d heard the story of Yaha Uta’s first victory, and knew that his brother’s diversion had saved him.

“The third wife grabbed a knife from the belt of one of the sons who stood beside her. They were all young sons, not yet men, and she knew they would die when their father failed.

“The third wife ran toward the Cold Woman with the dagger raised high. The Cold Woman smiled, barely distracted from her fight with the old wolf. She had no fear of the weak human woman or the knife that would not even scratch her skin, and she was about to deliver the death blow to Taha Aki.

“And then the third wife did something the Cold Woman did not expect. She fell to her knees at the blood drinker’s feet and plunged the knife into her own heart.

“Blood spurted through the third wife’s fingers and splashed against the Cold Woman. The blood drinker could not resist the lure of the fresh blood leaving the third wife’s body. Instinctively, she turned to the dying woman, for one second entirely consumed by thirst.

“Taha Aki’s teeth closed around her neck.

“That was not the end of the fight, but Taha Aki was not alone now. Watching their mother die, two young sons felt such rage that they sprang forth as their spirit wolves, though they were not yet men. With their father, they finished the creature.

“Taha Aki never rejoined the tribe. He never changed back to a man again. He lay for one day beside the body of the third wife, growling whenever anyone tried to touch her, and then he went into the forest and never returned.

“Trouble with the cold ones was rare from that time on. Taha Aki’s sons guarded the tribe until their sons were old enough to take their places. There were never more than three wolves at a time. It was enough. Occasionally a blood drinker would come through these lands, but they were taken by surprise, not expecting the wolves. Sometimes a wolf would die, but never were they decimated again like that first time. They’d learned how to fight the cold ones, and they passed the knowledge on, wolf mind to wolf mind, spirit to spirit, father to son.

“Time passed, and the descendants of Taha Aki no longer became wolves when they reached manhood. Only in a great while, if a cold one was near, would the wolves return. The cold ones always came in ones and twos, and the pack stayed small.

“A bigger coven came, and your own great-grandfathers prepared to fight them off. But the leader spoke to Ephraim Black as if he were a man, and promised not to harm the Quileutes. His strange
yellow eyes gave some proof to his claim that they were not the same as other blood drinkers. The wolves were outnumbered; there was no need for the cold ones to offer a treaty when they could have won the fight. Ephraim accepted. They’ve stayed true to their side, though their presence does tend to draw in others.

“And their numbers have forced a larger pack than the tribe has ever seen,” Old Quil said, and for one moment his black eyes, all but buried in the wrinkles of skin folded around them, seemed to rest on me. “Except, of course, in Taha Aki’s time,” he said, and then he sighed. “And so the sons—and daughters—of our tribe again carry the burden and share the sacrifice their fathers endured before them.”

All was silent for a long moment. The living descendants of magic and legend stared at one another across the fire with sadness in their eyes. All but one.


Across the dying fire, Seth Clearwater—his eyes wide with adulation for the fraternity of tribal protectors—nodded his agreement.

Billy chuckled, low and long, and the magic seemed to fade into the glowing embers. Suddenly, it was just a circle of friends again. Jared flicked a small stone at Quil, and everyone laughed when it made him jump. Low conversations murmured around us, teasing and casual.

Leah Clearwater’s eyes did not open. I thought I saw something sparkling on her cheek like a tear, but when I looked back a moment later it was gone.

Neither Julie nor I spoke. She was so still beside me, her breath so deep and even, that I thought she might be close to sleep.

My mind was a thousand years away. I was not thinking of Yaha Uta or the other wolves, or the beautiful Cold Woman—I could picture her only too easily. No, I was thinking of someone outside the magic altogether. I was trying to imagine the face of the unnamed woman who had saved the entire tribe, the third wife.

Just a human woman, with no special gifts or powers. Physically weaker and slower than any of the monsters in the story. But she had been the key, the solution. She’d saved her husband, her young sons, her tribe.

I wish they’d remembered her name.…

Something shook my arm.

“C’mon, Bells,” Julie said in my ear. “We’re here.”

I blinked, confused because the fire seemed to have disappeared. I glared into the unexpected darkness, trying to make sense of my surroundings. It took me a minute to realize that I was no longer on the cliff. Julie and I were alone. I was still under her arm, but I wasn’t on the ground anymore.

How did I get in Julie’s car?

“Oh, crap!” I gasped as I realized that I had fallen asleep. “How late is it? Dang it, where’s that stupid phone?” I patted my pockets, frantic and coming up empty.

“Easy. It’s not even midnight yet. And I already called her for you. Look—she’s waiting there.”
“Midnight?” I repeated stupidly, still disoriented. I stared into the darkness, and my heartbeat picked up when my eyes made out the shape of the Volvo, thirty yards away. I reached for the door handle.

“Here,” Julie said, and she put a small shape into my other hand. The phone.

“You called Edythe for me?”

My eyes were adjusted enough to see the bright gleam of Julie’s smile. “I figured if I played nice, I’d get more time with you.”

“Thanks, Jules,” I said, touched. “Really, thank you. And thanks for inviting me tonight. That was…” Words failed me. “Wow. That was something else.”

“And you didn’t even stay up to watch me swallow a cow.” She laughed. “No, I’m glad you liked it. It was… nice for me. Having you there.”

There was a movement in the dark distance—something pale ghosting against the black trees. Pacing?

“Yeah, she’s not so patient, is she?” Julie said, noticing my distraction. “Go ahead. But come back soon, okay?”

“Sure, Jules,” I promised, cracking the car door open. Cold air washed across my legs and made me shiver.

“Sleep tight, Bells. Don’t worry about anything—I’ll be watching out for you tonight.”

I paused, one foot on the ground. “No, Jules. Get some rest, I’ll be fine.”

“Sure, sure,” she said, but she sounded more patronizing than agreeing.

“’Night, Jules. Thanks.”

“’Night, Bella,” she whispered as I hurried into the darkness.

Edythe caught me at the boundary line.

“Bella,” she said, relief strong in her voice; her arms wound tightly around me.

“Hi. Sorry I’m so late. I fell asleep and—”

“I know. Julie explained.” She started toward the car, and I staggered woodenly at her side. “Are you tired? I could carry you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Let’s get you home and in bed. Did you have a nice time?”

“Yeah—it was amazing, Edythe. I wish you could have come. I can’t even explain it. Jules’s dad told us the old legends and it was like… like magic.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it. After you’ve slept.”

“I won’t get it right,” I said, and then I yawned hugely.
Edythe chuckled. She opened my door for me, lifted me in, and buckled my seat belt around me.

Bright lights flashed on and swept across us. I waved toward Julie’s headlights, but I didn’t know if she saw the gesture.

That night—after I’d gotten past Charlie, who didn’t give me as much trouble as I’d expected because Julie had called him, too—instead of collapsing in bed right away, I leaned out the open window while I waited for Edythe to come back. The night was surprisingly cold, almost wintry. I hadn’t noticed it at all on the windy cliffs; I imagined that had less to do with the fire than it did with sitting next to Julie.

Icy droplets spattered against my face as the rain began to fall.

It was too dark to see much besides the black triangles of the spruces leaning and shaking with the wind. But I strained my eyes anyway, searching for other shapes in the storm. A pale silhouette, moving like a ghost through the black… or maybe the shadowy outline of an enormous wolf…. My eyes were too weak.

Then there was a movement in the night, right beside me. Edythe slid through my open window, her hands colder than the rain.

“Is Julie out there?” I asked, shivering as Edythe pulled me into the circle of her arm.

“Yes… somewhere. And Earnest’s on his way home.”

I sighed. “It’s so cold and wet. This is silly.” I shivered again.

She chuckled. “It’s only cold to you, Bella.”

It was cold in my dream that night, too, maybe because I slept in Edythe’s arms. But I dreamt I was outside in the storm, the wind whipping my hair in my face and blinding my eyes. I stood on the rocky crescent of First Beach, trying to understand the quickly moving shapes I could only dimly see in the darkness at the shore’s edge. At first, there was nothing but a flash of white and black, darting toward each other and dancing away. And then, as if the moon had suddenly broken from the clouds, I could see everything.

Rosalie, her hair swinging wet and golden down to the back of her knees, was lunging at an enormous wolf—its muzzle shot through with silver—that I instinctively recognized as Billy Black.

I broke into a run, but found myself moving in the frustrating slow motion of dreamers. I tried to scream to them, to tell them to stop, but my voice was stolen by the wind, and I could make no sound. I waved my arms, hoping to catch their attention. Something flashed in my hand, and I noticed for the first time that my right hand wasn’t empty.

I held a long, sharp blade, ancient and silver, crusted in dried, blackened blood.

I cringed away from the knife, and my eyes snapped open to the quiet darkness of my bedroom. The first thing I realized was that I was not alone, and I turned to bury my face in Edythe’s chest, knowing the sweet scent of her skin would chase the nightmare away more effectively than anything else.
“Did I wake you?” she whispered. There was the sound of paper, the ruffling of pages, and a faint thump as something light fell to the wooden floor.

“No,” I mumbled, sighing in contentment as her arms tightened around me. “I had a bad dream.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

I shook my head. “Too tired. Maybe in the morning, if I remember.”

I felt a silent laugh shake through her.

“In the morning,” she agreed.

“What were you reading?” I muttered, not really awake at all.

“Wuthering Heights,” she said.

I frowned sleepily. “I thought you didn’t like that book.”

“You left it out,” she murmured, her soft voice lulling me toward unconsciousness. “Besides… the more time I spend with you, the more human emotions seem comprehensible to me. I’m discovering that I can sympathize with Heathcliff in ways I didn’t think possible before.”

“Mmm,” I sighed.

She said something else, something low, but I was already asleep.

The next morning dawned pearl gray and still. Edythe asked me about my dream, but I couldn’t get a handle on it. I only remembered that I was cold, and that I was glad she was there when I woke up. She kissed me, long enough to get my pulse racing, and then headed home to change and get her car.

I dressed quickly, low on options. Whoever had ransacked my hamper had critically impaired my wardrobe. If it wasn’t so frightening, it would be seriously annoying.

As I was about to head down for breakfast, I noticed my battered copy of Wuthering Heights lying open on the floor where Edythe had dropped it in the night, holding her place the way the damaged binding always held mine.

I picked it up curiously, trying to remember what she’d said. Something about feeling sympathy for Heathcliff, of all people. That couldn’t be right; I must have dreamed that part.

Three words on the open page caught my eye, and I bent my head to read the paragraph more closely. It was Heathcliff speaking, and I knew the passage well.

And there you see the distinction between our feelings: had he been in my place and I in his, though I hated him with a hatred that turned my life to gall, I never would have raised a hand against him. You may look incredulous, if you please! I never would have banished him from her society as long as she desired his. The moment her regard ceased, I would have torn his heart out, and drank his blood! But, till then—if you don’t believe me, you don’t know me—till then, I would have died by inches before I touched a single hair of his head!
The three words that had caught my eye were “drank his blood.”

I shuddered.

Yes, surely I must have dreamt that Edythe said anything positive about Heathcliff. And this page was probably not the page she’d been reading. The book could have fallen open to any page.
“I HAVE FORESEEN…,” ARCHIE BEGAN IN AN OMINOUS tone.

Edythe threw an elbow toward his ribs, which he neatly dodged.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Edythe is making me do this. But I did foresee that you would be more difficult if I surprised you.”

We were walking to the car after school, and I was completely clueless as to what he was talking about.

“In English?” I requested.

“Don’t be a baby about this. No tantrums.”

“Now I’m scared.”

“So you’re—I mean we’re—having a graduation party. It’s no big thing. Nothing to freak out over. But I saw that you would freak out if I tried to make it a surprise party”—he danced out of the way as Edythe reached over to muss his hair—“and Edythe said I had to tell you. But it’s nothing. Promise.”

I sighed heavily. “Is there any point in arguing?”

“None at all.”

“Okay, Archie. I’ll be there. And I’ll hate every minute of it. Promise.”

“That’s the spirit! By the way, I love my gift. You shouldn’t have.”

“Archie, I didn’t!”

“Oh, I know that. But you will.”

I racked my brains in panic, trying to remember what I’d ever decided to get him for graduation that he might have seen.

“Amazing,” Edythe muttered. “How can someone so tiny be so annoying?”

Archie laughed. “It’s a talent.”

“Couldn’t you have waited a few weeks to tell me about this?” I asked petulantly. “Now I’ll just be stressed that much longer.”

Archie frowned at me.

“Bella,” he said slowly. “Do you know what day it is?”

“Monday?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes. It is Monday… the fourth.” He grabbed my elbow, spun me halfway around, and pointed toward a big yellow poster taped to the gym door. There, in sharp black letters, was the date of graduation. Exactly one week from today.
“It’s the fourth? Of June? Are you sure?”

Neither one answered. Archie just shook his head sadly, feigning disappointment, and Edythe’s eyebrows lifted.

“It can’t be! How did that happen?” I tried to count backwards in my head, but I couldn’t figure out where the days had gone.

I felt like someone had kicked my legs out from under me. The weeks of stress, of worry… somehow in the middle of all my obsessing over the time, my time had disappeared. My space for sorting through it all, for making plans, had vanished. I was out of time.

And I wasn’t ready.

I didn’t know how to do this. How to say goodbye to Charlie and Renée… to Julie… to being human.

I knew exactly what I wanted, but I was suddenly terrified of getting it.

In theory, I was anxious, even eager to trade mortality for immortality. After all, it was the key to staying with Edythe forever. And then there was the fact that I was being hunted by known and unknown parties. I’d rather not sit around, helpless and delicious, waiting for one of them to catch up with me.

In theory, that all made sense.

In practice… being human was all I knew. The future beyond that was a big, dark abyss that I couldn’t know until I leaped into it.

This simple knowledge, today’s date—which was so obvious that I must have been subconsciously repressing it—made the deadline I’d been impatiently counting down toward feel like a date with the firing squad.

In a vague way, I was aware of Edythe holding the car door for me, of Archie chattering from the backseat, of the rain hammering against the windshield. Edythe seemed to realize I was only there in body; she didn’t try to pull me out of my abstraction. Or maybe she did, and I was past noticing.

We ended up at my house, where Edythe led me to the sofa and pulled me down next to her. I stared out the window, into the liquid gray haze, and tried to find where my resolve had gone. Why was I panicking now? I’d known the deadline was coming. Why should it frighten me that it was here?

I don’t know how long she let me stare out the window in silence. But the rain was disappearing into darkness when it was finally too much for her.

She put her cold hands on either side of my face and fixed her golden eyes on mine.

“Would you please tell me what you are thinking? Before I go mad?”

What could I say to her? That I was a coward? I searched for words.

“Your lips are white. Talk, Bella.”

I exhaled in a big gust. How long had I been holding my breath?

“The date took me off guard,” I whispered. “That’s all.”
She waited, her face full of worry and skepticism.

I tried to explain. “I’m not sure what to do… what to tell Charlie… what to say… how to…” My voice trailed off.

“This isn’t about the party?”

I frowned. “No. But thanks for reminding me.”

The rain was louder as she read my face.

“You’re not ready,” she whispered.

“I am,” I lied immediately, a reflex reaction. I could tell she saw through it, so I took a deep breath, and told the truth. “I have to be.”

“You don’t have to be anything.”

I could feel the panic surfacing in my eyes as I mouthed the reasons. “Victoria, Jane, Caius, whoever was in my room…!”

“All the more reason to wait.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Edythe!”

She pressed her hands more tightly to my face and spoke with slow deliberation.

“Bella. Not one of us had a choice. You’ve seen what it’s done… to Rosalie especially. We’ve all struggled, trying to reconcile ourselves with something we had no control over. I won’t let it be that way for you. You will have a choice.”

“I’ve already made my choice.”

“You aren’t going through with this because a sword is hanging over your head. We will take care of the problems, and I will take care of you,” she vowed. “When we’re through it, and there is nothing forcing your hand, then you can decide to join me, if you still want to. But not because you’re afraid. You won’t be forced into this.”

“Carlisle promised,” I mumbled, contrary out of habit. “After graduation.”

“Not until you’re ready,” she said in a sure voice. “And definitely not while you feel threatened.”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have it in me to argue; I couldn’t seem to find my commitment at the moment.

“There.” She kissed my forehead. “Nothing to worry about.”

I laughed a shaky laugh. “Nothing but impending doom.”

“Trust me.”

“I do.”

She was still watching my face, waiting for me to relax.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.
“Anything.”

I hesitated, biting my lip, and then asked a different question than the one I was worried about.

“What am I getting Archie for graduation?”

She snickered. “It looked like you were getting us both concert tickets—”

“That’s right!” I was so relieved, I almost smiled. “The concert in Tacoma. I saw an ad in the paper last week, and I thought it would be something you’d like, since you said it was a good CD.”

“It’s a great idea. Thank you.”

“I hope it’s not sold out.”

“It’s the thought that counts. I ought to know.”

I sighed.

“There’s something else you meant to ask,” she said.

I frowned. “You’re good.”

“I have lots of practice reading your face. Ask me.”

I closed my eyes and leaned into her, hiding my face against her chest. “You don’t want me to be a vampire.”

“No, I don’t,” she said softly, and then she waited for more. “That’s not a question,” she prompted after a moment.

“Well… I was worrying about why you feel that way.”

“Worrying?” She picked out the word with surprise.

“Would you tell me why? The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?”

She hesitated for a minute. “If I answer your question, will you then explain your question?”

I nodded, my face still hidden.

She took a deep breath before she answered. “You could do so much better, Bella. I know that you believe I have a soul, but I’m not entirely convinced on that point, and to risk yours…” She shook her head slowly. “For me to allow this—to let you become what I am just so that I’ll never have to lose you—is the most selfish act I can imagine. I want it more than anything, for myself. But for you, I want so much more. Giving in—it feels criminal. It’s the most selfish thing I’ll ever do, even if I live forever.

“If there were any way for me to become human for you—no matter what the price was, I would pay it.”

I sat very still, absorbing this.

Edythe thought she was being selfish.

I felt the smile slowly spread across my face.
“So… it’s not that you’re afraid you won’t… like me as much when I’m different—when I’m not soft and warm and I don’t smell the same? You really do want to keep me, no matter how I turn out?”

She exhaled sharply. “You were worried I wouldn’t like you?” she demanded. Then, before I could answer, she was laughing. “Bella, for a fairly intuitive person, you can be so obtuse!”

I knew she would think it silly, but I was relieved. If she really wanted me, I could get through the rest… somehow. Selfish suddenly seemed like a beautiful word.

“I don’t think you realize how much easier it will be for me, Bella,” she said, the echo of her humor still there in her voice, “when I don’t have to concentrate all the time on not killing you. Certainly, there are things I’ll miss. This for one…”

She stared into my eyes as she stroked my cheek, and I felt the blood rush up to color my skin. She laughed gently.

“And the sound of your heart,” she continued, more serious but still smiling a little. “It’s the most significant sound in my world. I’m so attuned to it now, I swear I could pick it out from miles away. But neither of these things matter. This,” she said, taking my face in her hands. “You. That’s what I’m keeping. You’ll always be my Bella, you’ll just be a little more durable.”

I sighed and let my eyes close in contentment, resting there in her hands.

“Now will you answer a question for me? The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?” she asked.

“Of course,” I answered at once, my eyes opening wide with surprise. What would she want to know?

She spoke the words slowly. “You don’t want to be my wife.”

My heart stopped, and then broke into a sprint. A cold sweat dewed on the back of my neck and my hands turned to ice.

She waited, watching and listening to my reaction.

“That’s not a question,” I finally whispered.

She looked down, her lashes casting long shadows across her cheekbones, and dropped her hands from my face to pick up my frozen left hand. She played with my fingers while she spoke.

“I was worrying about why you felt that way.”

I tried to swallow. “That’s not a question, either,” I whispered.

“Please, Bella?”

“The truth?” I asked, only mouthing the words.

“Of course. I can take it, whatever it is.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re going to laugh at me.”

Her eyes flashed up to mine, shocked. “Laugh? I cannot imagine that.”

“You’ll see,” I muttered, and then I sighed. My face went from white to scarlet in a sudden blaze of
chagrin. “Okay, fine! I’m sure this will sound like some big joke to you, but really! It’s just so… so… so embarrassing!” I confessed, and I hid my face against her chest again.

There was a brief pause.

“I’m not following you.”

I tilted my head back and glared at her, embarrassment making me lash out, belligerent.

“I’m not that girl, Edythe. The one who gets married right out of high school like some small-town hick who got knocked up by her boyfriend! Do you know what people would think? Do you realize what century this is? People don’t just get married at eighteen! Not smart people, not responsible, mature people! I wasn’t going to be that girl! That’s not who I am…” I trailed off, losing steam.

Edythe’s face was impossible to read as she thought through my answer.

“That’s all?” she finally asked.

I blinked. “Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s not that you were… more eager for immortality itself than for just me?”

And then, though I’d predicted that she would laugh, I was suddenly the one having hysterics.

“Edythe!” I gasped out between the paroxysms of giggles. “And here… I always… thought that… you were… so much… smarter than me!”

She took me in her arms, and I could feel that she was laughing with me.

“Edythe,” I said, managing to speak more clearly with a little effort, “there’s no point to forever without you. I wouldn’t want one day without you.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” she said.

“Still… it doesn’t change anything.”

“It’s nice to understand, though. And I do understand your perspective, Bella, truly I do. But I’d like it very much if you’d try to consider mine.”

I’d sobered up by then, so I nodded and struggled to keep the frown off my face.

Her liquid gold eyes turned hypnotic as they held mine.

“You see, Bella, I was always that girl. In my world, I was already a woman. I already knew I didn’t have the same desires as other ladies my age, being utterly disinterested in marriage—to a man, at least…. And I was aware enough to keep that quiet. But if I had found…” She paused, cocking her head to the side. “I was going to say if I had found someone, but that won’t do. If I had found you, there isn’t a doubt in my mind how I would have proceeded. I was that girl, who would have—as soon as I discovered that you were what I was looking for—gotten down on one knee and endeavored to secure your hand, law and society be damned. I would have wanted you for eternity, even when the word didn’t have quite the same connotations.”

She smiled her crooked smile at me.

I stared at her with my eyes frozen wide.
“Breathe, Bella,” she reminded me, smiling.

I breathed.

“Can you see my side, Bella, even a little bit?”

And for one second, I could. I saw myself in a long skirt and a high-necked lace blouse with my hair piled up on my head. I saw Edythe looking dashing in a light suit with a bouquet of wildflowers in her hand, sitting beside me on a porch swing.

I shook my head and swallowed. I was just having *Anne of Green Gables* flashbacks.

“The thing is, Edythe,” I said in a shaky voice, avoiding the question, “in my mind, *marriage* and *eternity* are not mutually exclusive or mutually inclusive concepts. And since we’re living in my world for the moment, maybe we should go with the times, if you know what I mean.”

“But on the other hand,” she countered, “you will soon be leaving time behind you altogether. So why should the transitory customs of one local culture affect the decision so much?”

I pursed my lips. “*When in Rome?*”

She laughed at me. “You don’t have to say yes or no today, Bella. It’s good to understand both sides, though, don’t you think?”

“So your condition…?”

“Is still in effect. I do see your point, Bella, but if you want me to change you myself….?”

“Dum, dum, dah-dum,” I hummed under my breath. I was going for the wedding march, but it sort of sounded like a dirge.

Time continued to move too fast.

That night flew by dreamlessly, and then it was morning and graduation was staring me in the face. I had a pile of studying to do for my finals that I knew I wouldn’t get halfway through in the few days I had left.

When I came down for breakfast, Charlie was already gone. He’d left the paper on the table, and that reminded me that I had some shopping to do. I hoped the ad for the concert was still running; I needed the phone number to get the stupid tickets. It didn’t seem like much of a gift now that all the surprise was gone. Of course, trying to surprise Archie wasn’t the brightest plan to begin with.

I meant to flip right back to the entertainment section, but the thick black headline caught my attention. I felt a thrill of fear as I leaned closer to read the front-page story.

**SEATTLE TERRORIZED BY SLAYINGS**

It’s been less than a decade since the city of Seattle was the hunting ground for the most prolific
serial killer in U.S. history. Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer, was convicted of the murders of 48 women.

And now a beleaguered Seattle must face the possibility that it could be harboring an even more horrifying monster at this very moment.

The police are not calling the recent rash of homicides and disappearances the work of a serial killer. Not yet, at least. They are reluctant to believe so much carnage could be the work of one individual. This killer—if, in fact, it is one person—would then be responsible for 39 linked homicides and disappearances within the last three months alone. In comparison, Ridgway’s 48-count murder spree was scattered over a 21-year period. If these deaths can be linked to one man, then this is the most violent rampage of serial murder in American history.

The police are leaning instead toward the theory that gang activity is involved. This theory is supported by the sheer number of victims, and by the fact that there seems to be no pattern in the choice of victims.

From Jack the Ripper to Ted Bundy, the targets of serial killings are usually connected by similarities in age, gender, race, or a combination of the three. The victims of this crime wave range in age from 15-year-old honor student Amanda Reed, to 67-year-old retired postman Omar Jenks. The linked deaths include a nearly even 18 women and 21 men. The victims are racially diverse: Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics and Asians.

The selection appears random. The motive seems to be killing for no other reason than to kill.

So why even consider the idea of a serial killer?

There are enough similarities in the modus operandi to rule out unrelated crimes. Every victim discovered has been burned to the extent that dental records were necessary for identification. The use of some kind of accelerant, like gasoline or alcohol, seems to be indicated in the conflagrations; however, no traces of any accelerant have yet been found. All of the bodies have been carelessly dumped with no attempt at concealment.

More gruesome yet, most of the remains show evidence of brutal violence—bones crushed and snapped by some kind of tremendous pressure—which medical examiners believe occurred before the time of death, though these conclusions are difficult to be sure of, considering the state of the evidence.

Another similarity that points to the possibility of a serial: every crime is perfectly clean of evidence, aside from the remains themselves. Not a fingerprint, not a tire tread mark nor a foreign hair is left behind. There have been no sightings of any suspect in the disappearances.

Then there are the disappearances themselves—hardly low profile by any means. None of the victims are what could be viewed as easy targets. None are runaways or the homeless, who vanish so easily and are seldom reported missing. Victims have vanished from their homes, from a fourth-story apartment, from a health club, from a wedding reception. Perhaps the most astounding: 30-year-old amateur boxer Robert Walsh entered a movie theater with a date; a few minutes into the movie, the woman realized that he was not in his seat. His body was found only three hours later when fire fighters were called to the scene of a burning trash Dumpster, twenty miles away.

Another pattern is present in the slayings: all of the victims disappeared at night.

And the most alarming pattern? Acceleration. Six of the homicides were committed in the first month, 11 in the second. Twenty-two have occurred in the last 10 days alone. And the police are
no closer to finding the responsible party than they were after the first charred body was discovered.

The evidence is conflicting, the pieces horrifying. A vicious new gang or a wildly active serial killer? Or something else the police haven’t yet conceived of?

Only one conclusion is indisputable: something hideous is stalking Seattle.

It took me three tries to read the last sentence, and I realized the problem was my shaking hands.

“Bella?”

Focused as I was, Edythe’s voice, though quiet and not totally unexpected, made me gasp and whirl.

She was leaning in the doorway, her eyebrows pulled together. Then she was suddenly at my side, taking my hand.

“Did I startle you? I’m sorry. I did knock….”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “Have you seen this?” I pointed to the paper.

A frown creased her forehead.

“I hadn’t seen today’s news yet. But I knew it was getting worse. We’re going to have to do something… quickly.”

I didn’t like that. I hated any of them taking chances, and whatever or whoever was in Seattle was truly beginning to frighten me. But the idea of the Volturi coming was just as scary.

“What does Archie say?”

“That’s the problem.” Her frown hardened. “He can’t see anything… though we’ve made up our minds half a dozen times to check it out. He’s starting to lose confidence. He feels like he’s missing too much these days, that something’s wrong. That maybe his vision is slipping away.”

My eyes were wide. “Can that happen?”

“Who knows? No one’s ever done a study… but I really doubt it. These things tend to intensify over time. Look at Aro and Jane.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Self-fulfilling prophecy, I think. We keep waiting for Archie to see something so we can go… and he doesn’t see anything because we won’t really go until he does. So he can’t see us there. Maybe we’ll have to do it blind.”

I shuddered. “No.”

“Did you have a strong desire to attend class today? We’re only a couple of days from finals; they won’t be giving us anything new.”

“I think I can live without school for a day. What are we doing?”
“I want to talk to Jasper.”

Jasper, again. It was strange. In the Cullen family, Jasper was always a little on the fringe, part of things but never the center of them. It was my unspoken assumption that he was only there for Archie. I had the sense that he would follow Archie anywhere, but that this lifestyle was not his first choice. The fact that he was less committed to it than the others was probably why he had more difficulty keeping it up.

At any rate, I’d never seen Edythe feel dependent on Jasper. I wondered again what she’d meant about Jasper’s expertise. I really didn’t know much about Jasper’s history, just that he had come from somewhere in the south before Archie found him. For some reason, Edythe had always shied away from any questions about her newest brother. And I’d always been too intimidated by the tall, blond vampire who looked like a brooding movie star to ask him outright.

When we got to the house, we found Carlisle, Earnest, and Jasper watching the news intently, though the sound was so low that it was unintelligible to me. Archie was perched on the bottom step of the grand staircase, his face in his hands and his expression discouraged. As we walked in, Eleanor ambled through the kitchen door, seeming perfectly at ease. Nothing ever bothered Eleanor.

“Hey, Edythe. Ditching, Bella?” She grinned at me.

“We both are,” Edythe reminded her.

Eleanor laughed. “Yes, but it’s her first time through high school. She might miss something.”

Edythe rolled her eyes, but otherwise ignored her favorite sister. She tossed the paper to Carlisle.

“Did you see that they’re considering a serial killer now?” she asked.

Carlisle sighed. “They’ve had two specialists debating that possibility on CNN all morning.”

“We can’t let this go on.”

“Let’s go now,” Eleanor said with sudden enthusiasm. “I’m dead bored.”

A hiss echoed down the stairway from upstairs.

“She’s such a pessimist,” Eleanor muttered to herself.

Edythe agreed with Eleanor. “We’ll have to go sometime.”

Rosalie appeared at the top of the stairs and descended slowly. Her face was smooth, expressionless.

Carlisle was shaking his head. “I’m concerned. We’ve never involved ourselves in this kind of thing before. It’s not our business. We aren’t the Volturi.”

“I don’t want the Volturi to have to come here,” Edythe said. “It gives us so much less reaction time.”

“And all those innocent humans in Seattle,” Earnest murmured. “It’s not right to let them die this way.”

“I know,” Carlisle sighed.
“Oh,” Edythe said sharply, turning her head slightly to look at Jasper. “I didn’t think of that. I see. You’re right, that has to be it. Well, that changes everything.”

I wasn’t the only one who stared at her in confusion, but I might have been the only one who didn’t look slightly annoyed.

“I think you’d better explain to the others,” Edythe said to Jasper. “What could be the purpose of this?” Edythe started to pace, staring at the floor, lost in thought.

I hadn’t seen him get up, but Archie was there beside me. “What is she rambling about?” he asked Jasper. “What are you thinking?”

Jasper didn’t seem to enjoy the spotlight. He hesitated, reading every face in the circle—for everyone had moved in to hear what he would say—and then his eyes paused on my face.

“You’re confused,” he said to me, his deep voice very quiet.

There was no question in his assumption. Jasper knew what I was feeling, what everyone was feeling.

“We’re all confused,” Eleanor grumbled.

“You can afford the time to be patient,” Jasper told him. “Bella should understand this, too. She’s one of us now.”

His words took me by surprise. As little as I’d had to do with Jasper, especially since my last birthday when he’d tried to kill me, I hadn’t realized that he thought of me that way.

“How much do you know about me, Bella?” Jasper asked.

Eleanor sighed theatrically, and plopped down on the couch to wait with exaggerated impatience.

“Not much,” I admitted.

Jasper stared at Edythe, who looked up to meet his gaze.

“No,” Edythe answered his thought. “I’m sure you can understand why I haven’t told her that story. But I suppose she needs to hear it now.”

Jasper nodded thoughtfully, and then started to roll up the arm of his ivory sweater.

I watched, curious and confused, trying to figure out what he was doing. He held his wrist under the edge of the lampshade beside him, close to the light of the naked bulb, and traced his finger across a raised crescent mark on the pale skin.

It took me a minute to understand why the shape looked strangely familiar.

“Oh,” I breathed as realization hit. “Jasper, you have a scar exactly like mine.”

I held out my hand, the silvery crescent more prominent against my cream skin than against his alabaster.

Jasper smiled faintly. “I have a lot of scars like yours, Bella.”

Jasper’s face was unreadable as he pushed the sleeve of his thin sweater higher up his arm. At first my eyes could not make sense of the texture that was layered thickly across the skin. Curved half-
moons crisscrossed in a feathery pattern that was only visible, white on white as it was, because the bright glow of the lamp beside him threw the slightly raised design into relief, with shallow shadows outlining the shapes. And then I grasped that the pattern was made of individual crescents like the one on his wrist… the one on my hand.

I looked back at my own small, solitary scar—and remembered how I’d received it. I stared at the shape of James’s teeth, embossed forever on my skin.

And then I gasped, staring up at him. “Jasper, what happened to you?”
“THE SAME THING THAT HAPPENED TO YOUR HAND,” Jasper answered in a quiet voice. “Repeated a thousand times.” He laughed a little ruefully and brushed at his arm. “Our venom is the only thing that leaves a scar.”

“Why?” I breathed in horror, feeling rude but unable to stop staring at his subtly ravaged skin.

“I didn’t have quite the same… upbringing as my adopted siblings here. My beginning was something else entirely.” His voice turned hard as he finished.

I gaped at him, appalled.

“Before I tell you my story,” Jasper said, “you must understand that there are places in our world, Bella, where the life span of the never-aging is measured in weeks, and not centuries.”

The others had heard this before. Carlisle and Eleanor turned their attention to the TV again.

Archie moved silently to sit at Earnest’s feet. But Edythe was just as absorbed as I was; I could feel her eyes on my face, reading every flicker of emotion.

“To really understand why, you have to look at the world from a different perspective. You have to imagine the way it looks to the powerful, the greedy… the perpetually thirsty.

“You see, there are places in this world that are more desirable to us than others. Places where we can be less restrained, and still avoid detection.

“Picture, for instance, a map of the western hemisphere. Picture on it every human life as a small red dot. The thicker the red, the more easily we—well, those who exist this way—can feed without attracting notice.”

I shuddered at the image in my head, at the word feed. But Jasper wasn’t worried about frightening me, not overprotective like Edythe always was. He went on without a pause.

“Not that the covens in the South care much for what the humans notice or do not. It’s the Volturi that keep them in check. They are the only ones the southern covens fear. If not for the Volturi, the rest of us would be quickly exposed.”

I frowned at the way he pronounced the name—with respect, almost gratitude. The idea of the Volturi as the good guys in any sense was hard to accept.

“The North is, by comparison, very civilized. Mostly we are nomads here who enjoy the day as well as the night, who allow humans to interact with us unsuspectingly—anonymity is important to us all.

“It’s a different world in the South. The immortals there come out only at night. They spend the day plotting their next move, or anticipating their enemy’s. Because it has been war in the South, constant war for centuries, with never one moment of truce. The covens there barely note the existence of humans, except as soldiers notice a herd of cows by the wayside—food for the taking. They only hide from the notice of the herd because of the Volturi.”

“But what are they fighting for?” I asked.

Jasper smiled. “Remember the map with the red dots?”
He waited, so I nodded.

“They fight for control of the thickest red.

“You see, it occurred to someone once that, if he were the only vampire in, let’s say Mexico City, well then, he could feed every night, twice, three times, and no one would ever notice. He plotted ways to get rid of the competition.

“Others had the same idea. Some came up with more effective tactics than others.

“But the most effective tactic was invented by a fairly young vampire named Benito. The first anyone ever heard of him, he came down from somewhere north of Dallas and massacred the two small covens that shared the area near Houston. Two nights later, he took on the much stronger clan of allies that claimed Monterrey in northern Mexico. Again, he won.”

“How did he win?” I asked with wary curiosity.

“Benito had created an army of newborn vampires. He was the first one to think of it, and, in the beginning, he was unstoppable. Very young vampires are volatile, wild, and almost impossible to control. One newborn can be reasoned with, taught to restrain himself, but ten, fifteen together are a nightmare. They’ll turn on each other as easily as on the enemy you point them at. Benito had to keep making more as they fought amongst themselves, and as the covens he decimated took more than half his force down before they lost.

“You see, though newborns are dangerous, they are still possible to defeat if you know what you’re doing. They’re incredibly powerful physically, for the first year or so, and if they’re allowed to bring strength to bear they can crush an older vampire with ease. But they are slaves to their instincts, and thus predictable. Usually, they have no skill in fighting, only muscle and ferocity. And in this case, overwhelming numbers.

“The vampires in southern Mexico realized what was coming for them, and they did the only thing they could think of to counteract Benito. They made armies of their own….

“All hell broke loose—and I mean that more literally than you can possibly imagine. We immortals have our histories, too, and this particular war will never be forgotten. Of course, it was not a good time to be human in Mexico, either.”

I shuddered.

“When the body count reached epidemic proportions—in fact, your histories blame a disease for the population slump—the Volturi finally stepped in. The entire guard came together and sought out every newborn in the bottom half of North America. Benito was entrenched in Puebla, building his army as quickly as he could in order to take on the prize—Mexico City. The Volturi started with him, and then moved on to the rest.

“Anyone who was found with the newborns was executed immediately, and, since everyone was trying to protect themselves from Benito, Mexico was emptied of vampires for a time.

“The Volturi were cleaning house for almost a year. This was another chapter of our history that will always be remembered, though there were very few witnesses left to speak of what it was like. I spoke to someone once who had, from a distance, watched what happened when they visited Culiacán.”

Jasper shuddered. I realized that I had never before seen him either afraid or horrified. This was a first.
“It was enough that the fever for conquest did not spread from the South. The rest of the world stayed sane. We owe the Volturi for our present way of life.

“But when the Volturi went back to Italy, the survivors were quick to stake their claims in the South.

“It didn’t take long before covens began to dispute again. There was a lot of bad blood, if you’ll forgive the expression. Vendettas abounded. The idea of newborns was already there, and some were not able to resist. However, the Volturi had not been forgotten, and the southern covens were more careful this time. The newborns were selected from the human pool with more care, and given more training. They were used circumspectly, and the humans remained, for the most part, oblivious. Their creators gave the Volturi no reason to return.

“The wars resumed, but on a smaller scale. Every now and then, someone would go too far, speculation would begin in the human newspapers, and the Volturi would return and clean out the city. But they let the others, the careful ones, continue.…”

Jasper was staring off into space.

“That’s how you were changed.” My realization was a whisper.

“Yes,” he agreed. “When I was human, I lived in Houston, Texas. I was almost seventeen years old when I joined the Confederate Army in 1861. I lied to the recruiters and told them I was twenty. I was tall enough to get away with it.

“My military career was short-lived, but very promising. People always… liked me, listened to what I had to say. My father said it was charisma. Of course, now I know it was probably something more. But, whatever the reason, I was promoted quickly through the ranks, over older, more experienced men. The Confederate Army was new and scrambling to organize itself, so that provided opportunities, as well. By the first battle of Galveston—well, it was more of a skirmish, really—I was the youngest major in Texas, not even acknowledging my real age.

“I was placed in charge of evacuating the women and children from the city when the Union’s mortar boats reached the harbor. It took a day to prepare them, and then I left with the first column of civilians to convey them to Houston.

“I remember that one night very clearly.

“We reached the city after dark. I stayed only long enough to make sure the entire party was safely situated. As soon as that was done, I got myself a fresh horse, and I headed back to Galveston. There wasn’t time to rest.

“Just a mile outside the city, I found three women on foot. I assumed they were stragglers and dismounted at once to offer them my aid. But, when I could see their faces in the dim light of the moon, I was stunned into silence. They were, without question, the three most beautiful women I had ever seen.

“They had such pale skin, I remember marveling at it. Even the little black-haired girl, whose features were clearly Mexican, was porcelain in the moonlight. They seemed young, all of them, still young enough to be called girls. I knew they were not lost members of our party. I would have remembered seeing these three.

“‘He’s speechless,’ the tallest girl said in a lovely, delicate voice—it was like wind chimes. She had fair hair, and her skin was snow white.
“The other was blonder still, her skin just as chalky. Her face was like an angel’s. She leaned
toward me with half-closed eyes and inhaled deeply.

“‘Mmm,’ she sighed. ‘Lovely.’

“The small one, the tiny brunette, put her hand on the girl’s arm and spoke quickly. Her voice was
too soft and musical to be sharp, but that seemed to be the way she intended it.

“‘Concentrate, Nettie,’ she said.

“I’d always had a good sense of how people related to each other, and it was immediately clear that
the brunette was somehow in charge of the others. If they’d been military, I would have said that
she outranked them.

“‘He looks right—young, strong, an officer…. ’ The brunette paused, and I tried unsuccessfully to
speak. ‘And there’s something more… do you sense it?’ she asked the other two. ‘He’s…
compelling.’

“‘Oh, yes,’ Nettie quickly agreed, leaning toward me again.

“‘Patience,’ the brunette cautioned her. ‘I want to keep this one.’

“Nettie frowned; she seemed annoyed.

“‘You’d better do it, Maria,’ the taller blonde spoke again. ‘If he’s important to you. I kill them
twice as often as I keep them.’

“‘Yes, I’ll do it,’ Maria agreed. ‘I really do like this one. Take Nettie away, will you? I don’t want
to have to protect my back while I’m trying to focus.’

“My hair was standing up on the back of my neck, though I didn’t understand the meaning of
anything the beautiful creatures were saying. My instincts told me that there was danger, that the
angel had meant it when she spoke of killing, but my judgment overruled my instincts. I had not
been taught to fear women, but to protect them.

“‘Let’s hunt,’ Nettie agreed enthusiastically, reaching for the tall girl’s hand. They wheeled—they
were so graceful!—and sprinted toward the city. They seemed to almost take flight, they were so
fast—their white dresses blew out behind them like wings. I blinked in amazement, and they were
gone.

“I turned to stare at Maria, who was watching me curiously.

“I’d never been superstitious in my life. Until that second, I’d never believed in ghosts or any other
such nonsense. Suddenly, I was unsure.

“‘What is your name, soldier?’ Maria asked me.

“‘Major Jasper Whitlock, ma’am,’ I stammered, unable to be impolite to a female, even if she was
a ghost.

“‘I truly hope you survive, Jasper,’ she said in her gentle voice. ‘I have a good feeling about you.’

“She took a step closer, and inclined her head as if she were going to kiss me. I stood frozen in
place, though my instincts were screaming at me to run.”

Jasper paused, his face thoughtful. “A few days later,” he finally said, and I wasn’t sure if he had
“Their names were Maria, Nettie, and Lucy. They hadn’t been together long—Maria had rounded up the other two—all three were survivors of recently lost battles. Theirs was a partnership of convenience. Maria wanted revenge, and she wanted her territories back. The others were eager to increase their… herd lands, I suppose you could say. They were putting together an army, and going about it more carefully than was usual. It was Maria’s idea. She wanted a superior army, so she sought out specific humans who had potential. Then she gave us much more attention, more training than anyone else had bothered with. She taught us to fight, and she taught us to be invisible to the humans. When we did well, we were rewarded.…”

He paused, editing again.

“She was in a hurry, though. Maria knew that the massive strength of the newborn began to wane around the year mark, and she wanted to act while we were strong.

“There were six of us when I joined Maria’s band. She added four more within a fortnight. We were all male—Maria wanted soldiers—and that made it slightly more difficult to keep from fighting amongst ourselves. I fought my first battles against my new comrades in arms. I was quicker than the others, better at combat. Maria was pleased with me, though put out that she had to keep replacing the ones I destroyed. I was rewarded often, and that made me stronger.

“Maria was a good judge of character. She decided to put me in charge of the others—as if I were being promoted. It suited my nature exactly. The casualties went down dramatically, and our numbers swelled to hover around twenty.

“This was considerable for the cautious times we lived in. My ability, as yet undefined, to control the emotional atmosphere around me was vitally effective. We soon began to work together in a way that newborn vampires had never cooperated before. Even Maria, Nettie, and Lucy were able to work together more easily.

“Maria grew quite fond of me—she began to depend upon me. And, in some ways, I worshipped the ground she walked on. I had no idea that any other life was possible. Maria told us this was the way things were, and we believed.

“She asked me to tell her when my brothers and I were ready to fight, and I was eager to prove myself. I pulled together an army of twenty-three in the end—twenty-three unbelievably strong new vampires, organized and skilled as no others before. Maria was ecstatic.

“We crept down toward Monterrey, her former home, and she unleashed us on her enemies. They had only nine newborns at the time, and a pair of older vampires controlling them. We took them down more easily than Maria could believe, losing only four in the process. It was an unheard-of margin of victory.

“And we were well trained. We did it without attracting notice. The city changed hands without any human being aware.

“Success made Maria greedy. It wasn’t long before she began to eye other cities. That first year, she extended her control to cover most of Texas and northern Mexico. Then the others came from the South to dislodge her.”

He brushed two fingers along the faint pattern of scars on his arm.
“The fighting was intense. Many began to worry that the Volturi would return. Of the original twenty-three, I was the only one to survive the first eighteen months. We both won and lost. Nettie and Lucy turned on Maria eventually—but that one we won.

“Maria and I were able to hold on to Monterrey. It quieted a little, though the wars continued. The idea of conquest was dying out; it was mostly vengeance and feuding now. So many had lost their partners, and that is something our kind does not forgive.…

“Maria and I always kept a dozen or so newborns ready. They meant little to us—they were pawns, they were disposable. When they outgrew their usefulness, we did dispose of them. My life continued in the same violent pattern and the years passed. I was sick of it all for a very long time before anything changed…

“Decades later, I developed a friendship with a newborn who’d remained useful and survived his first three years, against the odds. His name was Peter. I liked Peter; he was… civilized—I suppose that’s the right word. He didn’t enjoy the fight, though he was good at it.

“He was assigned to deal with the newborns—babysit them, you could say. It was a full-time job.

“And then it was time to purge again. The newborns were outgrowing their strength; they were due to be replaced. Peter was supposed to help me dispose of them. We took them aside individually, you see, one by one… It was always a very long night. This time, he tried to convince me that a few had potential, but Maria had instructed that we get rid of them all. I told him no.

“We were about halfway through, and I could feel that it was taking a great toll on Peter. I was trying to decide whether or not I should send him away and finish up myself as I called out the next victim. To my surprise, he was suddenly angry, furious. I braced for whatever his mood might foreshadow—he was a good fighter, but he was never a match for me.

“The newborn I’d summoned was a female, just past her year mark. Her name was Charlotte. His feelings changed when she came into view; they gave him away. He yelled for her to run, and he bolted after her. I could have pursued them, but I didn’t. I felt… averse to destroying him.

“Maria was irritated with me for that…

“Five years later, Peter snuck back for me. He picked a good day to arrive.

“Maria was mystified by my ever-deteriorating frame of mind. She’d never felt a moment’s depression, and I wondered why I was different. I began to notice a change in her emotions when she was near me—sometimes there was fear…and malice—the same feelings that had given me advance warning when Nettie and Lucy struck. I was preparing myself to destroy my only ally, the core of my existence, when Peter returned.

“Peter told me about his new life with Charlotte, told me about options I’d never dreamed I had. In five years, they’d never had a fight, though they’d met many others in the north. Others who could co-exist without the constant mayhem.

“In one conversation, he had me convinced. I was ready to go, and somewhat relieved I wouldn’t have to kill Maria. I’d been her companion for as many years as Carlisle and Edythe have been together, yet the bond between us was nowhere near as strong. When you live for the fight, for the blood, the relationships you form are tenuous and easily broken. I walked away without a backward glance.

“I traveled with Peter and Charlotte for a few years, getting the feel of this new, more peaceful
world. But the depression didn’t fade. I didn’t understand what was wrong with me, until Peter noticed that it was always worse after I’d hunted.

“I contemplated that. In so many years of slaughter and carnage, I’d lost nearly all of my humanity. I was undeniably a nightmare, a monster of the grisiest kind. Yet each time I found another human victim, I would feel a faint prick of remembrance for that other life. Watching their eyes widen in wonder at my beauty, I could see Maria and the others in my head, what they had looked like to me the last night that I was Jasper Whitlock. It was stronger for me—this borrowed memory—than it was for anyone else, because I could feel everything my prey was feeling. And I lived their emotions as I killed them.

“You’ve experienced the way I can manipulate the emotions around myself, Bella, but I wonder if you realize how the feelings in a room affect me. I live every day in a climate of emotion. For the first century of my life, I lived in a world of bloodthirsty vengeance. Hate was my constant companion. It eased some when I left Maria, but I still had to feel the horror and fear of my prey.

“It began to be too much.

“The depression got worse, and I wandered away from Peter and Charlotte. Civilized as they were, they didn’t feel the same aversion I was beginning to feel. They only wanted peace from the fight. I was so wearied by killing—killing anyone, even mere humans.

“Yet I had to keep killing. What choice did I have? I tried to kill less often, but I would get too thirsty and I would give in. After a century of instant gratification, I found self-discipline... challenging. I still haven’t perfected that.”

Jasper was lost in the story, as was I. It surprised me when his desolate expression smoothed into a peaceful smile.

“I was in Philadelphia. There was a storm, and I was out during the day—something I was not completely comfortable with yet. I knew standing in the rain would attract attention, so I ducked into a little half-empty diner. My eyes were dark enough that no one would notice them, though this meant I was thirsty, and that worried me a little.

“He was there—expecting me, naturally.” He chuckled once. “He hopped down from the high stool at the counter as soon as I walked in and came directly toward me.

“It shocked me. I was not sure if he meant to attack. That’s the only interpretation of his behavior my past had to offer. But he was smiling. And the emotions that were emanating from him were like nothing I’d ever felt before.

“‘You’ve kept me waiting a long time,’ he said.”

I didn’t realize Archie had come to stand behind me again.

“And you ducked your head, like a good Southern gentleman, and said, ‘I’m sorry, sir.’” Archie laughed at the memory.

Jasper smiled down at him. “You held out your hand, and I took it without stopping to make sense of what I was doing. For the first time in almost a century, I felt hope.”

Jasper took Archie’s hand as he spoke.

Archie grinned. “I was just relieved. I thought you were never going to show up.”
They smiled at each other for a long moment, and then Jasper looked back to me, the soft expression lingering.

“Archie told me what he’d seen of Carlisle and his family. I could hardly believe that such an existence was possible. But Archie made me optimistic. So we went to find them.”

“Scared the hell out of them, too,” Edythe said, rolling her eyes at Jasper before turning to me to explain. “Eleanor and I were away hunting. Jasper shows up, covered in battle scars, towing this little freak”—she nudged Archie playfully—“who greets them all by name, knows everything about them, and wants to know which room he can move into.”

Archie and Jasper laughed in harmony, soprano and bass.

“When I got home, all my things were in the garage,” Edythe continued.

Archie shrugged. “Your room had the best view.”

They all laughed together now.

“That’s a nice story,” I said.

Three pairs of eyes questioned my sanity.

“I mean the last part,” I defended myself. “The happy ending with Archie.”

“Archie has made all the difference,” Jasper agreed. “This is a climate I enjoy.”

But the momentary pause in the stress couldn’t last.

“An army,” Archie whispered. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

The others were intent again, their eyes locked on Jasper’s face.

“I thought I must be interpreting the signs incorrectly. Because where is the motive? Why would someone create an army in Seattle? There is no history there, no vendetta. It makes no sense from a conquest standpoint, either; no one claims it. Nomads pass through, but there’s no one to fight for it. No one to defend it from.

“But I’ve seen this before, and there’s no other explanation. There is an army of newborn vampires in Seattle. Fewer than twenty, I’d guess. The difficult part is that they are totally untrained. Whoever made them just set them loose. It will only get worse, and it won’t be much longer till the Volturi step in. Actually, I’m surprised they’ve let this go on so long.”

“What can we do?” Carlisle asked.

“If we want to avoid the Volturi’s involvement, we will have to destroy the newborns, and we will have to do it very soon.” Jasper’s face was hard. Knowing his story now, I could guess how this evaluation must disturb him. “I can teach you how. It won’t be easy in the city. The young ones aren’t concerned about secrecy, but we will have to be. It will limit us in ways that they are not. Maybe we can lure them out.”

“Maybe we won’t have to.” Edythe’s voice was bleak. “Does it occur to anyone else that the only possible threat in the area that would call for the creation of an army is… us?”

Jasper’s eyes narrowed; Carlisle’s widened, shocked.
“Tanya’s family is also near,” Earnest said slowly, unwilling to accept Edythe’s words.

“The newborns aren’t ravaging Anchorage, Earnest. I think we have to consider the idea that we are the targets.”

“They’re not coming after us,” Archie insisted, and then paused. “Or… they don’t know that they are. Not yet.”

“What is that?” Edythe asked, curious and tense. “What are you remembering?”

“Flickers,” Archie said. “I can’t see a clear picture when I try to see what’s going on, nothing concrete. But I’ve been getting these strange flashes. Not enough to make sense of. It’s as if someone’s changing their mind, moving from one course of action to another so quickly that I can’t get a good view.…”

“Indecision?” Jasper asked in disbelief.

“I don’t know.…”

“Not indecision,” Edythe growled. “Knowledge. Someone who knows you can’t see anything until the decision is made. Someone who is hiding from us. Playing with the holes in your vision.”

“Who would know that?” Archie whispered.

Edythe’s eyes were hard as ice. “Aro knows you as well as you know yourself.”

“But I would see if they’d decided to come….…”

“Unless they didn’t want to get their hands dirty.”

“A favor,” Rosalie suggested, speaking for the first time. “Someone in the South… someone who already had trouble with the rules. Someone who should have been destroyed is offered a second chance—if they take care of this one small problem…. That would explain the Volturi’s sluggish response.”

“Why?” Carlisle asked, still shocked. “There’s no reason for the Volturi—”

“It was there,” Edythe disagreed quietly. “I’m surprised it’s come to this so soon, because the other thoughts were stronger. In Aro’s head he saw me at his one side and Archie at his other. The present and the future, virtual omniscience. The power of the idea intoxicated him. I would have thought it would take him much longer to give up on that plan—he wanted it too much. But there was also the thought of you, Carlisle, of our family, growing stronger and larger. The jealousy and the fear: you having… not more than he had, but still, things that he wanted. He tried not to think about it, but he couldn’t hide it completely. The idea of rooting out the competition was there; besides their own, ours is the largest coven they’ve ever found.…”

I stared at her face in horror. She’d never told me this, but I guessed I knew why. I could see it in my head now, Aro’s dream. Edythe and Archie in black, flowing robes, drifting along at Aro’s side with their eyes cold and blood-red.…

Carlisle interrupted my waking nightmare. “They’re too committed to their mission. They would never break the rules themselves. It goes against everything they’ve worked for.”

“They’ll clean up afterward. A double betrayal,” Edythe said in a grim voice. “No harm done.”
Jasper leaned forward, shaking his head. “No, Carlisle is right. The Volturi do not break rules. Besides, it’s much too sloppy. This… person, this threat—they have no idea what they’re doing. A first-timer, I’d swear to it. I cannot believe the Volturi are involved. But they will be.”

They all stared at each other, frozen with stress.

“They all stared at each other, frozen with stress.

“Then let’s go,” Eleanor almost roared. “What are we waiting for?”

Carlisle and Edythe exchanged a long glance. Edythe nodded once.

“We’ll need you to teach us, Jasper,” Carlisle finally said. “How to destroy them.” Carlisle’s jaw was hard, but I could see the pain in his eyes as he said the words. No one hated violence more than Carlisle.

There was something bothering me, and I couldn’t put my finger on it. I was numb, horrified, deathly afraid. And yet, under that, I could feel that I was missing something important. Something that would make some sense out of the chaos. That would explain it.

“We’re going to need help,” Jasper said. “Do you think Tanya’s family would be willing…? Another five mature vampires would make an enormous difference. And then Kate and Eleazar would be especially advantageous on our side. It would be almost easy, with their aid.”

“We’ll ask,” Carlisle answered.

Jasper held out a cell phone. “We need to hurry.”

I’d never seen Carlisle’s innate calm so shaken. He took the phone, and paced toward the windows.

Edythe took my hand and pulled me to the white loveseat. I sat beside her, staring at her face while she stared at Carlisle.

Carlisle’s voice was low and quick, difficult to hear. I heard him greet Tanya, and then he raced through the situation too fast for me to understand much, though I could tell that the Alaskan vampires were not ignorant of what was going on in Seattle.

Then something changed in Carlisle’s voice.

“Oh,” he said, his voice sharper in surprise. “We didn’t realize… that Irina felt that way.”

Edythe groaned at my side and closed her eyes. “Damn it. Damn Laurent to the deepest pit of hell where he belongs.”

“Laurent?” I whispered, the blood emptying from my face, but Edythe didn’t respond, focused on Carlisle’s thoughts.

My short encounter with Laurent early this spring was not something that had faded or dimmed in my mind. I still remembered every word he’d said before Julie and her pack had interrupted.

*I actually came here as a favor to her….*

Victoria. Laurent had been her first maneuver—she’d sent him to observe, to see how hard it might be to get to me. He hadn’t survived the wolves to report back.

Though he’d kept up his old ties with Victoria after James’s death, he’d also formed new ties and
new relationships. He’d gone to live with Tanya’s family in Alaska—Tanya the strawberry blonde—
the closest friends the Cullens had in the vampire world, practically extended family. Laurent
had been with them for almost a year previous to his death.

Carlisle was still talking, his voice not quite pleading. Persuasive, but with an edge. Then the edge
abruptly won out over the persuasion.

“There’s no question of that,” Carlisle said in a stern voice. “We have a truce. They haven’t broken
it, and neither will we. I’m sorry to hear that…. Of course. We’ll just have to do our best alone.”

Carlisle shut the phone without waiting for an answer. He continued to stare out into the fog.

“What’s the problem?” Eleanor murmured to Edythe.

“Irina was more involved with our friend Laurent than we knew. She’s holding a grudge against
the wolves for destroying him to save Bella. She wants—” She paused, looking down at me.

“Go on,” I said as evenly as I could.

Her eyes tightened. “She wants revenge. To take down the pack. They would trade their help for
our permission.”

“No!” I gasped.

“Don’t worry,” she told me in a flat voice. “Carlisle would never agree to it.” She hesitated, then
sighed. “Nor would I. Laurent had it coming”—this was almost a growl—“and I still owe the
wolves for that.”

“This isn’t good,” Jasper said. “It’s too even a fight. We’d have the upper hand in skill, but not
numbers. We’d win, but at what price?” His tense eyes flashed to Archie’s face and away.

I wanted to scream out loud as I grasped what Jasper meant.

We would win, but we would lose. Some wouldn’t survive.

I looked around the room at their faces—Jasper, Archie, Eleanor, Rose, Earnest, Carlisle… Edythe
—the faces of my family.
“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS,” I SAID WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON. “You’ve completely lost your mind!”

“Say whatever you like about me,” Archie answered. “The party is still on.”

I stared at him, my eyes so wide with disbelief it felt like they might fall out and land on my lunch tray.

“Oh, calm down, Bella! There’s no reason not to go through with it. Besides, the invitations are already sent.”

“But… the… you… I… insane!” I spluttered.

“You’ve already bought my present,” he reminded me. “You don’t have to do anything but show up.”

I made an effort to calm myself. “With everything that is going on right now, a party is hardly appropriate.”

“Graduation is what’s going on right now, and a party is so appropriate it’s almost passé.”

“Archie!”

He sighed, and tried to be serious. “There are a few things we need to get in order now, and that’s going to take a little time. As long as we’re sitting here waiting, we might as well commemorate the good stuff. You’re only going to graduate from high school—for the first time—one. You don’t get to be human again, Bella. This is a once-in-a-lifetime shot.”

Edythe, silent through our little argument, flashed him a warning look. He stuck out his tongue at her. He was right—his soft voice would never carry over the babble of the cafeteria. And no one would understand the meaning behind his words in any case.

“What few things do we need to get in order?” I asked, refusing to be sidetracked.

Edythe answered in a low voice. “Jasper thinks we could use some help. Tanya’s family isn’t the only choice we have. Carlisle’s trying to track down a few old friends, and Jasper is looking up Peter and Charlotte. He’s considering talking to Maria…but no one really wants to involve the southerners.”

Archie shuddered delicately.

“It shouldn’t be too hard to convince them to help,” she continued. “Nobody wants a visit from Italy.”

“But these friends—they’re not going to be…vegetarians, right?” I protested, using the Cullens’ tongue-in-cheek nickname for themselves.

“No,” Edythe answered, suddenly expressionless.

“Here? In Forks?”

“They’re friends,” Archie reassured me. “Everything’s going to be fine. Don’t worry. And then,
Jasper has to teach us a few courses on newborn elimination….”

Edythe’s eyes brightened at that, and a brief smile flashed across her face. My stomach suddenly felt like it was full of sharp little splinters of ice.

“When are you going?” I asked in a hollow voice. I couldn’t stand this—the idea that someone might not come back. What if it was Eleanor, so brave and thoughtless that she was never the least bit cautious? Or Earnest, so sweet and fatherly that I couldn’t even imagine him in a fight? Or Archie, so tiny, so fragile-looking? Or… but I couldn’t even think the name, consider the possibility.

“A week,” Edythe said casually. “That ought to give us enough time.”

The icy splinters twisted uncomfortably in my stomach. I was suddenly nauseated.

“You look kind of green, Bella,” Archie commented.

Edythe put her arm around me and pulled me tightly against her side. “It’s going to be fine, Bella. Trust me.”

Sure, I thought to myself. Trust her. She wasn’t the one who was going to have to sit behind and wonder whether or not the core of her existence was going to come home.

And then it occurred to me. Maybe I didn’t need to sit behind. A week was more than enough time.

“You’re looking for help,” I said slowly.

“Yes.” Archie’s head cocked to the side as he processed the change in my tone.

I looked only at him as I answered. My voice was just slightly louder than a whisper. “I could help.”

Edythe’s body was suddenly rigid, her arm too tight around me. She exhaled, and the sound was a hiss.

But it was Archie, still calm, who answered. “That really wouldn’t be helpful.”

“Why not?” I argued; I could hear the desperation in my voice. “Eight is better than seven. There’s more than enough time.”

“There’s not enough time to make you helpful, Bella,” he disagreed coolly. “Do you remember how Jasper described the young ones? You’d be no good in a fight. You wouldn’t be able to control your instincts, and that would make you an easy target. And then Edythe would get hurt trying to protect you.” He folded his arms across his chest, pleased with his unassailable logic.

And I knew he was right, when he put it like that. I slumped in my seat, my sudden hope defeated. Beside me, Edythe relaxed.

She whispered the reminder in my ear. “Not because you’re afraid.”

“Oh,” Archie said, and a blank look crossed his face. Then his expression became surly. “I hate last-minute cancellations. So that puts the party attendance list down to sixty-five.…”

“Sixty-five!” My eyes bulged again. I didn’t have that many friends. Did I even know that many people?
“Who canceled?” Edythe wondered, ignoring me.

“Renée.”

“What?” I gasped.

“She was going to surprise you for your graduation, but something went wrong. You’ll have a message when you get home.”

For a moment, I just let myself enjoy the relief. Whatever it was that went wrong for my mother, I was eternally grateful to it. If she had come to Forks now... I didn’t want to think about it. My head would explode.

The message light was flashing when I got home. My feeling of relief flared again as I listened to my mother describe Phil’s accident on the ball field—while demonstrating a slide, he’d tangled up with the catcher and broken his thigh bone; he was entirely dependent on her, and there was no way she could leave him. My mom was still apologizing when the message cut off.

“Well, that’s one,” I sighed.

“One what?” Edythe asked.

“One person I don’t have to worry about getting killed this week.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Why won’t you and Archie take this seriously?” I demanded. “This is serious.”

She smiled. “Confidence.”

“Wonderful,” I grumbled. I picked up the phone and dialed Renée’s number. I knew it would be a long conversation, but I also knew that I wouldn’t have to contribute much.

I just listened, and reassured her every time I could get a word in: I wasn’t disappointed, I wasn’t mad, I wasn’t hurt. She should concentrate on helping Phil get better. I passed on my “get well soon” to Phil, and promised to call her with every single detail from Forks High’s generic graduation. Finally, I had to use my desperate need to study for finals to get off the phone.

Edythe’s patience was endless. She waited politely through the whole conversation, just playing with my hair and smiling whenever I looked up. It was probably superficial to notice such things while I had so many more important things to think about, but her smile still knocked the breath out of me. She was so beautiful that it made it hard sometimes to think about anything else, hard to concentrate on Phil’s troubles or Renée’s apologies or hostile vampire armies. I was only human.

As soon as I hung up, I stretched onto my tiptoes to kiss her. She put her hands around my waist and lifted me onto the kitchen counter, so I wouldn’t have to reach as far. That worked for me. I locked my arms around her neck and melted against her cold chest.

Too soon, as usual, she pulled away.

I felt my face slip into a pout. She laughed at my expression as she extricated himself from my arms and legs. She leaned against the counter next to me and put one arm lightly around my
shoulders.

“I know you think that I have some kind of perfect, unyielding self-control, but that’s not actually the case.”

“I wish,” I sighed.

And she sighed, too.

“After school tomorrow,” she said, changing the subject, “I’m going hunting with Carlisle, Earnest, and Rosalie. Just for a few hours—we’ll stay close. Archie, Jasper, and Eleanor should be able to keep you safe.”

“Ugh,” I grumbled. Tomorrow was the first day of finals, and it was only a half-day. I had Calculus and History—the only two challenges in my line-up—so I’d have almost the whole day without her, and nothing to do but worry. “I hate being babysat.”

“It’s temporary,” she promised.

“Jasper will be bored. Eleanor will make fun of me.”

“They’ll be on their best behavior.”

“Right,” I grumbled.

And then it occurred to me that I did have one option besides babysitters. “You know… I haven’t been to La Push since the bonfire.”

I watched her face carefully for any change in expression. Her eyes tightened the tiniest bit. “You’re probably right.”

Her face was calm, but just a little too smooth. I almost asked if she’d rather I stayed here, but then I thought of the ribbing Eleanor would no doubt dish out, and I changed the subject. “Are you thirsty already?” I asked, reaching up to stroke the light shadow beneath her eye. Her irises were still a deep gold.

“Not really.” She seemed reluctant to answer, and that surprised me. I waited for an explanation.

“We want to be as strong as possible,” she explained, still reluctant. “We’ll probably hunt again on the way, looking for big game.”

“That makes you stronger?”

She searched my face for something, but there was nothing to find but curiosity.

“Yes,” she finally said. “Human blood makes us the strongest, though only fractionally. Jasper’s been thinking about cheating—adverse as he is to the idea, he’s nothing if not practical—but he won’t suggest it. He knows what Carlisle will say.”

“Would that help?” I asked quietly.

“It doesn’t matter. We aren’t going to change who we are.”
I frowned. If something helped even the odds… and then I shuddered, realizing I was willing to have a stranger die to protect her. I was horrified at myself, but not entirely able to deny it, either.

She changed the subject again. “That’s why they’re so strong, of course. The newborns are full of human blood—their own blood, reacting to the change. It lingers in the tissues and strengthens them. Their bodies use it up slowly, like Jasper said, the strength starting to wane after about a year.”

“How strong will I be?”

She grinned. “Stronger than I am.”

“Stronger than Eleanor?”

The grin got bigger. “Yes. Do me a favor and challenge her to an arm-wrestling match. It would be a good experience for her.”

I laughed. It sounded so ridiculous.

Then I sighed and hopped down from the counter, because I really couldn’t put it off any longer. I had to cram, and cram hard. Luckily I had Edythe’s help, and Edythe was an excellent tutor—since she knew absolutely everything. I figured my biggest problem would be just focusing on the tests. If I didn’t watch myself, I might end up writing my History essay on the vampire wars of the South.

I took a break to call Julie, and Edythe seemed just as comfortable as she had when I was on the phone with Renée. She played with my hair again.

Though it was the middle of the afternoon, my call woke Julie up, and she was grouchy at first. She cheered right up when I asked if I could visit the next day. The Quileute school was already out for the summer, so she told me to come over as early as I could. I was pleased to have an option besides being babysat. There was a tiny bit more dignity in spending the day with Julie.

Some of that dignity was lost when Edythe insisted again on delivering me to the border line like a child being exchanged by custodial guardians.

“So how do you feel you did on your exams?” Edythe asked on the way, making small talk.

“History was easy, but I don’t know about the Calculus. It seemed like it was making sense, so that probably means I failed.”

She laughed. “I’m sure you did fine. Or, if you’re really worried, I could bribe Mr. Varner to give you an A.”

“Er, thanks, but no thanks.”

She laughed again, but suddenly stopped when we turned the last bend and saw the red car waiting. She frowned in concentration, and then, as she parked the car, she sighed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my hand on the door.

She shook her head. “Nothing.” Her eyes were narrowed as she stared through the windshield toward the other car. I’d seen that look before.

“You’re not listening to Julie, are you?” I accused.
“It’s not easy to ignore someone when she’s shouting.”

“Oh.” I thought about that for a second. “What’s she shouting?” I whispered.

“I’m absolutely certain she’ll mention it herself,” Edythe said in a wry tone.

I would have pressed the issue, but then Julie honked her horn—two quick impatient honks.

“That’s impolite,” Edythe growled.

“That’s Julie,” I sighed, and I hurried out before Julie did something to really set Edythe’s teeth on edge.

I waved to Edythe before I got into the Rabbit and, from that distance, it looked like she was truly upset about the honking thing… or whatever Julie was thinking about. But my eyes were weak and made mistakes all the time.

I wanted Edythe to come to me. I wanted to make both of them get out of their cars and shake hands and be friends—be Edythe and Julie rather than vampire and werewolf. It was as if I had those two stubborn magnets in my hands again, and I was holding them together, trying to force nature to reverse herself….

I sighed, and climbed in Julie’s car.

“Hey, Bells.” Julie’s tone was cheerful, but her voice dragged. I examined her face as she started down the road, driving a little faster than I did, but slower than Edythe, on her way back to La Push.

Julie looked different, maybe even sick. Her eyelids drooped and her face was drawn. Her shaggy hair stuck out in random directions; it was almost to her chin in some places.

“Are you all right, Jules?”

“Just tired,” she managed to get out before she was overcome by a massive yawn. When she finished, she asked, “What do you want to do today?”

I eyed her for a moment. “Let’s just hang out at your place for now,” I suggested. She didn’t look like she was up for much more than that. “We can ride our bikes later.”

“Sure, sure,” she said, yawning again.

Julie’s house was vacant, and that felt strange. I realized I thought of Billy as a nearly permanent fixture there.

“Where’s your dad?”

“Over at the Clearwaters’. He’s been hanging out there a lot since Harry died. Sue gets lonely.”

Julie sat down on the old couch that was no bigger than a loveseat and squished herself to the side to make room for me.

“Oh. That’s nice. Poor Sue.”

“Yeah… she’s having some trouble....” She hesitated. “With her kids.”

“Sure, it’s got to be hard on Seth and Leah, losing their dad....”
“Uh-huh,” she agreed, lost in thought. She picked up the remote and flipped on the TV without seeming to think about it. She yawned.

“What’s with you, Jules? You’re like a zombie.”

“I got about two hours of sleep last night, and four the night before,” she told me. She stretched her long arms slowly, and I could hear the joints crack as she flexed. She settled her left arm along the back of the sofa behind me, and slumped back to rest her head against the wall. “I’m exhausted.”

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” I asked.

She made a face. “Sam’s being difficult. He doesn’t trust your bloodsuckers. I’ve been running double shifts for two weeks and nobody’s touched me yet, but he still doesn’t buy it. So I’m on my own for now.”

“Double shifts? Is this because you’re trying to watch out for me? Jules, that’s wrong! You need to sleep. I’ll be fine.”

“It’s no big deal.” Her eyes were abruptly more alert. “Hey, did you ever find out who was in your room? Is there anything new?”

I ignored the second question. “No, we didn’t find anything out about my, um, visitor.”

“Then I’ll be around,” she said as her eyes slid closed.

“Jules…,” I started to whine.

“Hey, it’s the least I can do—I offered eternal servitude, remember. I’m your slave for life.”

“I don’t want a slave!”

Her eyes didn’t open. “What do you want, Bella?”

“I want my friend Julie—and I don’t want her half-dead, hurting herself in some misguided attempt —”

She cut me off. “Look at it this way—I’m hoping I can track down a vampire I’m allowed to kill, okay?”

I didn’t answer. She looked at me then, peeking at my reaction.

“Kidding, Bella.”

I stared at the TV.

“So, any special plans next week? You’re graduating. Wow. That’s big.” Her voice turned flat, and her face, already drawn, looked downright haggard as her eyes closed again—not in exhaustion this time, but in denial. I realized that graduation still had a horrible significance for her, though my intentions were now disrupted.

“No special plans,” I said carefully, hoping she would hear the reassurance in my words without a more detailed explanation. I didn’t want to get into it now. For one thing, she didn’t look up for any difficult conversations. For another, I knew she would read too much into my qualms. “Well, I do have to go to a graduation party. Mine.” I made a disgusted sound. “Archie loves parties, and he’s invited the whole town to his place the night of. It’s going to be horrible.”
Her eyes opened as I spoke, and a relieved smile made her face look less worn. “I didn’t get an invitation. I’m hurt,” she teased.

“Consider yourself invited. It’s supposedly my party, so I should be able to ask who I want.”

“Thanks,” she said sarcastically, her eyes slipping closed once more.

“I wish you would come,” I said without any hope. “It would be more fun. For me, I mean.”


A few seconds later, she was snoring.

Poor Julie. I studied her dreaming face, and liked what I saw. While she slept, every trace of defensiveness and bitterness disappeared and suddenly she was the girl who had been my very best friend before all the werewolf nonsense had gotten in the way. She looked so much younger. She looked like my Julie.

I nestled into the couch to wait out her nap, hoping she would sleep for a while and make up some of what she’d lost. I flipped through channels, but there wasn’t much on. I settled for a cooking show, knowing, as I watched, that I’d never put that much effort into Charlie’s dinner. Julie continued to snore, getting louder. I turned up the TV.

I was strangely relaxed, almost sleepy, too. This house felt safer than my own, probably because no one had ever come looking for me here. I curled up on the sofa and thought about taking a nap myself. Maybe I would have, but Julie’s snoring was impossible to tune out. So, instead of sleeping, I let my mind wander.

Finals were done, and most of them had been a cakewalk. Calculus, the one exception, was behind me, pass or fail. My high school education was over. And I didn’t really know how I felt about that. I couldn’t look at it objectively, tied up as it was with my human life being over.

I wondered how long Edythe planned to use this “not because you’re scared” excuse. I was going to have to put my foot down sometime.

If I were thinking practically, I knew it made more sense to ask Carlisle to change me the second I made it through the graduation line. Forks was becoming nearly as dangerous as a war zone. No, Forks was a war zone. Not to mention… it would be a good excuse to miss the graduation party. I smiled to myself as I thought of that most trivial of reasons for changing. Silly… yet still compelling.

But Edythe was right—I wasn’t quite ready yet.

And I didn’t want to be practical. I wanted Edythe to be the one. It wasn’t a rational desire. I was sure that—about two seconds after someone actually bit me and the venom started burning through my veins—I really wouldn’t care anymore who had done it. So it shouldn’t make a difference.

It was hard to define, even to myself, why it mattered. There was just something about her being the one to make the choice—to want to keep me enough that she wouldn’t just allow me to be changed, she would act to keep me. It was childish, but I liked the idea that her lips would be the last good thing I would feel. Even more embarrassingly, something I would never say aloud, I wanted her venom to poison my system. It would make me belong to her in a tangible, quantifiable way.
But I knew she was going to stick to her marriage scheme like glue—because a delay was what she was clearly after and it was working so far. I tried to imagine telling my parents that I was getting married this summer. Telling Angela and Ben and Mike. I couldn’t. I couldn’t think of the words to say. It would be easier to tell them I was becoming a vampire. And I was sure that at least my mother—were I to tell her every detail of the truth—would be more strenuously opposed to me getting married than to me a becoming a vampire. I grimaced to myself as I imagined her horrified expression.

Then, for just a second, I saw that same odd vision of Edythe and me on a porch swing, wearing clothes from another kind of world. A simpler place, where love was defined in simpler ways. One plus one equals two.…

Julie snorted and rolled to her side. Her arm swung off the back of the couch and pinned me against her body.

Holy crow, but she was heavy! And hot. It was sweltering after just a few seconds.

I tried to slide out from under her arm without waking her, but I had to shove a little bit, and when her arm fell off me, her eyes snapped open. She jumped to her feet, looking around anxiously.

“What? What?” she asked, disoriented.

“It’s just me, Jules. Sorry I woke you.”

She turned to look at me, blinking and confused. “Bella?”

“Hey, sleepy.”

“Oh, man! Did I fall asleep? I’m sorry! How long was I out?”

“A few Emerils. I lost count.”

She flopped back on the couch next to me. “Wow. Sorry about that, really.”

I patted her hair, trying to smooth the wild disarray. “Don’t feel bad. I’m glad you got some sleep.”

She yawned and stretched. “I’m useless these days. No wonder Billy’s always gone. I’m so boring.”

“You’re fine,” I assured her.

“Ugh, let’s go outside. I need to walk around or I’ll pass out again.”

“Jules, go back to sleep. I’m good. I’ll call Edythe to come pick me up.” I patted my pockets as I spoke, and realized they were empty. “Shoot, I’ll have to borrow your phone. I think I must have left his in the car.” I started to unfold myself.

“No!” Julie insisted, grabbing my hand. “No, stay. You hardly ever make it down. I can’t believe I wasted all this time.”

She pulled me off the couch as she spoke, and then led the way outside, ducking her head as she passed under the doorframe. It had gotten much cooler while Julie slept; the air was unseasonably cold—there must be a storm on the way. It felt like February, not May.

The wintry air seemed to make Julie more alert. She paced back and forth in front of the house for a minute, dragging me along with her.
“I’m an idiot,” she muttered to herself.

“What’s the matter, Jules? So you fell asleep.” I shrugged.

“I wanted to talk to you. I can’t believe this.”

“Talk to me now,” I said.

Julie met my eyes for a second, and then looked away quickly toward the trees. It almost looked like she was blushing, but it was hard to tell with her dark skin.

I suddenly remembered what Edythe had said when she dropped me off—that Julie would tell me whatever she was shouting in her head. I started gnawing on my lip.

“Look,” Julie said. “I was planning to do this a little bit differently.” She laughed, and it sounded like she was laughing at himself. “Smoother,” she added. “I was going to work up to it, but”—and she looked at the clouds, dimmer as the afternoon progressed—“I’m out of time to work.”

She laughed again, nervous. We were still pacing slowly.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

She took a deep breath. “I want to tell you something. And you already know it… but I think I should say it out loud anyway. Just so there’s never any confusion on the subject.”

I planted my feet, and she came to a stop. I took my hand away and folded my arms across my chest. I was suddenly sure that I didn’t want to know what she was building up to.

Julie’s eyebrows pulled down, throwing her deep-set eyes into shadow. They were pitch black as they bored into mine.

“I’m in love with you, Bella,” Julie said in a strong, sure voice. “Bella, I love you. And I want you to pick me instead of her. I know you don’t feel that way, but I need the truth out there so that you know your options. I wouldn’t want a miscommunication to stand in our way.”
I STARED AT HER FOR A LONG MINUTE, SPEECHLESS. I could not think of one thing to say to her.

As she watched my dumbfounded expression, the seriousness left her face.

“Okay,” she said, grinning. “That’s all.”

“Jules—” It felt like there was something big sticking in my throat. I tried to clear the obstruction. “I can’t—I mean I don’t…I have to go.”

I turned, but she grabbed my shoulders and spun me around.

“No, wait. I know that, Bella. But, look, answer me this, all right? Do you want me to go away and never see you again? Be honest.”

It was hard to concentrate on her question, so it took a minute to answer. “No, I don’t want that,” I finally admitted.

Julie grinned again. “See.”

“But I don’t want you around for the same reason that you want me around,” I objected.

“Tell me exactly why you want me around, then.”

I thought carefully. “I miss you when you’re not there. When you’re happy,” I qualified carefully, “it makes me happy. But I could say the same thing about Charlie, Julie. You’re family. I love you, but I’m not in love with you.”

She nodded, unruffled. “But you do want me around.”

“Yes,” I sighed. She was impossible to discourage.

“Then I’ll stick around.”

“You’re a glutton for punishment,” I grumbled.

“Yep.” She stroked the tips of her fingers across my right cheek. I slapped her hand away.

“Do you think you could behave yourself a little better, at least?” I asked, irritated.

“No, I don’t. You decide, Bella. You can have me the way I am—bad behavior included—or not at all.”

I stared at her, frustrated. “That’s mean.”

“So are you.”

That pulled me up short, and I took an involuntary step back. She was right. If I wasn’t mean—and greedy, too—I would tell her I didn’t want to be friends and walk away. It was wrong to try to keep my friend when that would hurt her. I didn’t know what I was doing here, but I was suddenly sure that it wasn’t good.
“You’re right,” I whispered.

She laughed. “I forgive you. Just try not to get too mad at me. Because I recently decided that I’m not giving up. There really is something irresistible about a lost cause.”

“You.” I stared into her dark eyes, trying to make her take me seriously. “I love her, Julie. She’s my whole life.”

“You love me, too,” she reminded me. She held up her hand when I started to protest. “Not the same way, I know. But she’s not your whole life, either. Not anymore. Maybe she was once, but she left. And now she’s just going to have to deal with the consequence of that choice—me.”

I shook my head. “You’re impossible.”

Suddenly, she was serious. She took my chin in her hand, holding it firmly so that I couldn’t look away from her intent gaze.

“Until your heart stops beating, Bella,” she said. “I’ll be here—fighting. Don’t forget that you have options.”

“I don’t want options,” I disagreed, trying to yank my chin free unsuccessfully. “And my heartbeats are numbered, Julie. The time is almost gone.”

Her eyes narrowed. “All the more reason to fight—fight harder now, while I can,” she whispered.

She still had my chin—her fingers holding too tight, till it hurt—and I saw the resolve form abruptly in her eyes.

“N—” I started to object, but it was too late.

Her lips crushed mine, stopping my protest. She kissed me angrily, roughly, her other hand gripping tight around the back of my neck, making escape impossible. I shoved against her chest with all my strength, but she didn’t even seem to notice. Her mouth was soft, despite the anger, her lips molding to mine in a warm, unfamiliar way.

I grabbed at her face, trying to push it away, failing again. She seemed to notice this time, though, and it aggravated her. Her lips forced mine open, and I could feel her hot breath in my mouth.

Acting on instinct, I let my hands drop to my side, and shut down. I opened my eyes and didn’t fight, didn’t feel… just waited for her to stop.

It worked. The anger seemed to evaporate, and she pulled back to look at me. She pressed her lips softly to mine again, once, twice… a third time. I pretended I was a statue and waited.

Finally, she let go of my face and leaned away.

“Are you done now?” I asked in an expressionless voice.

“Yes,” she sighed. She started to smile, closing her eyes.

I pulled my arm back and then let it snap forward, punching her in the mouth with as much power as I could force out of my body.

There was a crunching sound.

“Ow! OW!” I screamed, frantically hopping up and down in agony while I clutched my hand to my
chest. It was broken, I could feel it.

Julie stared at me in shock. “Are you all right?”

“No, dammit! You broke my hand!”

“Bella, you broke your hand. Now stop dancing around and let me look at it.”

“Don’t touch me! I’m going home right now!”

“I’ll get my car,” she said calmly. She wasn’t even rubbing her jaw like they did in the movies. How pathetic.

“No, thanks,” I hissed. “I’d rather walk.” I turned toward the road. It was only a few miles to the border. As soon as I got away from her, Archie would see me. He’d send somebody to pick me up.

“Just let me drive you home,” Julie insisted. Unbelievably, she had the nerve to wrap her arm around my waist.

I jerked away from her.

“Fine!” I growled. “Do! I can’t wait to see what Edythe does to you! I hope she snaps your neck, you pushy, obnoxious, moronic DOG!”

Julie rolled her eyes. She walked me to the passenger side of her car and helped me in. When she got in the driver’s side, she was whistling.

“Didn’t I hurt you at all?” I asked, furious and annoyed.

“Are you kidding? If you hadn’t started screaming, I might not have figured out that you were trying to punch me. I may not be made out of stone, but I’m not that soft.”

“I hate you, Julie Black.”

“That’s good. Hate is a passionate emotion.”

“I’ll give you passionate,” I muttered under my breath. “Murder, the ultimate crime of passion.”

“Oh, c’mon,” she said, all cheery and looking like she was about to start whistling again. “That had to be better than kissing a rock.”

“Not even remotely close,” I told her coldly.

She pursed her lips. “You could just be saying that.”

“But I’m not.”

That seemed to bother her for a second, but then she perked up. “You’re just mad. I don’t have any experience with this kind of thing, but I thought it was pretty incredible myself.”

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“You’re going to think about it tonight. When she thinks you’re asleep, you’ll be thinking about your options.”

“If I think about you tonight, it will be because I’m having a nightmare.”
She slowed the car to a crawl, turning to stare at me with her dark eyes wide and earnest. “Just think about how it could be, Bella,” she urged in a soft, eager voice. “You wouldn’t have to change anything for me. You know Charlie would be happy if you picked me. I could protect you just as well as your vampire can—maybe better. And I would make you happy, Bella. There’s so much I could give you that she can’t. I’ll bet she couldn’t even kiss you like that—because she would hurt you. I would never, never hurt you, Bella.”

I held up my injured hand.

She sighed. “That wasn’t my fault. You should have known better.”

“Julie, I can’t be happy without her.”

“You’ve never tried,” she disagreed. “When she left, you spent all your energy holding on to her. You could be happy if you let go. You could be happy with me.”

“I don’t want to be happy with anyone but her,” I insisted.

“You’ll never be able to be as sure of her as you are of me. She left you once, she could do it again.”

“No, she will not,” I said through my teeth. The pain of the memory bit into me like the lash of a whip. It made me want to hurt her back. “You left me once,” I reminded her in a cold voice, thinking of the weeks she’d hidden from me, the words she’d said to me in the woods beside her home.…

“I never did,” she argued hotly. “They told me I couldn’t tell you—that it wasn’t safe for you if we were together. But I never left, never! I used to run around your house at night—like I do now. Just making sure you were okay.”

I wasn’t about to let her make me feel bad for her now.

“Take me home. My hand hurts.”

She sighed, and started driving at a normal speed, watching the road.

“Just think about it, Bella.”

“No,” I said stubbornly.

“You will. Tonight. And I’ll be thinking about you while you’re thinking about me.”

“Like I said, a nightmare.”

She grinned over at me. “You kissed me back.”

I gasped, unthinkingly balling my hands up into fists again, hissing when my broken hand reacted.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I did not.”

“I think I can tell the difference.”

“Obviously you can’t—that was not kissing back, that was trying to get you the hell off of me, you idiot.”
She laughed a low, throaty laugh. “Touchy. Almost *overly* defensive, I would say.”

I took a deep breath. There was no point in arguing with her; she would twist anything I said. I concentrated on my hand, trying to stretch out my fingers, to ascertain where the broken parts were. Sharp pains stabbed along my knuckles. I groaned.

“I’m really sorry about your hand,” Julie said, sounding almost sincere. “Next time you want to hit me, use a baseball bat or a crowbar, okay?”

“Don’t think I’ll forget that,” I muttered.

I didn’t realize where we were going until we were on my road.

“Why are you taking me here?” I demanded.

She looked at me blankly. “I thought you said you were going home?”

“Ugh. I guess you can’t take me to Edythe’s house, can you?” I ground my teeth in frustration.

Pain twisted across her face, and I could see that this affected her more than anything else I’d said.

“This is your home, Bella,” she said quietly.

“Yes, but do any doctors live here?” I asked, holding up my hand again.

“Oh.” She thought about that for a minute. “I’ll take you to the hospital. Or Charlie can.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital. It’s embarrassing and unnecessary.”

She let the Rabbit idle in front of the house, deliberating with an unsure expression. Charlie’s cruiser was in the driveway.

I sighed. “Go home, Julie.”

I climbed out of the car awkwardly, heading for the house. The engine cut off behind me, and I was less surprised than annoyed to find Julie beside me again.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I am going to get some ice on my hand, and then I am going to call Edythe and tell her to come and get me and take me to Carlisle so that he can fix my hand. Then, if you’re still here, I am going to hunt up a crowbar.”

She didn’t answer. She opened the front door and held it for me.

We walked silently past the front room where Charlie was lying on the sofa.

“Hey, kids,” he said, sitting forward. “Nice to see you here, Jules.”

“Hey, Charlie,” Julie answered casually, pausing. I stalked on to the kitchen.

“What’s wrong with her?” Charlie wondered.

“She thinks she broke her hand,” I heard Julie tell him. I went to the freezer and pulled out a tray of ice cubes.

“How did she do that?” As my father, I thought Charlie ought to sound a bit less amused and a bit
more concerned.

Julie laughed. “She hit me.”

Charlie laughed, too, and I scowled while I beat the tray against the edge of the sink. The ice scattered inside the basin, and I grabbed a handful with my good hand and wrapped the cubes in the dishcloth on the counter.

“Why did she hit you?”

“Because I kissed her,” Julie said, unashamed.

“Good for you, kid,” Charlie congratulated her.

I ground my teeth and went for the phone. I dialed Edythe’s cell.

“Bella?” she answered on the first ring. She sounded more than relieved—she was delighted. I could hear the Volvo’s engine in the background; she was already in the car—that was good. “You left the phone… I’m sorry, did Julie drive you home?”

“Yes,” I grumbled. “Will you come and get me, please?”

“I’m on my way,” she said at once. “What’s wrong?”

“I want Carlisle to look at my hand. I think it’s broken.”

It had gone quiet in the front room, and I wondered when Julie would bolt. I smiled a grim smile, imagining her discomfort.

“What happened?” Edythe demanded, her voice going flat.

“I punched Julie,” I admitted.

“Good,” Edythe said bleakly. “Though I’m sorry you’re hurt.”

I laughed once, because she sounded as pleased as Charlie had.

“I wish I’d hurt her.” I sighed in frustration. “I didn’t do any damage at all.”

“I can fix that,” she offered.

“I was hoping you would say that.”

There was a slight pause. “That doesn’t sound like you,” she said, wary now. “What did she do?”

“She kissed me,” I growled.

All I heard on the other end of the line was the sound of an engine accelerating.

In the other room, Charlie spoke again. “Maybe you ought to take off, Jules,” he suggested.

“I think I’ll hang out here, if you don’t mind.”

“Your funeral,” Charlie muttered.

“Is the dog still there?” Edythe finally spoke again.
“Yes.”

“I’m around the corner,” she said darkly, and the line disconnected.

As I hung up the phone, smiling, I heard the sound of her car racing down the street. The brakes protested loudly as she slammed to a stop out front. I went to get the door.

“How’s your hand?” Charlie asked as I walked by. Charlie looked uncomfortable. Julie lolled next to him on the sofa, perfectly at ease. I lifted the ice pack to show it off. “It’s swelling.”

“Maybe you should pick on people your own size,” Charlie suggested.

“Maybe,” I agreed. I walked on to open the door. Edythe was waiting.

“Let me see,” she murmured.

She examined my hand gently, so carefully that it caused me no pain at all. Her hands were almost as cold as the ice, and they felt good against my skin.

“I think you’re right about the break,” she said. “I’m proud of you. You must have put some force behind this.”

“As much as I have.” I sighed. “Not enough, apparently.”

She kissed my hand softly. “I’ll take care of it,” she promised. And then she called, “Julie,” her voice still quiet and even.

“Now, now,” Charlie cautioned.

I heard Charlie heave himself off of the sofa. Julie got to the hall first, and much more quietly, but Charlie was not far behind her. Julie’s expression was alert and eager.

“I don’t want any fighting, do you understand?” Charlie looked only at Edythe when he spoke. “I can go put my badge on if that makes my request more official.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Edythe said in a restrained tone.

“Why don’t you arrest me, Dad?” I suggested. “I’m the one throwing punches.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to press charges, Jules?”

“No.” Julie grinned, incorrigible. “I’ll take the trade any day.”

Edythe grimaced.

“Dad, don’t you have a baseball bat somewhere in your room? I want to borrow it for a minute.”

Charlie looked at me evenly. “Enough, Bella.”

“Let’s go have Carlisle look at your hand before you wind up in a jail cell,” Edythe said. She put her arm around me and pulled me toward the door.

“Fine,” I said, leaning against her. I wasn’t so angry anymore, now that Edythe was with me. I felt comforted, and my hand didn’t bother me as much.
We were walking down the sidewalk when I heard Charlie whispering anxiously behind me.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?”

“Give me a minute, Charlie,” Julie answered. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right back.”

I looked back and Julie was following us, stopping to close the door in Charlie’s surprised and uneasy face.

Edythe ignored her at first, leading me to the car. She helped me inside, shut the door, and then turned to face Julie on the sidewalk.

I leaned anxiously through the open window. Charlie was visible in the house, peeking through the drapes in the front room.

Julie’s stance was casual, her arms folded across her chest, but the muscles in her jaw were tight.

Edythe spoke in a voice so peaceful and gentle that it made the words strangely more threatening. “I’m not going to kill you now, because it would upset Bella.”

“Hmph,” I grumbled.

Edythe turned slightly to throw me a quick smile. Her face was still calm. “It would bother you in the morning,” she said, brushing her fingers across my cheek.

Then she turned back to Julie. “But if you ever bring her back damaged again—and I don’t care whose fault it is; I don’t care if she merely trips, or if a meteor falls out of the sky and hits her in the head—if you return her to me in less than the perfect condition that I left her in, you will be running with three legs. Do you understand that, mongrel?”

Julie rolled her eyes.

“Who’s going back?” I muttered.

Edythe continued as if she hadn’t heard me. “And if you ever kiss her again, I will break your jaw for her,” she promised, her voice still gentle and velvet and deadly.

“What if she wants me to?” Julie drawled, arrogant.

“Hah!” I snorted.

“If that’s what she wants, then I won’t object.” Edythe shrugged, untroubled. “You might want to wait for her to say it, rather than trust your interpretation of body language—but it’s your face.”

Julie grinned.

“You wish,” I grumbled.

“Yes, she does,” Edythe murmured.

“Well, if you’re done rummaging through my head,” Julie said with a thick edge of annoyance, “why don’t you go take care of her hand?”

“One more thing,” Edythe said slowly. “I’ll be fighting for her, too. You should know that. I’m not taking anything for granted, and I’ll be fighting twice as hard as you will.”
“Good,” Julie growled. “It’s no fun beating someone who forfeits.”

“She is mine.” Edythe’s low voice was suddenly dark, not as composed as before. “I didn’t say I would fight fair.”

“Neither did I.”

“Best of luck.”

Julie nodded. “Yes, may the best woman win.”

“That sounds about right… pup.”

Julie grimaced briefly, then she composed her face and leaned around Edythe to smile at me. I glowered back.

“I hope your hand feels better soon. I’m really sorry you’re hurt.”

Childishly, I turned my face away from her.

I didn’t look up again as Edythe walked around the car and climbed into the driver’s side, so I didn’t know if Julie went back into the house or continued to stand there, watching me.

“How do you feel?” Edythe asked as we drove away.

“Irritated.”

She chuckled. “I meant your hand.”

I shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

“True,” she agreed, and frowned.

Edythe drove around the house to the garage. Eleanor and Rosalie were there, Rosalie’s perfect legs, recognizable even sheathed in jeans, were sticking out from under the bottom of Eleanor’s huge Jeep. Eleanor was sitting beside her, one hand reached under the Jeep toward her. It took me a moment to realize that she was acting as the jack.

Eleanor watched curiously as Edythe helped me carefully out of the car. Her eyes zeroed in on the hand I cradled against my chest.

Eleanor grinned. “Fall down again, Bella?”

I glared at her fiercely. “No, Eleanor. I punched a werewolf in the face.”

Eleanor blinked, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

As Edythe led me past them, Rosalie spoke from under the car.

“Jasper’s going to win the bet,” she said smugly.

Eleanor’s laughter stopped at once, and she studied me with appraising eyes.

“What bet?” I demanded, pausing.

“Let’s get you to Carlisle,” Edythe urged. She was staring at Eleanor. Her head shook infinitesimally.
“What bet?” I insisted as I turned on her.

“Thanks, Rosalie,” she muttered as she tightened her arm around my waist and pulled me toward the house.

“Edythe…,” I grumbled.

“It’s infantile,” she shrugged. “Eleanor and Jasper like to gamble.”

“Eleanor will tell me.” I tried to turn, but her arm was like iron around me.

She sighed. “They’re betting on how many times you… slip up in the first year.”

“Oh.” I grimaced, trying to hide my sudden horror as I realized what she meant. “They have a bet about how many people I’ll kill?”

“Yes,” she admitted unwillingly. “Rosalie thinks your temper will turn the odds in Jasper’s favor.”

I felt a little high. “Jasper’s betting high.”

“It will make him feel better if you have a hard time adjusting. He’s tired of being the weakest link.”

“Sure. Of course it will. I guess I could throw in a few extra homicides, if it makes Jasper happy. Why not?” I was babbling, my voice a blank monotone. In my head, I was seeing newspaper headlines, lists of names.…

She squeezed me. “You don’t need to worry about it now. In fact, you don’t have to worry about it ever, if you don’t want to.”

I groaned, and Edythe, thinking it was the pain in my hand that bothered me, pulled me faster toward the house.

My hand was broken, but there wasn’t any serious damage, just a tiny fissure in one knuckle. I didn’t want a cast, and Carlisle said I’d be fine in a brace if I promised to keep it on. I promised.

Edythe could tell I was out of it as Carlisle worked to fit a brace carefully to my hand. She worried aloud a few times that I was in pain, but I assured her that that wasn’t it.

As if I needed—or even had room for—one more thing to worry about.

All of Jasper’s stories about newly created vampires had been percolating in my head since he’d explained his past. Now those stories jumped into sharp focus with the news of his and Eleanor’s wager. I wondered randomly what they were betting. What was a motivating prize when you had everything?

I’d always known that I would be different. I hoped that I would be as strong as Edythe said I would be. Strong and fast and, most of all, beautiful. Someone who could stand next to Edythe and feel like she belonged there.

I’d been trying not to think too much about the other things that I would be. Wild. Bloodthirsty. Maybe I would not be able to stop myself from killing people. Strangers, people who had never harmed me. People like the growing number of victims in Seattle, who’d had families and friends and futures. People who’d had lives. And I could be the monster who took that away from them.

But, in truth, I could handle that part—because I trusted Edythe, trusted her absolutely, to keep me
from doing anything I would regret. I knew she’d take me to Antarctica and hunt penguins if I asked her to. And I would do whatever it took to be a good person. A good vampire. That thought would have made me giggle, if not for this new worry.

Because, if I really were somehow like that—like the nightmarish images of newborns that Jasper had painted in my head—could I possibly be me? And if all I wanted was to kill people, what would happen to the things I wanted now?

Edythe was so obsessed with me not missing anything while I was human. Usually, it seemed kind of silly. There weren’t many human experiences that I worried about missing. As long as I got to be with Edythe, what else could I ask for?

I stared at her face while she watched Carlisle fix my hand. There was nothing in this world that I wanted more than her. Would that, could that, change?

Was there a human experience that I was not willing to give up?
“I HAVE NOTHING TO WEAR!” I MOANED TO MYSELF.

Every item of clothing I owned was strewn across my bed; my drawers and closets were bare. I stared into the empty recesses, willing something suitable to appear.

My khaki skirt lay over the back of the rocking chair, waiting for me to discover something that went with it just exactly right. Something that would make me look beautiful and grown up. Something that said special occasion. I was coming up empty.

It was almost time to go, and I was still wearing my favorite old sweats. Unless I could find something better here—and the odds weren’t looking good at this point—I was going to graduate in them.

I scowled at the pile of clothes on my bed.

The kicker was that I knew exactly what I would have worn if it were still available—my kidnapped red blouse. I punched the wall with my good hand.

“Stupid, thieving, annoying vampire!” I growled.

“What did I do?” Archie demanded.

He was leaning casually beside the open window as if he’d been there the whole time.

“Knock, knock,” he added with a grin.

“Is it really so hard to wait for me to get the door?”

He threw a flat, white box onto my bed. “I’m just passing through. I thought you might need something to wear.”

I looked at the big package lying on top of my unsatisfying wardrobe and grimaced.

“Admit it,” Archie said. “I’m a lifesaver.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” I muttered. “Thanks.”

“Well, it’s nice to get something right for a change. You don’t know how irritating it is—missing things the way I have been. I feel so useless. So… normal.” He cringed in horror of the word.

“I can’t imagine how awful that must feel. Being normal? Ugh.”

He laughed. “Well, at least this makes up for missing your annoying thief—now I just have to figure out what I’m not seeing in Seattle.”

When he said the words that way—putting the two situations together in one sentence—right then it clicked. The elusive something that had been bothering me for days, the important connection that I couldn’t quite put together, suddenly became clear. I stared at him, my face frozen with whatever expression was already in place.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” he asked. He sighed when I didn’t move immediately, and tugged the top of the box off himself. He pulled something out and held it up, but I couldn’t concentrate
on what it was. “Pretty, don’t you think? I picked blue, because I know it’s Edythe’s favorite on you.”

I wasn’t listening.

“It’s the same,” I whispered.

“What is?” he demanded. “You don’t have anything like this. For crying out loud, you only own one skirt!”

“No, Archie! Forget the clothes, listen!”

“You don’t like it?” Archie’s face clouded with disappointment.

“Listen, Archie, don’t you see? It’s the same! The one who broke in and stole my things, and the new vampires in Seattle. They’re together!”

The clothes slipped from his fingers and fell back into the box.

Archie focused now, his voice suddenly sharp. “Why do you think that?”

“Remember what Edythe said? About someone using the holes in your vision to keep you from seeing the newborns? And then what you said before, about the timing being too perfect—how careful my thief was to make no contact, as if he knew you would see that. I think you were right, Archie, I think he did know. I think he was using those holes, too. And what are the odds that two different people not only know enough about you to do that, but also decided to do it at exactly the same time? No way. It’s one person. The same one. The one who is making the army is the one who stole my scent.”

Archie wasn’t accustomed to being taken by surprise. He froze, and was still for so long that I started counting in my head as I waited. He didn’t move for two minutes straight. Then his eyes refocused on me.

“You’re right,” he said in a hollow tone. “Of course you’re right. And when you put it that way….”

“Edythe had it wrong,” I whispered. “It was a test… to see if it would work. If he could get in and out safely as long as he didn’t do anything you would be watching out for. Like trying to kill me… And he didn’t take my things to prove he’d found me. He stole my scent… so that others could find me.”

His eyes were wide with shock. I was right, and I could see that he knew it, too.

“Oh, no,” he mouthed.

I was through expecting my emotions to make sense anymore. As I processed the fact that someone had created an army of vampires—the army that had gruesomely murdered dozens of people in Seattle—for the express purpose of destroying me, I felt a spasm of relief.

Part of it was finally solving that irritating feeling that I was missing something vital.

But the larger part was something else entirely.

“Well,” I whispered, “everyone can relax. Nobody’s trying to exterminate the Cullens after all.”

“If you think that one thing has changed, you’re absolutely wrong,” Archie said through his teeth. “If someone wants one of us, they’re going to have to go through the rest of us to get to her.”
“Thanks, Archie. But at least we know what they’re really after. That has to help.”

“Maybe,” he muttered. He started pacing back and forth across my room.

*Thud, thud*—a fist hammered against my door.

I jumped. Archie didn’t seem to notice.

“Aren’t you ready yet? We’re gonna be late!” Charlie complained, sounding edgy. Charlie hated occasions about as much as I did. In his case, a lot of the problem was having to dress up.

“Almost. Give me a minute,” I said hoarsely.

He was quiet for half a second. “Are you crying?”

“No. I’m nervous. Go away.”

I heard him clump down the stairs.

“I have to go,” Archie whispered.

“Why?”

“Edythe is coming. If she hears this…”

“Go, go!” I urged immediately. Edythe would go berserk when she knew. I couldn’t keep it from her for long, but maybe the graduation ceremony wasn’t the best time for her reaction.

“Put it on,” Archie commanded as he flitted out the window.

I did what he said, dressing in a daze.

I’d been planning to do something more sophisticated with my hair, but time was up, so it hung straight and boring as on any other day. It didn’t matter. I didn’t bother to look in the mirror, so I had no idea how Archie’s sweater and skirt ensemble worked. That didn’t matter, either. I threw the ugly yellow polyester graduation robe over my arm and hurried down the stairs.

“You look nice,” Charlie said, already gruff with suppressed emotion. “Is that new?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, trying to concentrate. “Archie gave it to me. Thanks.”

Edythe arrived just a few minutes after her brother left. It wasn’t enough time for me to pull together a calm façade. But, since we were riding in the cruiser with Charlie, she never had a chance to ask me what was wrong.

Charlie had gotten stubborn last week when he’d learned that I was intending to ride with Edythe to the graduation ceremony. And I could see his point—parents should have some rights come graduation day. I’d conceded with good grace, and Edythe had cheerfully suggested that we all go together. Since Carlisle and Earnest had no problem with this, Charlie couldn’t come up with a compelling objection; he’d agreed with poor grace. And now Edythe rode in the backseat of my father’s police car, behind the fiberglass divider, with an amused expression—probably due to my father’s amused expression, and the grin that widened every time Charlie stole a glance at Edythe in his rearview mirror. Which almost certainly meant that Charlie was imagining things that would get him in trouble with me if he said them out loud.

“Are you all right?” Edythe whispered when she helped me from the front seat in the school
parking lot.

“Nervous,” I answered, and it wasn’t even a lie.

“You are so beautiful,” she said.

She looked like she wanted to say more, but Charlie, in an obvious maneuver that he meant to be subtle, shrugged in between us and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Are you excited?” he asked me.

“Not really,” I admitted.

“Bella, this is a big deal. You’re graduating from high school. It’s the real world for you now. College. Living on your own…. You’re not my little girl anymore.” Charlie choked up a bit at the end.

“Dad,” I moaned. “Please don’t get all weepy on me.”

“Who’s weepy?” he growled. “Now, why aren’t you excited?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I guess it hasn’t hit yet or something.”

“It’s good that Archie is throwing this party. You need something to perk you up.”

“Sure. A party’s exactly what I need.”

Charlie laughed at my tone and squeezed my shoulders. Edythe looked at the clouds, her face thoughtful.

My father had to leave us at the back door of the gym and go around to the main entrance with the rest of the parents.

It was pandemonium as Ms. Cope from the front office and Mr. Varner the math teacher tried to line everyone up alphabetically.

“Up front, Miss Cullen,” Mr. Varner barked at Edythe.

“Hey, Bella!”

I looked up to see Jessica Stanley waving at me from the back of the line with a smile on her face.

Edythe kissed me quickly, sighed, and went to go stand with the C’s. Archie wasn’t there. What was he going to do? Skip graduation? What poor timing on my part. I should have waited to figure things out until after this was over with.

“Down here, Bella!” Jessica called again.

I walked down the line to take my place behind Jessica, mildly curious as to why she was suddenly so friendly. As I got closer, I saw Angela five people back, watching Jessica with the same curiosity.

Jess was babbling before I was in earshot.

“…so amazing. I mean, it seems like we just met, and now we’re graduating together,” she gushed. “Can you believe it’s over? I feel like screaming!”
“So do I,” I muttered.

“This is all just so incredible. Do you remember your first day here? We were friends, like, right away. From the first time we saw each other. Amazing. And now I’m off to California and you’ll be in Alaska and I’m going to miss you so much! You have to promise that we’ll get together sometimes! I’m so glad you’re having a party. That’s perfect. Because we really haven’t spent much time together in a while and now we’re all leaving....”

She droned on and on, and I was sure the sudden return of our friendship was due to graduation nostalgia and gratitude for the party invite, not that I’d had anything to do with that. I paid attention as well as I could while I shrugged into my robe. And I found that I was glad that things could end on a good note with Jessica.

Because it was an ending, no matter what Eric, the valedictorian, had to say about commencement meaning “beginning” and all the rest of the trite nonsense. Maybe more for me than for the rest, but we were all leaving something behind us today.

It went so quickly. I felt like I’d hit the fast forward button. Were we supposed to march quite that fast? And then Eric was speed talking in his nervousness, the words and phrases running together so they didn’t make sense anymore. Principal Greene started calling names, one after the other without a long enough pause between; the front row in the gymnasium was rushing to catch up. Poor Ms. Cope was all thumbs as she tried to give the principal the right diploma to hand to the right student.

I watched as Archie, suddenly appearing, danced across the stage to take his, a look of deep concentration on his face. Edythe followed behind, her expression confused, but not upset. Only the two of them could carry off the hideous yellow and still look the way they did. They stood out from the rest of the crowd, their beauty and grace otherworldly. I wondered how I’d ever fallen for their human farce. A couple of angels, standing there with wings intact, would be less conspicuous.

I heard Mr. Greene call my name and I rose from my chair, waiting for the line in front of me to move. I was conscious of cheering in the back of the gym, and I looked around to see Julie pulling Charlie to his feet, both of them hooting in encouragement. I could just make out the top of Billy’s head beside Julie’s elbow. I managed to throw them an approximation of a smile.

Mr. Greene finished with the list of names, and then continued to hand out diplomas with a sheepish grin as we filed past.

“Congratulations, Miss Stanley,” he mumbled as Jess took hers.

“Congratulations, Miss Swan,” he mumbled to me, pressing the diploma into my good hand.

“Thanks,” I murmured.

And that was it.

I went to stand next to Jessica with the assembled graduates. Jess was all red around the eyes, and she kept blotting her face with the sleeve of her robe. It took me a second to understand that she was crying.

Mr. Greene said something I didn’t hear, and everyone around me shouted and screamed. Yellow hats rained down. I pulled mine off, too late, and just let it fall to the ground.

“Oh, Bella!” Jess blubbered over the sudden roar of conversation. “I can’t believe we’re done.”
“I can’t believe it’s all over,” I mumbled.

She threw her arms around my neck. “You have to promise we won’t lose touch.”

I hugged her back, feeling a little awkward as I dodged her request. “I’m so glad I know you, Jessica. It was a good two years.”

“It was,” she sighed, and sniffed. Then she dropped her arms. “Lauren!” she squealed, waving over her head and pushing through the massed yellow gowns. Families were beginning to converge, pressing us tighter together.

I caught sight of Angela and Ben, but they were surrounded by their families. I would congratulate them later.

I craned my head, looking for Archie.

“Congratulations,” Edythe whispered in my ear, her arms winding around my waist. Her voice was subdued; she’d been in no hurry for me to reach this particular milestone.

“Um, thanks.”

“You don’t look like you’re over the nerves yet,” she noted.

“Not quite yet.”

“What’s left to worry about? The party? It won’t be that horrible.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Who are you looking for?”

My searching wasn’t quite as subtle as I’d thought. “Archie—where is he?”

“He ran out as soon as he had his diploma.”

Her voice took on a new tone. I looked up to see her confused expression as she stared toward the back door of the gym, and I made an impulse decision—the kind I really should think twice about, but rarely did.

“Worrying about Archie?” I asked.

“Er…” She didn’t want to answer that.

“What was he thinking about, anyway? To keep you out, I mean.”

Her eyes flashed down to my face, and narrowed in suspicion. “He was translating the Battle Hymn of the Republic into Arabic, actually. When he finished that, he moved on to Korean sign language.”

I laughed nervously. “I suppose that would keep his head busy enough.”

“You know what he’s hiding from me,” she accused.

“Sure.” I smiled a weak smile. “I’m the one who came up with it.”

She waited, confused.
I looked around. Charlie would be on his way through the crowd now.

“Knowing Archie,” I whispered in a rush, “he’ll probably try to keep this from you until after the party. But since I’m all for the party being canceled—well, don’t go berserk, regardless, okay? It’s always better to know as much as possible. It has to help somehow.”

“What are you talking about?”

I saw Charlie’s head bob up over the other heads as he searched for me. He spotted me and waved.

“Just stay calm, okay?”

She nodded once, her mouth a grim line.

In hurried whispers I explained my reasoning to her. “I think you’re wrong about things coming at us from all sides. I think it’s mostly coming at us from one side… and I think it’s coming at me, really. It’s all connected, it has to be. It’s just one person who’s messing with Archie’s visions. The stranger in my room was a test, to see if someone could get around him. It’s got to be the same one who keeps changing his mind, and the newborns, and stealing my clothes—all of it goes together. My scent is for them.”

Her face had turned so white that I had a hard time finishing.

“But no one’s coming for you, don’t you see? This is good—Earnest and Archie and Carlisle, no one wants to hurt them!”

Her eyes were huge, wide with panic, dazed and horrified. She could see that I was right, just as Archie had.

I put my hand on her cheek. “Calm,” I pleaded.

“Bella!” Charlie crowed, pushing his way past the close-packed families around us.

“Congratulations, baby!” He was still yelling, even though he was right at my ear now. He wrapped his arms around me, ever so slyly shuffling Edythe off to the side as he did so.

“Thanks,” I muttered, preoccupied by the expression on Edythe’s face. She still hadn’t gained control. Her hands were halfway extended toward me, like she was about to grab me and make a run for it. Only slightly more in control of myself than she was, running didn’t seem like such a terrible idea to me.

“Julie and Billy had to take off—did you see that they were here?” Charlie asked, taking a step back, but keeping his hands on my shoulders. He had his back to Edythe—probably an effort to exclude her, but that was fine at the moment. Edythe’s mouth was hanging open, her eyes still wide with dread.

“Yeah,” I assured my father, trying to pay enough attention. “Heard them, too.”

“It was nice of them to show up,” Charlie said.

“Mm-hmm.”

Okay, so telling Edythe had been a really bad idea. Archie was right to keep his thoughts clouded. I should have waited till we were alone somewhere, maybe with the rest of her family. And nothing breakable close by—like windows… cars… school buildings. Her face brought back all my fear
and then some. Though her expression was past the fear now—it was pure fury that was suddenly plain on her features.

“So where do you want to go out for dinner?” Charlie asked. “The sky’s the limit.”

“I can cook.”

“Don’t be silly. Do you want to go to the Lodge?” he asked with an eager smile.

I did not particularly enjoy Charlie’s favorite restaurant, but, at this point, what was the difference? I wasn’t going to be able to eat anyway.

“Sure, the Lodge, cool,” I said.

Charlie smiled wider, and then sighed. He turned his head halfway toward Edythe, without really looking at her.

“You coming, too, Edythe?”

I stared at her, my eyes beseeching. Edythe pulled her expression together just before Charlie turned to see why he hadn’t gotten an answer.

“No, thank you,” Edythe said stiffly, her face hard and cold.

“Do you have plans with your parents?” Charlie asked, a frown in his voice. Edythe was always more polite than Charlie deserved; the sudden hostility surprised him.

“Yes. If you’ll excuse me…. ” Edythe turned abruptly and stalked away through the dwindling crowd. She moved just a little bit too fast, too upset to keep up her usually perfect charade.

“What did I say?” Charlie asked with a guilty expression.

“Don’t worry about it, Dad,” I reassured him. “I don’t think it’s you.”

“Are you two fighting again?”

“Nobody’s fighting. Mind your own business.”

“You are my business.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s go eat.”

The Lodge was crowded. The place was, in my opinion, overpriced and tacky, but it was the only thing close to a formal restaurant in town, so it was always popular for events. I stared morosely at a depressed-looking stuffed elk head while Charlie ate prime rib and talked over the back of the seat to Tyler Crowley’s parents. It was noisy—everyone there had just come from graduation, and most were chatting across the aisles and over the booth-tops like Charlie.

I had my back to the front windows, and I resisted the urge to turn around and search for the eyes I could feel on me now. I knew I wouldn’t be able to see anything. Just as I knew there was no chance that she would leave me unguarded, even for a second. Not after this.

Dinner dragged. Charlie, busy socializing, ate too slowly. I picked at my burger, stuffing pieces of it into my napkin when I was sure his attention was somewhere else. It all seemed to take a very long time, but when I looked at the clock—which I did more often than necessary—the hands hadn’t moved much.
Finally Charlie got his change back and put a tip on the table. I stood up.

“In a hurry?” he asked me.

“I want to help Archie set things up,” I claimed.

“Okay.” He turned away from me to say goodnight to everyone. I went out to wait by the cruiser.

I leaned against the passenger door, waiting for Charlie to drag himself away from the impromptu party. It was almost dark in the parking lot, the clouds so thick that there was no telling if the sun had set or not. The air felt heavy, like it was about to rain.

Something moved in the shadows.

My gasp turned into a sigh of relief as Edythe appeared out of the gloom.

Without a word, she pulled me tightly against her chest. One cool hand found my chin, and pulled my face up so that she could press her hard lips to mine. I could feel the tension in her jaw.

“How are you?” I asked as soon as she let me breathe.

“Not so great,” she murmured. “But I’ve got a handle on myself. I’m sorry that I lost it back there.”

“My fault. I should have waited to tell you.”

“No,” she disagreed. “This is something I needed to know. I can’t believe I didn’t see it!”

“You’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“And you don’t?”

She suddenly kissed me again, not letting me answer. She pulled away after just a second.

“Charlie’s on his way.”

“I’ll have him drop me at your house.”

“I’ll follow you there.”

“That’s not really necessary,” I tried to say, but she was already gone.

“Bella?” Charlie called from the doorway of the restaurant, squinting into the darkness.

“I’m out here.”

Charlie sauntered out to the car, muttering about impatience.

“So, how do you feel?” he asked me as we drove north along the highway. “It’s been a big day.”

“I feel fine,” I lied.

He laughed, seeing through me easily. “Worried about the party?” he guessed.

“Yeah,” I lied again.

This time he didn’t notice. “You were never one for the parties.”

“Wonder where I got that from,” I murmured.
Charlie chuckled. “Well, you look really nice. I wish I’d thought to get you something. Sorry.”

“Don’t be silly, Dad.”

“It’s not silly. I feel like I don’t always do everything for you that I should.”

“That’s ridiculous. You do a fantastic job. World’s best dad. And…” It wasn’t easy to talk about feelings with Charlie, but I persevered after clearing my throat. “And I’m really glad I came to live with you, Dad. It was the best idea I ever had. So don’t worry—you’re just experiencing post-graduation pessimism.”

He snorted. “Maybe. But I’m sure I slipped up in a few places. I mean, look at your hand!”

I stared down blankly at my hands. My left hand rested lightly on the dark brace I rarely thought about. My broken knuckle didn’t hurt much anymore.

“I never thought I needed to teach you how to throw a punch. Guess I was wrong about that.”

“I thought you were on Julie’s side?”

“No matter what side I’m on, if someone kisses you without your permission, you should be able to make your feelings clear without hurting yourself. You didn’t keep your thumb inside your fist, did you?”

“No, Dad. That’s kind of sweet in a weird way, but I don’t think lessons would have helped. Julie’s head is really hard.”

Charlie laughed. “I don’t want to tell anyone to hit a girl, but… hit her in the gut next time.”

“Next time?” I asked incredulously.

“Aw, don’t be too hard on the kid. She’s young.”

“She’s obnoxious.”

“She’s still your friend.”

“I know.” I sighed. “I don’t really know what the right thing to do here is, Dad.”

Charlie nodded slowly. “Yeah. The right thing isn’t always real obvious. Sometimes the right thing for one person is the wrong thing for someone else. So… good luck figuring that out.”

“Thanks,” I muttered dryly.

Charlie laughed again, and then frowned. “If this party gets too wild…,” he began.

“Don’t worry about it, Dad. Carlisle and Earnest are going to be there. I’m sure you can come, too, if you want.”

Charlie grimaced as he squinted through the windshield into the night. Charlie enjoyed a good party just about as much as I did.

“Where’s the turnoff, again?” he asked. “They ought to clear out their drive—it’s impossible to find in the dark.”

“Just around the next bend, I think.” I pursed my lips. “You know, you’re right—it is impossible to
find. Archie said he put a map in the invitation, but even so, maybe everyone will get lost.” I cheered up slightly at the idea.

“Maybe,” Charlie said as the road curved to the east. “Or maybe not.”

The black velvet darkness was interrupted ahead, just where the Cullens’ drive should be. Someone had wrapped the trees on either side in thousands of twinkle lights, impossible to miss.

“Archie,” I said sourly.

“Wow,” Charlie said as we turned onto the drive. The two trees at the entry weren’t the only ones lit. Every twenty feet or so, another shining beacon guided us toward the big white house. All the way—all three miles of the way.

“He doesn’t do things halfway, does he?” Charlie mumbled in awe.

“Sure you don’t want to come in?”

“Extremely sure. Have fun, kid.”

“Thanks so much, Dad.”

He was laughing to himself as I got out and shut the door. I watched him drive away, still grinning. With a sigh, I marched up the stairs to endure my party.
“BELLA?”

Edythe’s soft voice came from behind me. I turned to see her spring lightly up the porch steps, her hair windblown from running. She pulled me into her arms at once, just like she had in the parking lot, and kissed me again.

This kiss frightened me. There was too much tension, too strong an edge to the way her lips crushed mine—like she was afraid we only had so much time left to us.

I couldn’t let myself think about that. Not if I was going to have to act human for the next several hours. I pulled away from her.

“Let’s get this stupid party over with,” I mumbled, not meeting her eyes.

She put her hands on either side of my face, waiting until I looked up.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I touched her lips with the fingers of my good hand. “I’m not worried about myself so much.”

“Why am I not surprised by that?” she muttered to herself. She took a deep breath, and then she smiled slightly. “Ready to celebrate?” she asked.

I groaned.

She held the door for me, keeping her arm securely around my waist. I stood frozen there for a minute, then I slowly shook my head.

“Unbelievable.”

Edythe shrugged. “Archie will be Archie.”

The interior of the Cullens’ home had been transformed into a nightclub—the kind that didn’t often exist in real life, only on TV.

“Edythe!” Archie called from beside a gigantic speaker. “I need your advice.” He gestured toward a towering stack of CDs. “Should we give them familiar and comforting? Or”—he gestured to a different pile—“educate their taste in music?”

“Keep it comforting,” Edythe recommended. “You can only lead the horse to water.”

Archie nodded seriously, and started throwing the educational CDs into a box. I noticed that he had changed into a sequined tank top and red leather pants. His bare skin reacted oddly to the pulsing red and purple lights.

“I think I’m underdressed.”

“You’re perfect,” Edythe disagreed.

“You’ll do,” Archie amended.

“Thanks.” I sighed. “Do you really think people will come?” Anyone could hear the hope in my
voice. Archie made a face at me.

“Everyone will come,” Edythe answered. “They’re all dying to see the inside of the reclusive Cullens’ mystery house.”

“Fabulous,” I moaned.

There wasn’t anything I could do to help. I doubted that—even after I didn’t need sleep and moved at a much faster speed—I would ever be able to get things done the way Archie did.

Edythe refused to let me go for a second, dragging me along with her as she hunted up Jasper and then Carlisle to tell them of my epiphany. I listened with quiet horror as they discussed their attack on the army in Seattle. I could tell that Jasper was not pleased with the way the numbers stood, but they’d been unable to contact anyone besides Tanya’s unwilling family. Jasper didn’t try to hide his desperation the way Edythe would have. It was easy to see that he didn’t like gambling with stakes this high.

I couldn’t stay behind, waiting and hoping for them to come home. I wouldn’t. I would go mad.

The doorbell rang.

All at once, everything was surreally normal. A perfect smile, genuine and warm, replaced the stress on Carlisle’s face. Archie turned the volume of the music up, and then danced to get the door.

It was a Suburban-load of my friends, either too nervous or too intimidated to arrive on their own. Jessica was the first one in the door, with Mike right behind her. Tyler, Conner, Austin, Lee, Samantha… even Lauren trailing in last, her critical eyes alight with curiosity. They all were curious, and then overwhelmed as they took in the huge room decked out like a chic rave. The room wasn’t empty; all the Cullens had taken their places, ready to put on their usual perfect human charade. Tonight I felt like I was acting every bit as much as they were.

I went to greet Jess and Mike, hoping the edge in my voice sounded like the right kind of excitement. Before I could get to anyone else, the bell rang again. I let Angela and Ben in, leaving the door wide, because Eric and Katie were just reaching the steps.

I didn’t get another chance to panic. I had to talk to everyone, concentrate on being upbeat, a hostess. Though the party had been billed as a joint event for Archie, Edythe, and me, there was no denying that I was the most popular target for congratulations and thanks. Maybe because the Cullens looked just slightly wrong under Archie’s party lights. Maybe because those lights left the room dim and mysterious. Not an atmosphere to make your average human feel relaxed when standing next to someone like Eleanor. I saw Eleanor grin at Mike over the food table, the red lights gleaming off her teeth, and watched Mike take an automatic step back.

Probably Archie had done this on purpose, to force me into the center of attention—a place he thought I should enjoy more. He was forever trying to make me be human the way he thought humans should be.

The party was a clear success, despite the instinctive edginess cause by the Cullens’ presence—or maybe that simply added a thrill to the atmosphere. The music was infectious, the lights almost hypnotic. From the way the food disappeared, that must have been good, too. The room was soon crowded, though never claustrophobic. The entire senior class seemed to be there, along with most of the juniors. Bodies swayed to the beat that rumbled under the soles of their feet, the party constantly on the edge of breaking into a dance.
It wasn’t as hard as I’d thought it would be. I followed Archie’s lead, mingling and chatting for a minute with everyone. They seemed easy enough to please. I was sure this party was far cooler than anything the town of Forks had experienced before. Archie was almost purring—no one here would forget this night.

I’d circled the room once, and was back to Jessica. She babbled excitedly, and it was not necessary to pay strict attention, because the odds were she wouldn’t need a response from me anytime soon. Edythe was at my side—still refusing to let go of me. She kept one hand securely at my waist, pulling me closer now and then in response to thoughts I probably didn’t want to hear.

So I was immediately suspicious when she dropped her arm and edged away from me.

“Stay here,” she murmured in my ear. “I’ll be right back.”

She passed gracefully through the crowd without seeming to touch any of the close-packed bodies, gone too quickly for me to ask why she was leaving. I stared after her with narrowed eyes while Jessica shouted over the music eagerly, hanging on to my elbow, oblivious to my distraction.

I watched her as she reached the dark shadow beside the kitchen doorway, where the lights only shone intermittently. She was leaning over someone, but I couldn’t see past all the heads between us.

I stretched up on my toes, craning my neck. Right then, a red light flashed across her back and glinted off the red sequins of Archie’s shirt. The light only touched his face for half a second, but it was enough.

“Excuse me for a minute, Jess,” I mumbled, pulling my arm away. I didn’t pause for her reaction, even to see if I’d hurt her feelings with my abruptness.

I ducked my way through the bodies, getting shoved around a bit. A few people were dancing now. I hurried to the kitchen door.

Edythe was gone, but Archie was still there in the dark, his face blank—the kind of expressionless look you see on the face of someone who has just witnessed a horrible accident. One of his hands gripped the door frame, like he needed the support.

“What, Archie, what? What did you see?” My hands were clutched in front of me—begging.

He didn’t look at me, he was staring away. I followed his gaze and watched as he caught Edythe’s eye across the room. Her face was empty as a stone. She turned and disappeared into the shadows under the stair.

The doorbell rang just then, hours after the last time, and Archie looked up with a puzzled expression that quickly turned into one of disgust.

“Who invited the werewolf?” he griped at me.

I scowled. “Guilty.”

I’d thought I’d rescinded that invitation—not that I’d ever dreamed Julie would come here, regardless.

“Well, you go take care of it, then. I have to talk to Carlisle.”

“No, Archie, wait!” I tried to reach for his arm, but he was gone and my hand clutched the empty
“Damn it!” I grumbled.

I knew this was it. Archie had seen what he’d been waiting for, and I honestly didn’t feel I could stand the suspense long enough to answer the door. The doorbell peeled again, too long, someone holding down the button. I turned my back toward the door resolutely, and scanned the darkened room for Archie.

I couldn’t see anything. I started pushing for the stairs.

“Hey, Bella!”

Julie’s deep voice caught a lull in the music, and I looked up in spite of myself at the sound of my name.

I made a face.

It wasn’t just one werewolf, it was three. Julie had let herself in, flanked on either side by Quil and Embry. The two of them looked terribly tense, their eyes flickering around the room like they’d just walked into a haunted crypt. Embry’s trembling hand still held the door, his body half-turned to run for it.

Julie was waving at me, calmer than the others, though her nose was wrinkled in disgust. I waved back—waved goodbye—and turned to look for Archie. I squeezed through a space between Conner’s and Lauren’s backs.

She came out of nowhere, her hand on my shoulder pulling me back toward the shadow by the kitchen. I ducked under her grip, but she grabbed my good wrist and yanked me from the crowd.

“Friendly reception,” she noted.

I pulled my hand free and scowled at her. “What are you doing here?”

“You invited me, remember?”

“In case my right hook was too subtle for you, let me translate: that was me uninviting you.”

“Don’t be a poor sport. I brought you a graduation present and everything.”

I folded my arms across my chest. I didn’t want to fight with Julie right now. I wanted to know what Archie had seen and what Edythe and Carlisle were saying about it. I craned my head around Julie, searching for them.

“Take it back to the store, Jules. I’ve got to do something…”

She stepped into my line of sight, demanding my attention.

“I can’t take it back. I didn’t get it from the store—I made it myself. Took a really long time, too.”

I leaned around her again, but I couldn’t see any of the Cullens. Where had they gone? My eyes scanned the darkened room.

“Oh, c’mon, Bell. Don’t pretend like I’m not here!”

“I’m not.” I couldn’t see them anywhere. “Look, Jules, I’ve got a lot on my mind right now.”
She put her hand under my chin and pulled my face up. “Could I please have just a few seconds of your undivided attention, Miss Swan?”

I jerked away from her touch. “Keep your hands to yourself, Julie,” I hissed.

“Sorry!” she said at once, holding her hands up in surrender. “I really am sorry. About the other day, I mean, too. I shouldn’t have kissed you like that. It was wrong. I guess…. well, I guess I deluded myself into thinking you wanted me to.”

“Deluded—what a perfect description!”

“Be nice. You could accept my apology, you know.”

“Fine. Apology accepted. Now, if you’ll just excuse me for a moment….”

“Okay,” she mumbled, and her voice was so different from before that I stopped searching for Archie and scrutinized her face. She was staring at the floor, hiding her eyes. Her lower lip jutted out just a little bit.

“I guess you’d rather be with your real friends,” she said in the same defeated tone. “I get it.”

I groaned. “Aw, Jules, you know that’s not fair.”

“You should.” I leaned forward, peering up, trying to look into her eyes. She looked up then, over my head, avoiding my gaze.

“Jules?”

She refused to look at me.

“Hey, you said you made me something, right?” I asked. “Was that just talk? Where’s my present?” My attempt to fake enthusiasm was pretty sad, but it worked. She rolled her eyes and then grimaced at me.

I kept up the lame pretense, holding my hand open in front of me. “I’m waiting.”

“Right,” she grumbled sarcastically. But she also reached into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out a small bag of a loose-woven, multi-colored fabric. It was tied shut with leather drawstrings. She set it on my palm.

“Hey, that’s pretty, Jules. Thanks!”

She sighed. “The present is inside, Bella.”

“Oh.”

I had some trouble with the strings. She sighed again and took it from me, sliding the ties open with one easy tug of the right cord. I held my hand out for it, but she turned the bag upside down and shook something silver into my hand. Metal links clinked quietly against each other.

“I didn’t make the bracelet,” she admitted. “Just the charm.”

Fastened to one of the links of the silver bracelet was a tiny wooden carving. I held it between my fingers to look at it closer. It was amazing the amount of detail involved in the little figurine—the
miniature wolf was utterly realistic. It was even carved out of some red-brown wood that matched the color of her skin.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered. “You made this? How?”

She shrugged. “It’s something Billy taught me. He’s better at it than I am.”

“That’s hard to believe,” I murmured, turning the tiny wolf around and around in my fingers.

“Do you really like it?”

“Yes! It’s unbelievable, Jules.”

She smiled, happily at first, but then the expression soured. “Well, I figured that maybe it would make you remember me once in a while. You know how it is, out of sight, out of mind.”

I ignored the attitude. “Here, help me put it on.”

I held out my left wrist, since the right was stuck in the brace. She fastened the catch easily, though it looked too delicate for her big fingers to manage.

“You’ll wear it?” she asked.

“Of course I will.”

She grinned at me—it was the happy smile that I loved to see her wear.

I returned it for a moment, but then my eyes shot reflexively around the room again, anxiously scanning the crowd for some sign of Edythe or Archie.

“Why’re you so distracted?” Julie wondered.

“It’s nothing,” I lied, trying to concentrate. “Thanks for the present, really. I love it.”

“Bella?” Her brows pulled together, throwing her eyes deep into their shadow. “Something’s going on, isn’t it?”

“Jules, I… no, there’s nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, you suck at lying. You should tell me what’s going on. We want to know these things,” she said, slipping into the plural at the end.

She was probably right; the wolves would certainly be interested in what was happening. Only I wasn’t sure what that was yet. I wouldn’t know for sure until I found Archie.

“Julie, I will tell you. Just let me figure out what’s happening, okay? I need to talk to Archie.”

Understanding lit her expression. “The psychic saw something.”

“Yes, just when you showed up.”

“Is this about the bloodsucker in your room?” she murmured, pitching her voice below the thrum of the music.

“It’s related,” I admitted.

She processed that for a minute, leaning her head to one side while she read my face. “You know
something you’re not telling me… something big.”

What was the point in lying again? She knew me too well. “Yes.”

Julie stared at me for one short moment, and then turned to catch her pack brothers’ eyes where they stood in the entry, awkward and uncomfortable. When they took in her expression, they started moving, weaving their way agilely through the partiers, almost like they were dancing, too. In half a minute, they stood on either side of Julie, towering over me.


Embry and Quil looked back and forth between our faces, confused and wary.

“Julie, I don’t know everything.” I kept searching the room, now for a rescue. They had me backed into a corner in every sense.

“What you do know, then.”

They all folded their arms across their chests at exactly the same moment. It was a little bit funny, but mostly menacing.

And then I caught sight of Archie descending the stairs, his white skin glowing in the purple light.

“Archie!” I squeaked in relief.

He looked right at me as soon as I called his name, despite the thudding bass that should have drowned my voice. I waved eagerly, and watched his face as he took in the three werewolves leaning over me. His eyes narrowed.

But, before that reaction, his face was full of stress and fear. I bit my lip as he skipped to my side.

Julie, Quil, and Embry all leaned away from him with uneasy expressions. He put his arm around my waist.

“I need to talk to you,” he murmured into my ear.

“Er, Jules, I’ll see you later….” I mumbled as we eased around them.

Julie threw her long arm out to block our way, bracing her hand against the wall. “Hey, not so fast.”

Archie stared up at her, eyes wide and incredulous. “Excuse me?”

“Tell us what’s going on,” she demanded in a growl.

Jasper appeared quite literally out of nowhere. One second it was just Archie and me against the wall, Julie blocking our exit, and then Jasper was standing on the other side of Julie’s arm, his expression terrifying.

Julie slowly pulled her arm back. It seemed like the best move, going with the assumption that she wanted to keep that arm.

“We have a right to know,” Julie muttered, still glaring at Archie.

Jasper stepped in between them, and the three werewolves braced themselves.

“Hey, hey,” I said, adding a slightly hysterical chuckle. “This is a party, remember?”
Nobody paid any attention to me. Julie glared at Archie while Jasper glowered at Julie. Archie’s face was suddenly thoughtful.

“It’s okay, Jasper. She actually has a point.”

Jasper did not relax his position.

I was sure the suspense was going to make my head explode in about one second. “What did you see, Archie?”

He stared at Julie for one second, and then turned to me, evidently having chosen to let them hear.

“The decision’s been made.”

“You’re going to Seattle?”

“No.”

I felt the color drain out of my face. My stomach lurched. “They’re coming here,” I choked out.

The Quileutes watched silently, reading every unconscious play of emotion on our faces. They were rooted in place, and yet not completely still. All three pairs of hands were trembling.

“Yes.”

“Forks,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

“Forks?”

He nodded, understanding my question. “One carried your red shirt.”

I tried to swallow.

Jasper’s expression was disapproving. I could tell he didn’t like discussing this in front of the werewolves, but he had something he needed to say. “We can’t let them come that far. There aren’t enough of us to protect the town.”

“I know,” Archie said, his face suddenly desolate. “But it doesn’t matter where we stop them. There still won’t be enough of us, and some of them will come here to search.”

“No!” I whispered.

The noise of the party overwhelmed the sound of my denial. All around us, my friends and neighbors and petty enemies ate and laughed and swayed to the music, oblivious to the fact that they were about to face horror, danger, maybe death. Because of me.

“Archie,” I mouthed his name. “I have to go, I have to get away from here.”

“That won’t help. It’s not like we’re dealing with a tracker. They’ll still come looking here first.”

“Then I have to go to meet them!” If my voice hadn’t been so hoarse and strained, it might have been a shriek. “If they find what they’re looking for, maybe they’ll go away and not hurt anyone else!”
“Bella!” Archie protested.

“Hold it,” Julie ordered in a low, forceful voice. “What is coming?”

Archie turned his icy gaze on her. “Our kind. Lots of them.”

“What is coming?”

“For Bella. That’s all we know.”

“There are too many for you?” she asked.

Jasper bridled. “We have a few advantages, dog. It will be an even fight.”

“No,” Julie said, and a strange, fierce half-smile spread across her face. “It won’t be even.”

“Excellent!” Archie hissed.

I stared, still frozen in horror, at Archie’s new expression. His face was alive with exultation, all the despair wiped clean from his perfect features.

He grinned at Julie, and she grinned back.

“Everything just disappeared, of course,” he told her in a smug voice. “That’s inconvenient, but, all things considered, I’ll take it.”

“We’ll have to coordinate,” Julie said. “It won’t be easy for us. Still, this is our job more than yours.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but we need the help. We aren’t going to be picky.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” I interrupted them.

Archie was on his toes, Julie leaning down toward him, both of their faces lit up with excitement, both of their noses wrinkled against the smell. They looked at me impatiently.

“Coordinate?” I repeated through my teeth.

“You didn’t honestly think you were going to keep us out of this?” Julie asked.

“You are staying out of this!”

“Your psychic doesn’t think so.”

“Archie—tell them no!” I insisted. “They’ll get killed!”

Julie, Quil, and Embry all laughed out loud.

“Bella,” Archie said, his voice soothing, placating. “separately we all could get killed. Together—”

“It’ll be no problem,” Julie finished his sentence. Quil laughed again.

“How many?” Quil asked eagerly.

“No!” I shouted.

Archie didn’t even look at me. “It changes—twenty-one today, but the numbers are going down.”
“Why?” Julie asked, curious.

“Long story,” Archie said, suddenly looking around the room. “And this isn’t the place for it.”

“Later tonight?” Julie pushed.

“Yes,” Jasper answered him. “We were already planning a… strategic meeting. If you’re going to fight with us, you’ll need some instruction.”

The wolves all made a disgruntled face at the last part.

“No!” I moaned.

“This will be odd,” Jasper said thoughtfully. “I never considered working together. This has to be a first.”

“No doubt about that,” Julie agreed. She was in a hurry now. “We’ve got to get back to Sam. What time?”

“What’s too late for you?”

All three rolled their eyes. “What time?” Julie repeated.

“Three o’clock?”

“Where?”

“About ten miles due north of the Hoh Forest ranger station. Come at it from the west and you’ll be able to follow our scent in.”

“We’ll be there.”

They turned to leave.

“Wait, Jules!” I called after her. “Please! Don’t do this!”

She paused, turning back to grin at me, while Quil and Embry headed impatiently for the door. “Don’t be ridiculous, Bells. You’re giving me a much better gift than the one I gave you.”

“No!” I shouted again. The sound of an electric guitar drowned my cry.

She didn’t respond; she hurried to catch up with her friends, who were already gone. I watched helplessly as Julie disappeared.
“THAT HAD TO BE THE LONGEST PARTY IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD,” I complained on the way home.

Edythe didn’t seem to disagree. “It’s over now,” she said, rubbing my arm soothingly.

Because I was the only one who needed soothing. Edythe was fine now—all the Cullens were fine.

They’d all reassured me; Archie reaching up to pat my head as I left, eyeing Jasper meaningfully until a flood of peace swirled around me, Earnest kissing my forehead and promising me everything was all right, Eleanor laughing boisterously and asking why I was the only one who was allowed to fight with werewolves… Julie’s solution had them all relaxed, almost euphoric after the long weeks of stress.

Doubt had been replaced with confidence. The party had ended on a note of true celebration. Not for me.

Bad enough—horrible—that the Cullens would fight for me. It was already too much that I would have to allow that. It already felt like more than I could bear.

Not Julie, too. Not her foolish, eager brothers—most of them even younger than I was. They were just oversized, over-muscled children, and they looked forward to this like it was picnic on the beach. I could not have them in danger, too. My nerves felt frayed and exposed. I didn’t know how much longer I could restrain the urge to scream out loud.

I whispered now, to keep my voice under control. “You’re taking me with you tonight.”

“Bella, you’re worn out.”

“You think I could sleep?”

She frowned. “This is an experiment. I’m not sure if it will be possible for us all to… cooperate. I don’t want you in the middle of that.”

As if that didn’t make me all the more anxious to go. “If you won’t take me, then I’ll call Julie.”

Her eyes tightened. That was a low blow, and I knew it. But there was no way I was being left behind.

She didn’t answer; we were at Charlie’s house now. The front light was on.

“See you upstairs,” I muttered.

I tiptoed in the front door. Charlie was asleep in the living room, overflowing the too-small sofa, and snoring so loudly I could have ripped a chainsaw to life and it wouldn’t have wakened him.

I shook his shoulder vigorously.

“Dad! Charlie!”

He grumbled, eyes still closed.
“I’m home now—you’re going to hurt your back sleeping like that. C’mon, time to move.”

It took a few more shakes, and his eyes never did open all the way, but I managed to get him off the couch. I helped him up to his bed, where he collapsed on top of the covers, fully dressed, and started snoring again.

He wasn’t going to be looking for me anytime soon.

Edythe waited in my room while I washed my face and changed into jeans and a flannel shirt. She watched me unhappily from the rocking chair as I hung the outfit Archie had given me in my closet.

“Come here,” I said, taking her hand and pulling her to my bed.

I pushed her down on the bed and then curled up against her chest. Maybe she was right and I was tired enough to sleep. I wasn’t going to let her sneak off without me.

She tucked my quilt in around me, and then held me close.

“Please relax.”

“Sure.”

“This is going to work, Bella. I can feel it.”

My teeth locked together.

She was still radiating relief. Nobody but me cared if Julie and her friends got hurt. Not even Julie and her friends. Especially not them.

She could tell I was about to lose it. “Listen to me, Bella. This is going to be easy. The newborns will be completely taken by surprise. They’ll have no more idea that werewolves even exist than you did. I’ve seen how they act in a group, the way Jasper remembers. I truly believe that the wolves’ hunting techniques will work flawlessly against them. And with them divided and confused, there won’t be enough for the rest of us to do. Someone may have to sit out,” she teased.

“Piece of cake,” I mumbled tonelessly against her chest.

“Shhh,” she stroked my cheek. “You’ll see. Don’t worry now.”

She started humming my lullaby, but, for once, it didn’t calm me.

People—well, vampires and werewolves really, but still—people I loved were going to get hurt. Hurt because of me. Again. I wished my bad luck would focus a little more carefully. I felt like yelling up at the empty sky: It’s me you want—over here! Just me!

I tried to think of a way that I could do exactly that—force my bad luck to focus on me. It wouldn’t be easy. I would have to wait, bide my time…

I did not fall asleep. The minutes passed quickly, to my surprise, and I was still alert and tense when Edythe pulled us both up into a sitting position.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay and sleep?”

I gave her a sour look.
She sighed, and scooped me up in her arms before she jumped from my window.

She raced through the black, quiet forest with me on her back, and even in her run I could feel the elation. She ran the way she did when it was just us, just for enjoyment, just for the feel of the wind in her hair. It was the kind of thing that, during less anxious times, would have made me happy.

When we got to the big open field, her family was there, talking casually, relaxed. Eleanor’s booming laugh echoed through the wide space now and then. Edythe set me down and we walked hand in hand toward them.

It took me a minute, because it was so dark with the moon hidden behind the clouds, but I realized that we were in the baseball clearing. It was the same place where, more than a year ago, that first lighthearted evening with the Cullens had been interrupted by James and his coven. It felt strange to be here again—as if this gathering wouldn’t be complete until James and Laurent and Victoria joined us. But James and Laurent were never coming back. That pattern wouldn’t be repeated. Maybe all the patterns were broken.

Yes, someone had broken out of their pattern. Was it possible that the Volturi were the flexible ones in this equation?

I doubted it.

Victoria had always seemed like a force of nature to me—like a hurricane moving toward the coast in a straight line—unavoidable, implacable, but predictable. Maybe it was wrong to limit her that way. She had to be capable of adaptation.

“You know what I think?” I asked Edythe.

She laughed. “No.”

I almost smiled.

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s all connected. Not just the two, but all three.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Three bad things have happened since you came back.” I ticked them off on my fingers. “The newborns in Seattle. The stranger in my room. And—first of all—Victoria came to look for me.”

Her eyes narrowed as she thought about it. “Why do you think so?”

“Because I agree with Jasper—the Volturi love their rules. They would probably do a better job anyway.” And I’d be dead if they wanted me dead, I added mentally. “Remember when you were tracking Victoria last year?”

“Yes.” She frowned. “I wasn’t very good at it.”

“Archie said you were in Texas. Did you follow her there?”

Her eyebrows pulled together. “Yes. Hmm…”

“See—she could have gotten the idea there. But she doesn’t know what she’s doing, so the newborns are all out of control.”
She started shaking her head. “Only Aro knows exactly how Archie’s visions work.”

“Aro would know best, but wouldn’t Tanya and Irina and the rest of your friends in Denali know enough? Laurent lived with them for so long. And if he was still friendly enough with Victoria to be doing favors for her, why wouldn’t he also tell her everything he knew?”

Edythe frowned. “It wasn’t Victoria in your room.”

“She can’t make new friends? Think about it, Edythe. If it is Victoria doing this in Seattle, she’s made a lot of new friends. She’s created them.”

She considered it, her forehead creased in concentration.

“Hmm,” she finally said. “It’s possible. I still think the Volturi are most likely… But your theory—there’s something there. Victoria’s personality. Your theory suits her personality perfectly. She’s shown a remarkable gift for self-preservation from the start—maybe it’s a talent of hers. In any case, this plot would put her in no danger at all from us, if she sits safely behind and lets the newborns wreak their havoc here. And maybe little danger from the Volturi, either. Perhaps she’s counting on us to win, in the end, though certainly not without heavy casualties of our own. But no survivors from her little army to bear witness against her. In fact,” she continued, thinking it through, “if there were survivors, I’d bet she’d be planning to destroy them herself… Hmm. Still, she’d have to have at least one friend who was a bit more mature. No fresh-made newborn left your father alive…”

She frowned into space for a long moment, and then suddenly smiled at me, coming back from her reverie. “Definitely possible. Regardless, we’ve got to be prepared for anything until we know for sure. You’re very perceptive today,” she added. “It’s impressive.”

I sighed. “Maybe I’m just reacting to this place. It makes me feel like she’s close by… like she sees me now.”

Her jaw muscles tensed at the idea. “She’ll never touch you, Bella,” she said.

In spite of her words, her eyes swept carefully across the dark trees. While she searched their shadows, the strangest expression crossed her face. Her lips pulled back over her teeth and her eyes shone with an odd light—a wild, fierce kind of hope.

“Yet, what I wouldn’t give to have her that close,” she murmured. “Victoria, and anyone else who’s ever thought of hurting you. To have the chance to end this myself. To finish it with my own hands this time.”

I shuddered at the ferocious longing in her voice, and clenched her fingers more tightly with mine, wishing I was strong enough to lock our hands together permanently.

We were almost to her family, and I noticed for the first time that Archie did not look as optimistic as the others. He stood a little aside, watching Jasper stretching his arms as if he were warming up to exercise, his lips pushed out in a pout.

“Is something wrong with Archie?” I whispered.

Edythe chuckled, herself again. “The werewolves are on their way, so he can’t see anything that will happen now. It makes him uncomfortable to be blind.”

Archie, though the farthest from us, heard her low voice. He looked up and stuck his tongue out at her. She laughed again.
“Hey, Edythe,” Eleanor greeted him. “Hey, Bella. Is she going to let you practice, too?”

Edythe groaned at her sister. “Please, Eleanor, don’t give her any ideas.”

“When will our guests arrive?” Carlisle asked Edythe.

Edythe concentrated for a moment, and then sighed. “A minute and a half. But I’m going to have to translate. They don’t trust us enough to use their human forms.”

Carlisle nodded. “This is hard for them. I’m grateful they’re coming at all.”

I stared at Edythe, my eyes stretched wide. “They’re coming as wolves?”

She nodded, cautious of my reaction. I swallowed once, remembering the two times I’d seen Julie in her wolf form—the first time in the meadow with Laurent, the second time on the forest lane where Paul had gotten angry at me… They were both memories of terror.

A strange gleam came into Edythe’s eyes, as though something had just occurred to her, something that was not altogether unpleasant. She turned away quickly, before I could see any more, back to Carlisle and the others.

“Prepare yourselves—they’ve been holding out on us.”

“What do you mean?” Archie demanded.

“Shh,” she cautioned, and stared past him into the darkness.

The Cullens’ informal circle suddenly widened out into a loose line with Jasper and Eleanor at the spear point. From the way Edythe leaned forward next to me, I could tell that she wished she was standing beside them. I tightened my hand around hers.

I squinted toward the forest, seeing nothing.

“Damn,” Eleanor muttered under her breath. “Did you ever see anything like it?”

Earnest and Rosalie exchanged a wide-eyed glance.

“What is it?” I whispered as quietly as I could. “I can’t see.”

“The pack has grown,” Edythe murmured into my ear.

Hadn’t I told him that Quil had joined the pack? I strained to see the six wolves in the gloom. Finally, something glittered in the blackness—their eyes, higher up than they should be. I’d forgotten how very tall the wolves were. Like horses, only thick with muscle and fur—and teeth like knives, impossible to overlook.

I could only see the eyes. And as I scanned, straining to see more, it occurred to me that there were more than six pairs facing us. One, two, three… I counted the pairs swiftly in my head. Twice.

There were ten of them.

“Fascinating,” Edythe murmured almost silently.

Carlisle took a slow, deliberate step forward. It was a careful movement, designed to reassure.

“Welcome,” he greeted the invisible wolves.
“Thank you,” Edythe responded in a strange, flat tone, and I realized at once that the words came from Sam. I looked to the eyes shining in the center of the line, the highest up, the tallest of them all. It was impossible to separate the shape of the big black wolf from the darkness.

Edythe spoke again in the same detached voice, speaking Sam’s words. “We will watch and listen, but no more. That is the most we can ask of our self-control.”

“That is more than enough,” Carlisle answered. “My son Jasper”—he gestured to where Jasper stood, tensed and ready—“has experience in this area. He will teach us how they fight, how they are to be defeated. I’m sure you can apply this to your own hunting style.”

“They are different from you?” Edythe asked for Sam.

Carlisle nodded. “They are all very new—only months old to this life. Children, in a way. They will have no skill or strategy, only brute strength. Tonight their numbers stand at twenty. Ten for us, ten for you—it shouldn’t be difficult. The numbers may go down. The new ones fight amongst themselves.”

A rumble passed down the shadowy line of wolves, a low growling mutter that somehow managed to sound enthusiastic.

“We are willing to take more than our share, if necessary,” Edythe translated, her tone less indifferent now.

Carlisle smiled. “We’ll see how it plays out.”

“Do you know when and how they’ll arrive?”

“They’ll come across the mountains in four days, in the late morning. As they approach, Archie will help us intercept their path.”

“Thank you for the information. We will watch.”

With a sighing sound, the eyes sank closer to the ground one set at a time.

It was silent for two heartbeats, and then Jasper took a step into the empty space between the vampires and the wolves. It wasn’t hard for me to see him—his skin was as bright against the darkness as the wolves’ eyes. Jasper threw a wary glance toward Edythe, who nodded, and then Jasper turned his back to the werewolves. He sighed, clearly uncomfortable.

“Carlisle’s right.” Jasper spoke only to us; he seemed to be trying to ignore the audience behind him. “They’ll fight like children. The two most important things you’ll need to remember are, first, don’t let them get their arms around you and, second, don’t go for the obvious kill. That’s all they’ll be prepared for. As long as you come at them from the side and keep moving, they’ll be too confused to respond effectively. Eleanor?”

Eleanor stepped out of the line with a huge smile.

Jasper backed toward the north end of the opening between the allied enemies. He waved Eleanor forward.

“Oh, Eleanor first. She’s the best example of a newborn attack.”

Eleanor’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll try not to break anything,” she muttered.
Jasper grinned. “What I meant is that Eleanor relies on her strength. She’s very straightforward about the attack. The newborns won’t be trying anything subtle, either. Just go for the easy kill, Eleanor.”

Jasper backed up a few more paces, his body tensing.

“Okay, Eleanor—try to catch me.”

And I couldn’t see Jasper anymore—he was a blur as Eleanor charged him like a bear, grinning while she snarled. Eleanor was impossibly quick, too, but not like Jasper. It looked like Jasper had no more substance than a ghost—any time it seemed Eleanor’s big hands had him for sure, Eleanor’s fingers clenched around nothing but the air. Beside me, Edythe leaned forward intently, her eyes locked on the brawl. Then Eleanor froze.

Jasper had her from behind, his teeth an inch from her throat.

Eleanor cussed.

There was a muttered rumble of appreciation from the watching wolves.

“Again,” Eleanor insisted, her smile gone.

“It’s my turn,” Edythe protested. My fingers tensed around hers.

“In a minute.” Jasper grinned, stepping back. “I want to show Bella something first.”

I watched with anxious eyes as he waved Archie forward.

“I know you worry about him,” he explained to me as Archie danced blithely into the ring. “I want to show you why that’s not necessary.”

Though I knew that Jasper would never allow any harm to come to Archie, it was still hard to watch as Jasper sank back into a crouch facing him. Archie stood motionlessly, looking tiny as a doll after Eleanor, smiling to himself. Jasper shifted forward, then slinked to Archie’s left.

Archie closed his eyes.

My heart thumped unevenly as Jasper stalked toward where Archie stood.

Jasper sprang, disappearing. Suddenly he was on the other side of Archie, who didn’t appear to have moved.

Jasper wheeled and launched himself at him again, only to land in a crouch behind him like the first time; all the while Archie stood smiling with his eyes closed.

I watched Archie more carefully now.

He was moving—I’d just been missing it, distracted by Jasper’s attacks. He took a small step forward at the exact second that Jasper’s body flew through the spot where he’d just been standing. He took another step, while Jasper’s grasping hands whistled past where his waist had been.

Jasper closed in, and Archie began to move faster. He was dancing—spiraling and twisting and curling in on himself. Jasper was his partner, lunging, reaching through his graceful patterns, never touching him, like every movement was choreographed. Finally, Archie laughed.

Out of nowhere he was perched on Jasper’s back, his lips at his partner’s neck.
“Gotcha,” he said, and kissed his throat.

Jasper chuckled, shaking his head. “You truly are one frightening little monster.”

The wolves muttered again. This time the sound was wary.

“It’s good for them to learn some respect,” Edythe murmured, amused. Then she spoke louder. “My turn.”

She squeezed my hand before she let it go.

Archie came to take his place beside me. “Cool, huh?” he asked me smugly.

“Very,” I agreed, not looking away from Edythe as she glided noiselessly toward Jasper, her movements lithe and watchful as a jungle cat.

“I’ve got my eye on you, Bella,” he whispered suddenly, his voice pitched so low that I could barely hear, though his lips were at my ear.

My gaze flickered to his face and then back to Edythe. She was intent on Jasper, both of them feinting as she closed the distance.

Archie’s expression was full of reproach.

“I’ll warn her if your plans get any more defined,” he threatened in the same low murmur. “It doesn’t help anything for you to put yourself in danger. Do you think either of them would give up if you died? They’d still fight, we all would. You can’t change anything, so just be good, okay?”

I grimaced, trying to ignore him.

“I’m watching,” he repeated.

Edythe had closed on Jasper now, and this fight was more even than either of the others. Jasper had the century of experience to guide him, and he tried to go on instinct alone as much as he could, but his thoughts always gave him away a fraction of a second before he acted. Edythe was slightly faster, but the moves Jasper used were unfamiliar to her. They came at each other again and again, neither one able to gain the advantage, instinctive snarls erupting constantly. It was hard to watch, but harder to look away. They moved too fast for me to really understand what they were doing. Now and then the sharp eyes of the wolves would catch my attention. I had a feeling the wolves were getting more out of this than I was—maybe more than they should.

Eventually, Carlisle cleared his throat.

Jasper laughed, and took a step back. Edythe straightened up and grinned at him.

“Back to work,” Jasper consented. “We’ll call it a draw.”

Everyone took turns, Carlisle, then Rosalie, Earnest, and Eleanor again. I squinted through my lashes, cringing as Jasper attacked Earnest. That one was the hardest to watch. Then he slowed down, still not quite enough for me to understand his motions, and gave more instruction.

“You see what I’m doing here?” he would ask. “Yes, just like that,” he encouraged. “Concentrate on the sides. Don’t forget where their target will be. Keep moving.”

Edythe was always focused, watching and also listening to what others couldn’t see.
It got more difficult to follow as my eyes got heavier. I hadn’t been sleeping well lately, anyway, and it was approaching a solid twenty-four hours since the last time I’d slept. I leaned against Edythe’s side, and let my eyelids droop.

“We’re about finished,” she whispered.

Jasper confirmed that, turning toward the wolves for the first time, his expression uncomfortable again. “We’ll be doing this tomorrow. Please feel welcome to observe again.”

“Yes,” Edythe answered in Sam’s cool voice. “We’ll be here.”

Then Edythe sighed, patted my arm, and stepped away from me. She turned to her family.

“The pack thinks it would be helpful to be familiar with each of our scents—so they don’t make mistakes later. If we could hold very still, it will make it easier for them.”

“Certainly,” Carlisle said to Sam. “Whatever you need.”

There was a gloomy, throaty grumble from the wolf pack as they all rose to their feet.

My eyes were wide again, exhaustion forgotten.

The deep black of the night was just beginning to fade—the sun brightening the clouds, though it hadn’t cleared the horizon yet, far away on the other side of the mountains. As they approached, it was suddenly possible to make out shapes… colors.

Sam was in the lead, of course. Unbelievably huge, black as midnight, a monster straight out of my nightmares—literally; after the first time I’d seen Sam and the others in the meadow, they’d starred in my bad dreams more than once.

Now that I could see them all, match the vastness with each pair of eyes, it looked like more than ten. The pack was overwhelming.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Edythe was watching me, carefully evaluating my reaction.

Sam approached Carlisle where he stood in the front, the huge pack right on his tail. Jasper stiffened, but Eleanor, on the other side of Carlisle, was grinning and relaxed.

Sam sniffed at Carlisle, seeming to wince slightly as he did. Then he moved on to Jasper.

My eyes ran down the wary brace of wolves. I was sure I could pick out a few of the new additions. There was a light gray wolf that was much smaller than the others, the hackles on the back of his neck raised in distaste. There was another, the color of desert sand, who seemed gangly and uncoordinated beside the rest. A low whine broke through the sandy wolf’s control when Sam’s advance left him isolated between Carlisle and Jasper.

I stopped at the wolf just behind Sam. Her fur was reddish-brown and longer than the others, shaggy in comparison. She was almost as tall as Sam, the second largest in the group. Her stance was casual, somehow exuding nonchalance over what the rest obviously considered an ordeal.

The enormous russet-colored wolf seemed to feel my gaze, and she looked up at me with familiar black eyes.

I stared back at her, trying to believe what I already knew. I could feel the wonder and fascination on my face.
The wolf’s muzzle fell open, pulling back over her teeth. It would have been a frightening expression, except that her tongue lolled out the side in a wolfy grin.

I giggled.

Julie’s grin widened over her sharp teeth. She left her place in line, ignoring the eyes of her pack as they followed her. She trotted past Edythe and Archie to stand not two feet away from me. She stopped there, her gaze flickering briefly toward Edythe.

Edythe stood motionless, a statue, her eyes still assessing my reaction.

Julie crouched down on her front legs and dropped her head so that her face was no higher than mine, staring at me, measuring my response just as much as Edythe was.

“Julie?” I breathed.

The answering rumble deep in her chest sounded like a chuckle.

I reached my hand out, my fingers trembling slightly, and touched the red-brown fur on the side of her face.

The black eyes closed, and Julie leaned her huge head into my hand. A thrumming hum resonated in her throat.

The fur was both soft and rough, and warm against my skin. I ran my fingers through it curiously, learning the texture, stroking her neck where the color deepened. I hadn’t realized how close I’d gotten; without warning, Julie suddenly licked my face from chin to hairline.

“Ew! Gross, Jules!” I complained, jumping back and smacking at her, just as I would have if she were human. She dodged out of the way, and the coughing bark that came through her teeth was obviously laughter.

I wiped my face on the sleeve of my shirt, unable to keep from laughing with her.

It was at that point that I realized that everyone was watching us, the Cullens and the werewolves—the Cullens with perplexed and somewhat disgusted expressions. It was hard to read the wolves’ faces. I thought Sam looked unhappy.

And then there was Edythe, on edge and clearly disappointed. I realized she’d been hoping for a different reaction from me. Like screaming and running away in terror.

Julie made the laughing sound again.

The other wolves were backing away now, not taking their eyes off the Cullens as they departed. Julie stood by my side, watching them go. Soon, they disappeared into the murky forest. Only two hesitated by the trees, watching Julie, their postures radiating anxiety.

Edythe sighed, and—ignoring Julie—came to stand on my other side, taking my hand.

“Ready to go?” she asked me.

Before I could answer, she was staring over me at Julie.

“I’ve not quite figured out all the details yet,” she said, answering a question in Julie’s thoughts.

The Julie-wolf grumbled sullenly.
“It’s more complicated than that,” Edythe said. “Don’t concern yourself; I’ll make sure it’s safe.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“Just discussing strategy,” Edythe said.

Julie’s head swiveled back and forth, looking at our faces. Then, suddenly, she bolted for the forest. As she darted away, I noticed for the first time a square of folded black fabric secured to her back leg.

“Wait,” I called, one hand stretching out automatically to reach after her. But she disappeared into the trees in seconds, the other two wolves following.

“Why did she leave?” I asked, hurt.

“She’s coming back,” Edythe said. She sighed. “She wants to be able to talk for herself.”

I watched the edge of the forest where Julie had vanished, leaning into Edythe’s side again. I was on the point of collapse, but I was fighting it.

Julie loped back into view, on two legs this time, her hair tangled and shaggy. She wore only a pair of black sweat pants and a tank top that probably used to be white; her feet were bare to the cold ground. She was alone now, but I suspected that her friends lingered in the trees, invisible.

It didn’t take her long to cross the field, though she gave a wide berth to the Cullens, who stood talking quietly in a loose circle.

“Okay, bloodsucker,” Julie said when she was a few feet from us, evidently continuing the conversation I’d missed. “What’s so complicated about it?”

“I have to consider every possibility,” Edythe said, unruffled. “What if someone gets by you?”

Julie snorted at that idea. “Okay, so leave her on the reservation. We’re making Collin and Brady stay behind anyway. She’ll be safe there.”

I scowled. “Are you talking about me?”

“I just want to know what she plans to do with you during the fight,” Julie explained.

“Do with me?”

“You can’t stay in Forks, Bella.” Edythe’s voice was pacifying. “They know where to look for you there. What if someone slipped by us?”

My stomach dropped and the blood drained from my face. “Charlie?” I gasped.

“He’ll be with Billy,” Julie assured me quickly. “If my dad has to commit a murder to get him there, he’ll do it. Probably it won’t take that much. It’s this Saturday, right? There’s a game.”

“This Saturday?” I asked, my head spinning. I was too lightheaded to control my wildly random thoughts. I frowned at Edythe. “Well, crap! There goes your graduation present.”

Edythe laughed. “It’s the thought that counts,” she reminded me. “You can give the tickets to someone else.”

Inspiration came swiftly. “Angela and Ben,” I decided at once. “At least that will get them out of
She touched my cheek. “You can’t evacuate everyone,” she said in a gentle voice. “Hiding you is just a precaution. I told you—we’ll have no problem now. There won’t be enough of them to keep us entertained.”

“But what about keeping her in La Push?” Julie interjected, impatient.

“She’s been back and forth too much,” Edythe said. “She’s left trails all over the place. Archie only sees very young vampires coming on the hunt, but obviously someone created them. There is someone more experienced behind this. Whoever he”—Edythe paused to look at me—“or she is, this could all be a distraction. Archie will see if he decides to look himself, but we could be very busy at the time that decision is made. Maybe someone is counting on that. I can’t leave her somewhere she’s been frequently. She has to be hard to find, just in case. It’s a very long shot, but I’m not taking chances.”

I stared at Edythe as she explained, my forehead creasing. She patted my arm.

“Just being overcautious,” she promised.

Julie gestured to the deep forest east of us, to the vast expanse of the Olympic Mountains.

“So hide her here,” she suggested. “There’s a million possibilities—places either one of us could be in just a few minutes if there’s a need.”

Edythe shook her head. “Her scent is too strong and, combined with mine, especially distinct. Even if I carried her, it would leave a trail. Our trace is all over the range, but in conjunction with Bella’s scent, it would catch their attention. We’re not sure exactly which path they’ll take, because they don’t know yet. If they crossed her scent before they found us…”

Both of them grimaced at the same time, their eyebrows pulling together.

“You see the difficulties.”

“There has to be a way to make it work,” Julie muttered. She glared toward the forest, pursing her lips.

I swayed on my feet. Edythe put her arm around my waist, pulling me closer and supporting my weight.

“I need to get you home—you’re exhausted. And Charlie will be waking up soon…”

“Wait a sec,” Julie said, wheeling back to us, her eyes bright. “My scent disgusts you, right?”

“Hmm, not bad.” Edythe was two steps ahead. “It’s possible.” She turned toward her family. “Jasper?” she called.

Jasper looked up curiously. He walked over with Archie a half step behind. Archie’s face was frustrated again.

“Okay, Julie.” Edythe nodded at her.

Julie turned toward me with a strange mixture of emotion on her face. She was clearly excited by whatever this new plan of hers was, but she was also still uneasy so close to her enemy allies. And then it was my turn to be wary as she held her arms out toward me.
Edythe took a deep breath.

“We’re going to see if I can confuse the scent enough to hide your trail,” Julie explained.

I stared at her open arms suspiciously.

“You’re going to have to let her carry you, Bella,” Edythe told me. Her voice was calm, but I could hear the subdued distaste.

I frowned.

Julie rolled her eyes, impatient, and reached down to yank me up into her arms.

“Don’t be such a baby,” she muttered.

But her eyes flickered to Edythe, just like mine did. Edythe’s face was composed and smooth. She spoke to Jasper.

“Bella’s scent is so much more potent to me—I thought it would be a fairer test if someone else tried.”

Julie turned away from them and paced swiftly into the woods. I didn’t say anything as the dark closed around us. I was pouting, uncomfortable in Julie’s arms. It felt too intimate to me—surely she didn’t need to hold me quite so tightly—and I couldn’t help but wonder what it felt like to her. It reminded me of my last afternoon in La Push, and I didn’t want to think about that. I folded my arms, annoyed when the brace on my hand intensified the memory.

We didn’t go far; she made a wide arc and came back into the clearing from a different direction, maybe half a football field away from our original departure point. Edythe was there alone and Julie headed toward her.

“You can put me down now.”

“I don’t want to take a chance of messing up the experiment.” Her walk slowed and her arms tightened.

“You are so annoying,” I muttered.

“Thanks.”

Out of nowhere, Jasper and Archie stood beside Edythe. Julie took one more step, and then set me down a half dozen feet from Edythe. Without looking back at Julie, I walked to Edythe’s side and took her hand.

“Well?” I asked.

“As long as you don’t touch anything, Bella, I can’t imagine someone sticking their nose close enough to that trail to catch your scent,” Jasper said, grimacing. “It was almost completely obscured.”

“A definite success,” Archie agreed, wrinkling his nose.

“And it gave me an idea.”

“Which will work,” Archie added confidently.
“Clever,” Edythe agreed.

“How do you stand that?” Julie muttered to me.

Edythe ignored Julie and looked at me while she explained. “We’re—well, you’re—going to leave a false trail to the clearing, Bella. The newborns are hunting, your scent will excite them, and they’ll come exactly the way we want them to without being careful about it. Archie can already see that this will work. When they catch our scent, they’ll split up and try to come at us from two sides. Half will go through the forest, where his vision suddenly disappears…”

“Yes!” Julie hissed.

Edythe smiled at her, a smile of true comradeship.

I felt sick. How could they be so eager for this? How could I stand having both of them in danger? I couldn’t.

I wouldn’t.

“Not a chance,” Edythe said suddenly, her voice disgusted. It made me jump, worrying that she’d somehow heard my resolve, but her eyes were on Jasper.

“I know, I know,” Jasper said quickly. “I didn’t even consider it, not really.”

Archie stepped on his foot.

“If Bella was actually there in the clearing,” Jasper explained to him, “it would drive them insane. They wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything but her. It would make picking them off truly easy…”

Edythe’s glare had Jasper backtracking.

“Of course it’s too dangerous for her. It was just an errant thought,” he said quickly. But he looked at me from the corner of his eyes, and the look was wistful.

“No,” Edythe said. Her voice rang with finality.

“You’re right,” Jasper said. He took Archie’s hand and started back to the others. “Best two out of three?” I heard him ask as they went to practice again.

Julie stared after him in disgust.

“Jasper looks at things from a military perspective,” Edythe quietly defended her brother. “He looks at all the options—it’s thoroughness, not callousness.”

Julie snorted.

She’d edged closer unconsciously, drawn by her absorption in the planning. She stood only three feet from Edythe now, and, standing there between them, I could feel the physical tension in the air. It was like static, an uncomfortable charge.

Edythe got back to business. “I’ll bring her here Friday afternoon to lay the false trail. You can meet us afterward, and carry her to a place I know. Completely out of the way, and easily defensible, not that it will come to that. I’ll take another route there.”

“And then what? Leave her with a cell phone?” Julie asked critically.
“You have a better idea?”

Julie was suddenly smug. “Actually, I do.”

“Oh… Again, dog, not bad at all.”

Julie turned to me quickly, as if determined to play the good guy by keeping me in the conversation. “We tried to talk Seth into staying behind with the younger two. He’s still too young, but he’s stubborn and he’s resisting. So I thought of a new assignment for him—cell phone.”

I tried to look like I got it. No one was fooled.

“As long as Seth Clearwater is in his wolf form, he’ll be connected to the pack,” Edythe said. “Distance isn’t a problem?” she added, turning to Julie.

“Nope.”

“Three hundred miles?” Edythe asked. “That’s impressive.”

Julie was the good guy again. “That’s the farthest we’ve ever gone to experiment,” she told me. “Still clear as a bell.”

I nodded absently; I was reeling from the idea that little Seth Clearwater was already a werewolf, too, and that made it difficult to concentrate. I could see his bright smile, so much like a younger Julie, in my head; he couldn’t be more than fifteen, if he was that. His enthusiasm at the council meeting bonfire suddenly took on new meaning…

“It’s a good idea.” Edythe seemed reluctant to admit this. “I’ll feel better with Seth there, even without the instantaneous communication. I don’t know if I’d be able to leave Bella there alone. To think it’s come to this, though! Trusting werewolves!”

“Fighting with vampires instead of against them!” Julie mirrored Edythe’s tone of disgust.

“Well, you still get to fight against some of them,” Edythe said.

Julie smiled. “That’s the reason we’re here.”
EDYTHE CARRIED ME HOME IN HER ARMS, EXPECTING that I wouldn’t be able to hang on. I must have fallen asleep on the way.

When I woke up, I was in my bed and the dull light coming through my windows slanted in from a strange angle. Almost like it was afternoon.

I yawned and stretched, my fingers searching for her and coming up empty.

“Edythe?” I mumbled.

My seeking fingers encountered something cool and smooth. Her hand.

“Are you really awake this time?” she murmured.

“Mmm,” I sighed in assent. “Have there been a lot of false alarms?”

“You’ve been very restless—talking all day.”

“All day?” I blinked and looked at the windows again.

“You had a long night,” she said reassuringly. “You’d earned a day in bed.”

I sat up, and my head spun. The light was coming in my window from the west. “Wow.”

“Hungry?” she guessed. “Do you want breakfast in bed?”

“I’ll get it,” I groaned, stretching again. “I need to get up and move around.”

She held my hand on the way to the kitchen, eyeing me carefully, like I might fall over. Or maybe she thought I was sleepwalking.

I kept it simple, throwing a couple of Pop-Tarts in the toaster. I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflective chrome.

“Ugh, I’m a mess.”

“It was a long night,” she said again. “You should have stayed here and slept.”

“Right! And missed everything. You know, you need to start accepting the fact that I’m part of the family now.”

She smiled. “I could probably get used to that idea.”

I sat down with my breakfast, and she sat next to me. When I lifted the Pop-Tart to take the first bite, I noticed her staring at my hand. I looked down, and saw that I was still wearing the gift that Julie had given me at the party.

“May I?” she asked, reaching for the tiny wooden wolf.

I swallowed noisily. “Um, sure.”

She moved her hand under the charm bracelet and balanced the little figurine in her snowy palm. For a fleeting moment, I was afraid. Just the slightest twist of her fingers could crush it into
But of course Edythe wouldn’t do that. I was embarrassed I’d even had the thought. She only weighed the wolf in her palm for a moment, and then let it fall. It swung lightly from my wrist.

I tried to read the expression in her eyes. All I could see was thoughtfulness; she kept everything else hidden, if there was anything else.

“Julie Black can give you presents.”

It wasn’t a question, or an accusation. Just a statement of fact. But I knew she was referring to my last birthday and the fit I’d thrown over gifts; I hadn’t wanted any. Especially not from Edythe. It wasn’t entirely logical, and, of course, everyone had ignored me anyway.…

“You’ve given me presents,” I reminded her. “You know I like the homemade kind.”

She pursed her lips for a second. “How about hand-me-downs? Are those acceptable?”

“What do you mean?”

“This bracelet.” Her finger traced a circle around my wrist. “You’ll be wearing this a lot?”

I shrugged.

“Because you wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings,” she suggested shrewdly.

“Sure, I guess so.”

“Don’t you think it’s fair, then,” she asked, looking down at my hand as she spoke. She turned it palm up, and ran her finger along the veins in my wrist. “If I have a little representation?”

“Representation?”

“A charm—something to keep me on your mind.”

“You’re in every thought I have. I don’t need reminders.”

“If I gave you something, would you wear it?” she pressed.

“A hand-me-down?” I checked.

“Yes, something I’ve had for a while.” She smiled her angel’s smile.

If this was the only reaction to Julie’s gift, I would take it gladly. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“Have you noticed the inequality?” she asked, and her voice turned accusing. “Because I certainly have.”

“What inequality?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Everyone else is able to get away with giving you things. Everyone but me. I would have loved to get you a graduation present, but I didn’t. I knew it would have upset you more than if anyone else did. That’s utterly unfair. How do you explain yourself?”

“Easy.” I shrugged. “You’re more important than everyone else. And you’ve given me you. That’s already more than I deserve, and anything else you give me just throws us more out of balance.”
She processed that for a moment, and then rolled her eyes. “The way you regard me is ludicrous.”

I chewed my breakfast calmly. I knew she wouldn’t listen if I told her that she had that backward.

Edythe’s phone buzzed.

She looked at the number before she opened it. “What is it, Archie?”

She listened, and I waited for her reaction, suddenly nervous. But whatever he said didn’t surprise her. She sighed a few times.

“I sort of guessed as much,” she told him, staring into my eyes, a disapproving arch to her brow. “She was talking in her sleep.”

I flushed. What had I said now?

“I’ll take care of it,” she promised.

She glared at me as she shut her phone. “Is there something you’d like to talk to me about?”

I deliberated for a moment. Given Archie’s warning last night, I could guess why he’d called. And then remembering the troubled dreams I’d had as I’d slept through the day—dreams where I chased after Jasper, trying to follow him and find the clearing in the maze-like woods, knowing I would find Edythe there… Edythe, and the monsters who wanted to kill me, but not caring about them because I’d already made my decision—I could also guess what Edythe had overheard while I’d slept.

I pursed my lips for a moment, not quite able to meet her gaze. She waited.

“I like Jasper’s idea,” I finally said.

She groaned.

“I want to help. I have to do something,” I insisted.

“It wouldn’t help to have you in danger.”

“Jasper thinks it would. This is his area of expertise.”

Edythe glowered at me.

“You can’t keep me away,” I threatened. “I’m not going to hide out in the forest while you all take risks for me.”

Suddenly, she was fighting a smile. “Archie doesn’t see you in the clearing, Bella. He sees you stumbling around lost in the woods. You won’t be able to find us; you’ll just make it more time consuming for me to find you afterward.”

I tried to keep as cool as she was. “That’s because Archie didn’t factor in Seth Clearwater,” I said politely. “If he had, of course, he wouldn’t have been able to see anything at all. But it sounds like Seth wants to be there as much as I do. It shouldn’t be too hard to persuade him to show me the way.”

Anger flickered across her face, and then she took a deep breath and composed herself. “That might have worked… if you hadn’t told me. Now I’ll just ask Sam to give Seth certain orders. Much as he might want to, Seth won’t be able to ignore that kind of injunction.”
I kept my smile pleasant. “But why would Sam give those orders? If I tell him how it would help for me to be there? I’ll bet Sam would rather do me a favor than you.”

She had to compose herself again. “Maybe you’re right. But I’m sure Julie would be only too eager to give those same orders.”

I frowned. “Julie?”

“Julie is second in command. Did she never tell you that? Her orders have to be followed, too.”

She had me, and by her smile, she knew it. My forehead crumpled. Julie would be on her side—in this one instance—I was sure. And Julie never had told me that.

Edythe took advantage of the fact that I was momentarily stumped, continuing in a suspiciously smooth and soothing voice.

“I got a fascinating look into the pack’s mind last night. It was better than a soap opera. I had no idea how complex the dynamic is with such a large pack. The pull of the individual against the plural psyche… Absolutely fascinating.”

She was obviously trying to distract me. I glared at her.

“Julie’s been keeping a lot of secrets,” she said with a grin.

I didn’t answer, I just kept glaring, holding on to my argument and waiting for an opening.

“For instance, did you note the smaller gray wolf there last night?”

I nodded one stiff nod.

She chuckled. “Julie transforming was something they thought would be impossible—quite a shock to them, really. But they’ve adjusted, under the assumption that she was an anomaly.”

I sighed. “Okay, I’ll bite. What are you talking about?”

“They always accepted without question that it was only the direct grandsons of the original wolf who had the power to transform.”

“Yeah, and Julie transformed even though she isn’t a grandson. What’s your point?”

“My point,” she continued, “is Leah Clearwater.”

It took a second for that to sink in.

“Leah’s a werewolf!” I shrieked. “What? For how long? Why didn’t Julie tell me?”

“There are things she wasn’t allowed to share—their numbers, for instance. Like I said before, when Sam gives an order, the pack simply isn’t able to ignore it. Julie was very careful to think of other things when she was near me. Of course, after last night that’s all out the window.”

“I can’t believe it. Leah Clearwater!” Suddenly, I remembered Julie speaking of Leah and Sam, and the way she acted as if she’d said too much—after she’d said something about Sam having to look in Leah’s eyes every day and know that he’d broken all his promises…. Leah on the cliff, a tear glistening on her cheek when Old Quil had spoken of the burden and sacrifice the Quileute sons shared…. And Billy, spending time with Sue because she was having trouble with her kids… and here the trouble actually was that both of them were werewolves now!
I hadn’t given much thought to Leah Clearwater, just to grieve for her loss when Harry had passed away, and then to pity her again when Julie had told her story, about how the strange imprinting between Sam and her cousin Elliott had broken Leah’s heart.

And now she was part of Sam’s pack, hearing his thoughts… and unable to hide her own.

_I really hate that part_, Julie had said. _Everything you’re ashamed of, laid out for everyone to see._

“Poor Leah,” I whispered.

Edythe snorted. “She’s making life exceedingly unpleasant for the rest of them. I’m not sure she deserves your sympathy.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard enough for them, having to share all their thoughts. Most of them try to cooperate, make it easier. When even one member is deliberately malicious, it’s painful for everyone.”

“She has reason enough,” I mumbled, still on her side.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “The imprinting compulsion is one of the strangest things I’ve ever witnessed in my life, and I’ve seen some strange things.” She shook her head wonderingly. “The way Sam is tied to his Elliott is impossible to describe—or I should say Elliott’s Sam. Sam really had no choice. It reminds me of _A Midsummer Night’s Dream_ with all the chaos caused by the fairies’ love spells… like magic.” She smiled. “It’s very nearly as strong as the way I feel about you.”

“Poor Leah,” I said again. “But what do you mean, malicious?”

“She’s constantly bringing up things they’d rather not think of,” she explained. “For example, Embry.”

“What’s with Embry?” I asked, surprised.

“His mother moved down from the Makah reservation seventeen years ago, when she was pregnant with him. She’s not Quileute. Everyone assumed she’d left his father behind with the Makahs. But then he joined the pack.”

“So?”

“So the prime candidates for his father are Quil Ateara Sr., Joshua Uley, or Billy Black, all of them married at that point, of course.”

“No!” I gasped. Edythe was right—this was exactly like a soap opera.

“Now Sam, Julie, and Quil all wonder which of them has a half-brother. They’d all like to think it’s Sam, since his father was never much of a father. But the doubt is always there. Julie’s never been able to ask Billy about that.”

“Wow. How did you get so much in one night?”

“The pack mind is mesmerizing. All thinking together and then separately at the same time. There’s so much to read!”

She sounded faintly regretful, like someone who’d had to put down a good book just before the climax. I laughed.
“The pack is fascinating,” I agreed. “Almost as fascinating as you are when you’re trying to distract me.”

Her expression became polite again—a perfect poker face.

“I have to be in that clearing, Edythe.”

“No,” she said in a very final tone.

A certain path occurred to me at that moment.

It wasn’t so much that I had to be in the clearing. I just had to be where Edythe was.

_Cruel_, I accused myself. _Selfish, selfish, selfish! Don’t do it!_

I ignored my better instincts. I couldn’t look at her while I spoke, though. The guilt had my eyes glued to the table.

“Okay, look, Edythe,” I whispered. “Here’s the thing... I’ve already gone crazy once. I know what my limits are. _And I can’t stand it if you leave me again._”

I didn’t look up to see her reaction, afraid to know how much pain I was inflicting. I did hear her sudden intake of breath and the silence that followed. I stared at the dark wooden tabletop, wishing I could take the words back. But knowing I probably wouldn’t. Not if it worked.

Suddenly, her arms were around me, her hands stroking my face, my arms. _She was comforting me._ The guilt went into spiral mode. But the survival instinct was stronger. There was no question that she was fundamental to my survival.

“You know it’s not like that, Bella,” she murmured. “I won’t be far, and it will be over quickly.”

“I can’t stand it,” I insisted, still staring down. “Not knowing whether or not you’ll come back. How do I live through that, no matter how quickly it’s over?”

She sighed. “It’s going to be easy, Bella. There’s no reason for your fears.”

“None at all?”

“None.”

“And everybody will be fine?”

“Everyone,” she promised.

“So there’s no way at all that I need to be in the clearing?”

“Of course not. Archie just told me that they’re down to nineteen. We’ll be able to handle it easily.”

“That’s right—you said it was so easy that someone could sit out,” I repeated her words from last night.

“Did you really mean that?”

“Yes.”
It felt too simple—she had to see it coming.

“So easy that you could sit out?”

After a long moment of silence, I finally looked up at her expression.

The poker face was back.

I took a deep breath. “So it’s one way or the other. Either there is more danger than you want me to know about, in which case it would be right for me to be there, to do what I can to help. Or… it’s going to be so easy that they’ll get by without you. Which way is it?”

She didn’t speak.

I knew what she was thinking of—the same thing I was thinking of. Carlisle. Earnest. Eleanor. Rosalie. Jasper. And… I forced myself to think the last name. And Archie.

I wondered if I was a monster. Not the kind that she thought she was, but the real kind. The kind that hurt people. The kind that had no limits when it came to what they wanted.

What I wanted was to keep her safe, safe with me. Did I have a limit to what I would do, what I would sacrifice for that? I wasn’t sure.

“You ask me to let them fight without my help?” she said in a quiet voice.

“Yes.” I was surprised I could keep my voice even, I felt so wretched inside. “Or to let me be there. Either way, so long as we’re together.”

She took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly. She moved her hands to place them on either side of my face, forcing me to meet her gaze. She looked into my eyes for a long time. I wondered what she was looking for, and what it was that she found. Was the guilt as thick on my face as it was in my stomach—sickening me?

Her eyes tightened against some emotion I couldn’t read, and she dropped one hand to pull out her phone again.

“Archie,” she sighed. “Could you come babysit Bella for a bit?” She raised one eyebrow, daring me to object to the word. “I need to speak with Jasper.”

He evidently agreed. She put the phone away and went back to staring at my face.

“What are you going to say to Jasper?” I whispered.

“I’m going to discuss… me sitting out.”

It was easy to read in her face how difficult the words were for her.

“I’m sorry.”

I was sorry. I hated to make her do this. Not enough that I could fake a smile and tell her to go on ahead without me. Definitely not that much.

“Don’t apologize,” she said, smiling just a little. “Never be afraid to tell me how you feel, Bella. If this is what you need…” She shrugged. “You are my first priority.”

“I didn’t mean it that way—like you have to choose me over your family.”
“I know that. Besides, that’s not what you asked. You gave me two alternatives that you could live with, and I chose the one that I could live with. That’s how compromise is supposed to work.”

I leaned forward and rested my forehead against her chest. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“Anytime,” she answered, kissing my hair. “Anything.”

We didn’t move for a long moment. I kept my face hidden, pressed against her shirt. Two voices struggled inside me. One that wanted to be good and brave, and one that told the good one to keep her mouth shut.

“Who’s the third wife?” she asked me suddenly.

“Huh?” I said, stalling. I didn’t remember having had that dream again.

“You were mumbling something about ‘the third wife’ last night. The rest made a little sense, but you lost me there.”

“Oh. Um, yeah. That was just one of the stories that I heard at the bonfire the other night.” I shrugged. “I guess it stuck with me.”

Edythe leaned away from me and cocked her head to the side, probably confused by the uncomfortable edge to my voice. Before she could ask, Archie appeared in the kitchen doorway with a sour expression.

“You’re going to miss all the fun,” he grumbled.

“Hello, Archie,” she greeted him. She put one finger under my chin and tilted my face up to kiss me goodbye.

“I’ll be back later tonight,” she promised me. “I’ll go work this out with the others, rearrange things.”

“Okay.”

“There’s not much to arrange,” Archie said. “I already told them. Eleanor is pleased.”

Edythe sighed. “Of course she is.”

She walked out the door, leaving me to face Archie.

He glared at me.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized again. “Do you think this will make it more dangerous for you?”

He snorted. “You worry too much, Bella. You’re going to go prematurely gray.”

“Why are you upset, then?”

“Edythe is such a grouch when she doesn’t get her way. I’m just anticipating living with her for the next few months.” He made a face. “I suppose, if it keeps you sane, it’s worth it. But I wish you could control the pessimism, Bella. It’s so unnecessary.”

“Would you let Jasper go without you?” I demanded.
Archie grimaced. “That’s different.”

“Sure it is.”

“Go clean yourself up,” he ordered me. “Charlie will be home in fifteen minutes, and if you look this ragged he’s not going to want to let you out again.”

Wow. I’d really lost the whole day. It felt like such a waste. I was glad I wouldn’t always have to squander my time with sleeping.

I was entirely presentable when Charlie got home—fully dressed, hair decent, and in the kitchen putting his dinner on the table. Archie sat in Edythe’s usual place, and this seemed to make Charlie’s day.

“Howdy, Archie! How are you, son?”

“I’m fine, Charlie, thanks.”

“I see you finally made it out of bed, sleepyhead,” he said to me as I sat beside him, before turning back to Archie. “Everyone’s talking about that party your parents threw last night. I’ll bet you’ve got one heck of a clean-up job ahead of you.”

Archie shrugged. Knowing him, it was already done.

“It was worth it,” he said. “It was a great party.”

“Where’s Edythe?” Charlie asked, a little grudgingly. “Is she helping clean up?”

Archie sighed and his face turned tragic. It was probably an act, but it was too perfect for me to be positive. “No. She’s off planning the weekend with Eleanor and Carlisle.”

“How’s Edythe?” Charlie asked, a little grudgingly. “Is she helping clean up?”

Archie nodded, his face suddenly forlorn. “Yes. They’re all going, except me. We always go backpacking at the end of the school year, sort of a celebration, but this year I decided I’d rather shop than hike, and not one of them will stay behind with me. I’m abandoned.”

His face puckered, the expression so devastated that Charlie leaned toward him automatically, one hand reaching out, looking for some way to help. I glared at him suspiciously. What was he doing?

“Archie, kiddo, why don’t you come stay with us,” Charlie offered. “I hate to think of you all alone in that big house.”

He sighed. Something squashed my foot under the table.

“Ow!” I protested.

Charlie turned to me. “What?”

Archie shot me a frustrated look. I could tell he thought that I was very slow tonight.

“Stubbed my toe,” I muttered.

“Oh.” He looked back at Archie. “So, how ’bout it?”

He stepped on my foot again, not quite so hard this time.
“Er, Dad, you know, we don’t really have the best accommodations here. I bet Archie doesn’t want to sleep on my floor….”

Charlie pursed his lips. Archie pulled out the devastated expression again.

“Maybe Bella should stay up there with you,” he suggested. “Just until your folks get back.”

“Oh, would you, Bella?” Archie smiled at me radiantly. “You don’t mind shopping with me, right?”


“When are they leaving?” Charlie asked.

Archie made another face. “Tomorrow.”

“When do you want me?” I asked.

“After dinner, I guess,” he said, and then put one finger to his chin, thoughtful. “You don’t have anything going on Saturday, do you? I want to get out of town to shop, and it will be an all-day thing.”

“Not Seattle,” Charlie interjected, his eyebrows pulling together.

“Of course not,” Archie agreed at once, though we both knew Seattle would be plenty safe on Saturday. “I was thinking Olympia, maybe…”

“You’ll like that, Bella.” Charlie was cheerful with relief. “Go get your fill of the city.”

“Yeah, Dad. It’ll be great.”

With one easy conversation, Archie had cleared my schedule for the battle.

Edythe returned not much later. She accepted Charlie’s wishes for a nice trip without surprise. She claimed they were leaving early in the morning, and said goodnight before the usual time. Archie left with her.

I excused myself soon after they left.

“You can’t be tired,” Charlie protested.

“A little,” I lied.

“No wonder you like to skip the parties,” he muttered. “It takes you so long to recover.”

Upstairs, Edythe was lying across my bed.

“What time are we meeting with the wolves?” I murmured as I went to join her.

“In an hour.”

“That’s good. Jules and her friends need to get some sleep.”

“They don’t need as much as you do,” she pointed out.

I moved to another topic, assuming she was about to try to talk me into staying home. “Did Archie tell you that he’s kidnapping me again?”
She grinned. “Actually, he’s not.”

I stared at her, confused, and she laughed quietly at my expression.

“I’m the only one who has permission to hold you hostage, remember?” she said. “Archie is going hunting with the rest of them.” She sighed. “I guess I don’t need to do that now.”

“You’re kidnapping me?”

She nodded.

I thought about that briefly. No Charlie listening downstairs, checking on me every so often. And no houseful of wide-awake vampires with their intrusively sensitive hearing…. Just her and me—really alone.

“Is that all right?” she asked, concerned by my silence.

“Well… sure, except for one thing.”

“What thing?” Her eyes were anxious. It was mind-boggling, but, somehow, she still seemed unsure of her hold on me. Maybe I needed to make myself more clear.

“Why didn’t Archie tell Charlie you were leaving tonight?” I asked.

She laughed, relieved.

I enjoyed the trip to the clearing more than I had last night. I still felt guilty, still afraid, but I wasn’t terrified anymore. I could function. I could see past what was coming, and almost believe that maybe it would be okay. Edythe was apparently fine with the idea of missing the fight… and that made it very hard not to believe her when she said this would be easy. She wouldn’t leave her family if she didn’t believe it herself. Maybe Archie was right, and I did worry too much.

We got to the clearing last.

Jasper and Eleanor were already wrestling—just warming up from the sounds of their laughter. Archie and Rosalie lounged on the hard ground, watching. Earnest and Carlisle were talking a few yards away, heads close together, fingers linked, not paying attention.

It was much brighter tonight, the moon shining through the thin clouds, and I could easily see the three wolves that sat around the edge of the practice ring, spaced far apart to watch from different angles.

It was also easy to recognize Julie; I would have known her at once, even if she hadn’t looked up and stared at the sound of our approach.

“Where are the rest of the wolves?” I wondered.

“They don’t all need to be here. One would do the job, but Sam didn’t trust us enough to just send Julie, though Julie was willing. Quil and Embry are her usual… I guess you could call them her wingmen.”

“Julie trusts you.”

Edythe nodded. “She trusts us not to try to kill her. That’s about it, though.”

“Are you participating tonight?” I asked, hesitant. I knew this was going to be almost as hard for
her as being left behind would have been for me. Maybe harder.

“I’ll help Jasper when he needs it. He wants to try some unequal groupings, teach them how to deal with multiple attackers.”

She shrugged.

And a fresh wave of panic shattered my brief sense of confidence.

They were still outnumbered. I was making that worse.

I stared at the field, trying to hide my reaction.

It was the wrong place to look, struggling as I was to lie to myself, to convince myself that everything would work out as I needed it to. Because when I forced my eyes away from the Cullens—away from the image of their play fighting that would be real and deadly in just a few days—Julie caught my eyes and smiled.

It was the same wolfy grin as before, her eyes scrunching the way they did when she was human.

It was hard to believe that, not so long ago, I’d found the werewolves frightening—lost sleep to nightmares about them.

I knew, without asking, which of the others was Embry and which was Quil. Because Embry was clearly the thinner gray wolf with the dark spots on his back, who sat so patiently watching, while Quil—deep chocolate brown, lighter over his face—twitched constantly, looking like he was dying to join in the mock fight. They weren’t monsters, even like this. They were friends.

Friends who didn’t look nearly as indestructible as Eleanor and Jasper did, moving faster than cobra strikes while the moonlight glinted off their granite-hard skin. Friends who didn’t seem to understand the danger involved here. Friends who were still somewhat mortal, friends who could bleed, friends who could die.…

Edythe’s confidence was reassuring, because it was plain that she wasn’t truly worried about her family. But would it hurt her if something happened to the wolves? Was there any reason for her to be anxious, if that possibility didn’t bother her? Edythe’s confidence only applied to one set of my fears.

I tried to smile back at Julie, swallowing against the lump in my throat. I didn’t seem to get it right.

Julie sprang lightly to her feet, her agility at odds with her sheer mass, and trotted over to where Edythe and I stood on the fringe of things.

“Julie,” Edythe greeted her politely.

Julie ignored her, her dark eyes on me. She put her head down to my level, as she had yesterday, cocking it to one side. A low whimper escaped her muzzle.

“I’m fine,” I answered, not needing the translation that Edythe was about to give. “Just worried, you know.”

Julie continued to stare at me.

“She wants to know why,” Edythe murmured.

Julie growled—not a threatening sound, an annoyed sound—and Edythe’s lips twitched.
“What?” I asked.

“She thinks my translations leave something to be desired. What she actually thought was, ‘That’s really stupid. What is there to be worried about?’ I edited, because I thought it was rude.”

I halfway smiled, too anxious to really feel amused. “There’s plenty to be worried about,” I told Julie. “Like a bunch of really stupid wolves getting themselves hurt.”

Julie laughed her coughing bark.

Edythe sighed. “Jasper wants help. You’ll be okay without a translator?”

“I’ll manage.”

Edythe looked at me wistfully for one minute, her expression hard to understand, then turned her back and strode over to where Jasper waited.

I sat down where I was. The ground was cold and uncomfortable.

Julie took a step forward, then looked back at me, and a low whine rose in her throat. She took another half-step.

“Go on without me,” I told her. “I don’t want to watch.”

Julie leaned her head to the side again for a moment, and then folded herself on to the ground beside me with a rumbling sigh.

“Really, you can go ahead,” I assured her. She didn’t respond, she just put her head down on her paws.

I stared up at the bright silver clouds, not wanting to see the fight. My imagination had more than enough fuel. A breeze blew through the clearing, and I shivered.

Julie scooted herself closer to me, pressing her warm fur against my left side.

“Er, thanks,” I muttered.

After a few minutes, I leaned against her wide shoulder. It was much more comfortable that way.

The clouds moved slowly across the sky, dimming and brightening as thick patches crossed the moon and passed on.

Absently, I began pulling my fingers through the fur on her neck. That same strange humming sound that she’d made yesterday rumbled in her throat. It was a homey kind of sound. Rougher, wilder than a cat’s purr, but conveying the same sense of contentment.

“You know, I never had a dog,” I mused. “I always wanted one, but Renée’s allergic.”

Julie laughed; her body shook under me.

“Aren’t you worried about Saturday at all?” I asked.

She turned her enormous head toward me, so that I could see one of her eyes roll.

“I wish I could feel that positive.”
She leaned her head against my leg and started humming again. And it did make me feel just a little bit better.

“So we’ve got some hiking to do tomorrow, I guess.”

She rumbled; the sound was enthusiastic.

“It might be a long hike,” I warned her. “Edythe doesn’t judge distances the way a normal person does.”

Julie barked another laugh.

I settled deeper into her warm fur, resting my head against her neck.

It was strange. Even though she was in this bizarre form, this felt more like the way Jules and I used to be—the easy, effortless friendship that was as natural as breathing in and out—than the last few times I’d been with Julie while she was human. Odd that I should find that again here, when I’d thought this wolf thing was the cause of its loss.

The killing games continued in the clearing, and I stared at the hazy moon.
EVERYTHING WAS READY.

I was packed for my two-day visit with “Archie,” and my bag waited for me on the passenger seat of my truck. I’d given the concert tickets to Angela, Ben, and Mike. Mike was going to take Jessica, which was exactly as I’d hoped. Billy had borrowed Old Quil Ateara’s boat and invited Charlie down for some open sea fishing before the afternoon game started. Collin and Brady, the two youngest werewolves, were staying behind to protect La Push—though they were just children, both of them only thirteen. Still, Charlie would be safer than anyone left in Forks.

I had done all that I could do. I tried to accept that, and put the things that were outside of my control out of my head, for tonight at least. One way or another, this would all be over in forty-eight hours. The thought was almost comforting.

Edythe had requested that I relax, and I was going to do my best.

“For this one night, could we try to forget everything besides just you and me?” she’d pleaded, unleashing the full force of her eyes on me. “It seems like I can never get enough time like that. I need to be with you. Just you.”

That was not a hard request to agree to, though I knew that forgetting my fears would be much easier said than done. Other matters were on my mind now, knowing that we had this night to be alone, and that would help.

There were some things that had changed.

For instance, I was ready.

I was ready to join her family and her world. The fear and guilt and anguish I was feeling now had taught me that much. I’d had a chance to concentrate on this—as I’d gazed at the moon through the clouds and rested against a werewolf—and I knew I would not panic again. The next time something came at us, I would be ready. An asset, not a liability. She would never have to make the choice between me and her family again. We would be partners, like Archie and Jasper. Next time, I would do my part.

I would wait for the sword to be removed from over my head, so that Edythe would be satisfied. But it wasn’t necessary. I was ready.

There was only one missing piece.

One piece, because there were some things that had not changed, and that included the desperate way I loved her. I’d had plenty of time to think through the ramifications of Jasper and Eleanor’s bet—to figure out the things I was willing to lose with my humanity, and the part that I was not willing to give up. I knew which human experience I was going to insist on before I became inhuman.

So we had some things to work out tonight. After everything I’d seen in the past two years, I didn’t believe in the word impossible anymore. It was going to take more than that to stop me now.

Okay, well, honestly, it was probably going to be much more complicated than that. But I was going to try.
As decided as I was, I wasn’t surprised that I still felt nervous as I drove down the long path to her house—I didn’t know how to do what I was trying to do, and that guaranteed me some serious jitters. She sat in the passenger seat, fighting a smile at my slow pace. I was surprised that she hadn’t insisted on taking the wheel, but tonight she seemed content to go at my speed.

It was after dark when we reached the house. In spite of that, the meadow was bright in the light shining from every window.

As soon as I cut the engine she was at my door, opening it for me. She lifted me from the cab with one arm, slinging my bag out of the truck bed and over her shoulder with the other. Her lips found mine as I heard her kick the truck’s door shut behind me.

Without breaking the kiss, she swung me up so that I was cradled in her arms and carried me into the house.

Was the front door already open? I didn’t know. We were inside, though, and I was dizzy. I had to remind myself to breathe.

This kissing did not frighten me. It wasn’t like before when I could feel the fear and panic leaking through her control. Her lips were not anxious, but enthusiastic now—she seemed as thrilled as I was that we had tonight to concentrate on being together. She continued to kiss me for several minutes, standing there in the entry; she seemed less guarded than usual, her mouth cold and urgent on mine.

I began to feel cautiously optimistic. Perhaps getting what I wanted would not be as difficult as I’d expected it to be.

No, of course it was going to be just exactly that difficult.

With a low chuckle, she pulled me away, holding me at arm’s length.

“Welcome home,” she said, her eyes liquid and warm.

“That sounds nice,” I said, breathless.

She set me gently on my feet. I wrapped both my arms around her, refusing to allow any space between us.

“I have something for you,” she said, her tone conversational.

“Oh?”

“Your hand-me-down, remember? You said that was allowable.”

“Oh, that’s right. I guess I did say that.”

She chuckled at my reluctance.

“It’s up in my room. Shall I go get it?”

Her bedroom? “Sure,” I agreed, feeling quite devious as I wound my fingers through hers. “Let’s go.”

She must have been eager to give me my non-present, because human velocity was not fast enough for her. She scooped me up again and nearly flew up the stairs to her room. She set me down at the door, and darted into her closet.
She was back before I’d taken a step, but I ignored her and went to the huge gold bed, plopping down on the edge and then sliding to the center. I curled up in a ball, my arms wrapped around my knees.

“Okay,” I grumbled. Now that I was where I wanted to be, I could afford a little reluctance. “Let me have it.”

Edythe laughed.

She climbed onto the bed to sit next to me, and my heart thumped unevenly. Hopefully she would write that off as some reaction to her giving me presents.

“A hand-me-down,” she reminded me sternly. She pulled my left wrist away from my leg, and touched the silver bracelet for just a moment. Then she gave me my arm back.

I examined it cautiously. On the opposite side of the chain from the wolf, there now hung a brilliant heart-shaped crystal. It was cut in a million facets, so that even in the subdued light shining from the lamp, it sparkled. I inhaled in a low gasp.

“It was my mother’s.” She shrugged deprecatingly. “I inherited quite a few baubles like this. I’ve given some to Rosalie and Archie both. So, clearly, this is not a big deal in any way.”

I smiled ruefully at her assurance.

“But I thought it was a good representation,” she continued. “It’s hard and cold.” She laughed. “And it throws rainbows in the sunlight.”

“You forgot the most important similarity,” I murmured. “It’s beautiful.”

“My heart is just as silent,” she mused. “And it, too, is yours.”

I twisted my wrist so the heart would glimmer. “Thank you. For both.”

“No, thank you. It’s a relief to have you accept a gift so easily. Good practice for you, too.” She grinned, flashing her teeth.

I leaned into her, ducking my head under her arm and cuddling into her side. It probably felt similar to snuggling with Michelangelo’s *David*, except that this perfect marble creature wrapped her arms around me to pull me closer.

It seemed like a good place to start.

“Can we discuss something? I’d appreciate it if you could begin by being open-minded.”

She hesitated for a moment. “I’ll give it my best effort,” she agreed, cautious now.

“I’m not breaking any rules here,” I promised. “This is strictly about you and me.” I cleared my throat. “So… I was impressed by how well we were able to compromise the other night. I was thinking I would like to apply the same principle to a different situation.” I wondered why I was being so formal. Must be the nerves.

“What would you like to negotiate?” she asked, a smile in her voice.

I struggled, trying to find exactly the right words to open with.

“Listen to your heart fly,” she murmured. “It’s fluttering like a hummingbird’s wings. Are you all
right?"

“I’m great.”

“Please go on then,” she encouraged.

“Well, I guess, first, I wanted to talk to you about that whole ridiculous marriage condition thing.”

“It’s only ridiculous to you. What about it?”

“I was wondering… is that open to negotiation?”

Edythe frowned, serious now. “I’ve already made the largest concession by far and away—I’ve agreed to take your life away against my better judgment. And that ought to entitle me to a few compromises on your part.”

“No.” I shook my head, focusing on keeping my face composed. “That part’s a done deal. We’re not discussing my… renovations right now. I want to hammer out some other details.”

She looked at me suspiciously. “Which details do you mean exactly?”

I hesitated. “Let’s clarify your prerequisites first.”

“You know what I want.”

“Matrimony.” I made it sound like a dirty word.

“Yes.” She smiled a wide smile. “To start with.”

The shock spoiled my carefully composed expression. “There’s more?”

“Well,” she said, and her face was calculating. “If you’re my wife, then what’s mine is yours… like tuition money. So there would be no problem with Dartmouth.”

“Anything else? While you’re already being absurd?”

“I wouldn’t mind some time.”

“No. No time. That’s a deal breaker right there.”

She sighed longingly. “Just a year or two?”

I shook my head, my lips set in a stubborn frown. “Move along to the next one.”

“That’s it. Unless you’d like to talk cars…”

She grinned widely when I grimaced, then took my hand and began playing with my fingers.

“I didn’t realize there was anything else you wanted besides being transformed into a monster yourself. I’m extremely curious.” Her voice was low and soft. The slight edge would have been hard to detect if I hadn’t known it so well.

I paused, staring at her hand on mine. I still didn’t know how to begin. I felt her eyes watching me and I was afraid to look up. The blood began to burn in my face.

Her cool fingers brushed my cheek. “You’re blushing?” she asked in surprise. I kept my eyes down. “Please, Bella, the suspense is painful.”
I bit my lip.

“Bella.” Her tone reproached me now, reminded me that it was hard for her when I kept my thoughts to myself.

“Well, I’m a little worried… about after,” I admitted, finally looking at her.

I felt her body tense, but her voice was gentle and velvet. “What has you worried?”

“All of you just seem so convinced that the only thing I’m going to be interested in, afterward, is slaughtering everyone in town,” I confessed, while she winced at my choice of words. “And I’m afraid I’ll be so preoccupied with the mayhem that I won’t be me anymore… and that I won’t… I won’t want you the same way I do now.”

“Bella, that part doesn’t last forever,” she assured me.

She was missing the point.

“Edythe,” I said, nervous, staring at a freckle on my wrist. “There’s something that I want to do before I’m not human anymore.”

She waited for me to continue. I didn’t. My face was all hot.

“Whatever you want,” she encouraged, anxious and completely clueless.

“Do you promise?” I muttered, knowing my attempt to trap her with her words was not going to work, but unable to resist.

“Yes,” she said. I looked up to see that her eyes were earnest and confused. “Tell me what you want, and you can have it.”

I couldn’t believe how awkward and idiotic I felt. I was too innocent—which was, of course, central to the discussion. I didn’t have the faintest idea how to be seductive. I would just have to settle for flushed and self-conscious.

“You,” I mumbled almost incoherently.

“I’m yours.” She smiled, still oblivious, trying to hold my gaze as I looked away again.

I took a deep breath and shifted forward so that I was kneeling on the bed. Then I wrapped my arms around her neck and kissed her.

She kissed me back, bewildered but willing. Her lips were gentle against mine, and I could tell her mind was elsewhere—trying to figure out what was on my mind. I decided she needed a hint.

My hands were slightly shaky as I unlocked my arms from around her neck. My fingers slid down her neck to the collar of her shirt. The trembling didn’t help as I tried to hurry to undo the buttons before she stopped me.

Her lips froze, and I could almost hear the click in her head as she put together my words and my actions.

She pushed me away at once, her face heavily disapproving.

“Be reasonable, Bella.”
“You promised—whatever I wanted,” I reminded her without hope.

“We’re not having this discussion.” She glared at me while she refastened the two buttons I’d managed to open.

My teeth clamped together.

“I say we are,” I growled. I moved my hands to my blouse and yanked open the top button.

She grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my sides.

“I say we’re not,” she said flatly.

We glowered at each other.

“You wanted to know,” I pointed out.

“I thought it would be something faintly realistic.”

“So you can ask for any stupid, ridiculous thing you want—like getting married—but I’m not allowed to even discuss what I—”

While I was ranting, she pulled my hands together to restrain them in just one of hers, and put her other hand over my mouth.

“No.” Her face was hard.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. And, as the anger began to fade, I felt something else.

It took me a minute to recognize why I was staring down again, the blush returning—why my stomach felt uneasy, why there was too much moisture in my eyes, why I suddenly wanted to run from the room.

Rejection washed through me, instinctive and strong.

I knew it was irrational. She’d been very clear on other occasions that my safety was the only factor. Yet I’d never made myself quite so vulnerable before. I scowled at the golden comforter that matched her eyes and tried to banish the reflex reaction that told me I was unwanted and unwanted.

Edythe sighed. The hand over my mouth moved under my chin, and she pulled my face up until I had to look at her.

“What now?”

“Nothing,” I mumbled.

She scrutinized my face for long moment while I tried unsuccessfully to twist away from her gaze. Her brow furrowed, and her expression became horrified.

“Did I hurt your feelings?” she asked, shocked.

“No,” I lied.

So quickly that I wasn’t even sure how it happened, I was in her arms, my face cradled between her shoulder and her hand, while her thumb stroked reassuringly against my cheek.
“You know why I have to say no,” she murmured. “You know that I want you, too.”

“Do you?” I whispered, my voice full of doubt.

“Of course I do, you silly, beautiful, oversensitive girl.” She laughed once, and then her voice was bleak. “Doesn’t everyone? I feel like there’s a line behind me, jockeying for position, waiting for me to make a big enough mistake…. You’re too desirable for your own good.”

“Who’s being silly now?” I doubted if awkward, self-conscious, and inept added up to desirable in anyone’s book.

“Do I have to send a petition around to get you to believe? Shall I tell you whose names would be on the top of the list? You know a few of them, but some might surprise you.”

I shook my head against her chest, grimacing. “You’re just trying to distract me. Let’s get back to the subject.”

She sighed.

“Tell me if I have anything wrong.” I tried to sound detached. “Your demands are marriage”—I couldn’t say the word without making a face—“paying my tuition, more time, and you wouldn’t mind if my vehicle went a little faster.” I raised my eyebrows. “Did I get everything? That’s a hefty list.”

“Only the first is a demand.” She seemed to be having a hard time keeping a straight face. “The others are merely requests.”

“And my lone, solitary little demand is—”

“Demand?” she interrupted, suddenly serious again.

“Yes, demand.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Getting married is a stretch for me. I’m not giving in unless I get something in return.”

She leaned down to whisper in my ear. “No,” she murmured silkily. “It’s not possible now. Later, when you’re less breakable. Be patient, Bella.”

I tried to keep my voice firm and reasonable. “But that’s the problem. It won’t be the same when I’m less breakable. I won’t be the same! I don’t know who I’ll be then.”

“You’ll still be Bella,” she promised.

I frowned. “If I’m so far gone that I’d want to kill Charlie—that I’d drink Julie’s blood or Angela’s if I got the chance—how can that be true?”

“It will pass. And I doubt you’ll want to drink the dog’s blood.” She pretended to shudder at the thought. “Even as a newborn, you’ll have better taste than that.”

I ignored her attempt to sidetrack me. “But that will always be what I want most, won’t it?” I challenged. “Blood, blood, and more blood!”

“The fact that you are still alive is proof that that is not true,” she pointed out.
“Over eighty years later,” I reminded her. “What I meant was physically, though. Intellectually, I know I’ll be able to be myself… after a while. But just purely physically—I will always be thirsty, more than anything else.”

She didn’t answer.

“So I will be different,” I concluded unopposed. “Because right now, physically, there’s nothing I want more than you. More than food or water or oxygen. Intellectually, I have my priorities in a slightly more sensible order. But physically…”

I twisted my head to kiss the palm of her hand.

She took a deep breath. I was surprised that it sounded a little unsteady.

“Bella, I could kill you,” she whispered.

“I don’t think you could.”

Edythe’s eyes tightened. She lifted her hand from my face and reached quickly behind herself for something I couldn’t see. There was a muffled snapping sound, and the bed quivered beneath us.

Something dark was in her hand; she held it up for my curious examination. It was a metal flower, one of the roses that adorned the wrought iron posts and canopy of her bed frame. Her hand closed for a brief second, her fingers contracting gently, and then it opened again.

Without a word, she offered me the crushed, uneven lump of black metal. It was a cast of the inside of her hand, like a piece of play dough squeezed in a child’s fist. A half-second passed, and the shape crumbled into black sand in her palm.

I glared. “That’s not what I meant. I already know how strong you are. You didn’t have to break the furniture.”

“What did you mean then?” she asked in a dark voice, tossing the handful of iron sand to the corner of the room; it hit the wall with a sound like rain.

Her eyes were intent on my face as I struggled to explain.

“Obviously not that you aren’t physically able hurt me, if you wanted to… More that, you don’t want to hurt me… so much so that I don’t think that you ever could.”

She started shaking her head before I was done.

“It might not work like that, Bella.”

“Might,” I scoffed. “You have no more idea what you’re talking about than I do.”

“Exactly. Do you imagine I would ever take that kind of risk with you?”

I stared into her eyes for a long minute. There was no sign of compromise, no hint of indecision in them.

“Please,” I finally whispered, hopeless. “It’s all I want. Please.” I closed my eyes in defeat, waiting for the quick and final no.

But she didn’t answer immediately. I hesitated in disbelief, stunned to hear that her breathing was uneven again.
I opened my eyes, and her face was torn.

“Please?” I whispered again, my heartbeat picking up speed. My words tumbled out as I rushed to take advantage of the sudden uncertainty in her eyes. “You don’t have to make me any guarantees. If it doesn’t work out right, well, then that’s that. Just let us try… only try. And I’ll give you what you want,” I promised rashly. “I’ll marry you. I’ll let you pay for Dartmouth, and I won’t complain about the bribe to get me in. You can even buy me a fast car if that makes you happy! Just… please.”

Her icy arms tightened around me, and her lips were at my ear; her cool breath made me shiver. “This is unbearable. So many things I’ve wanted to give you—and this is what you decide to demand. Do you have any idea how painful it is, trying to refuse you when you plead with me this way?”

“Then don’t refuse,” I suggested breathlessly.

She didn’t respond.

“Please,” I tried again.

“Bella…” She shook her head slowly, but it didn’t feel like a denial as her face, her lips, moved back and forth across my throat. It felt more like surrender. My heart, racing already, spluttered frantically.

Again, I took what advantage I could. When her face turned toward mine with the slow movement of her indecision, I twisted quickly in her arms till my lips reached hers. Her hands seized my face, and I thought she was going to push me away again.

I was wrong.

Her mouth was not gentle; there was a brand-new edge of conflict and desperation in the way her lips moved. I locked my arms around her neck, and, to my suddenly overheated skin, her body felt colder than ever. I trembled, but it was not from the chill.

She didn’t stop kissing me. I was the one who had to break away, gasping for air. Even then her lips did not leave my skin, they just moved to my throat. The thrill of victory was a strange high; it made me feel powerful. Brave. My hands weren’t unsteady now; I got through with the buttons on her shirt this time easily, and my fingers traced the perfect planes of her icy collarbone. She was too beautiful. What was the word she’d used just now? Unbearable—that was it. Her beauty was too much to bear.…

I pulled her mouth back to mine, and she seemed just as eager as I was. One of her hands still cupped my face, her other arm was tight around my waist, straining me closer to her. It made it slightly more difficult as I tried to reach the front of my shirt, but not impossible.

Cold iron fetters locked around my wrists, and pulled my hands above my head, which was suddenly on a pillow.

Her lips were at my ear again. “Bella,” she murmured, her voice warm and velvet. “Would you please stop trying to take your clothes off?”

“Do you want to do that part?” I asked, confused.

“Not tonight,” she answered softly. Her lips were slower now against my cheek and jaw, all the urgency gone.
“Edythe, don’t—,” I started to argue.

“I’m not saying no,” she reassured me. “I’m just saying not tonight.”

I thought about that while my breathing slowed.

“Give me one good reason why tonight is not as good as any other night.” I was still breathless; it made the frustration in my voice less impressive.

“I wasn’t born yesterday.” She chuckled in my ear. “Out of the two of us, which do you think is more unwilling to give the other what they want? You just promised to marry me before you do any changing, but if I give in tonight, what guarantee do I have that you won’t go running off to Carlisle in the morning? I am—clearly—much less reluctant to give you what you want. Therefore... you first.”

I exhaled with a loud huff. “I have to marry you first?” I asked in disbelief.

“That’s the deal—take it or leave it. Compromise, remember?”

Her arms wrapped around me, and she began kissing me in a way that should be illegal. Too persuasive—it was duress, coercion. I tried to keep a clear head... and failed quickly and absolutely.

“I think that’s a really bad idea,” I gasped when she let me breathe.

“I’m not surprised you feel that way.” She smirked. “You have a one-track mind.”

“How did this happen?” I grumbled. “I thought I was holding my own tonight—for once—and now, all of a sudden—”

“You’re engaged,” she finished.

“Ew! Please don’t say that out loud.”

“Are you going back on your word?” she demanded. She pulled away to read my face. Her expression was entertained. She was having fun.

I glared at her, trying to ignore the way her smile made my heart react.

“Are you?” she pressed.

“Ugh!” I groaned. “No. I’m not. Are you happy now?”

Her smile was blinding. “Exceptionally.”

I groaned again.

“Aren’t you happy at all?”

She kissed me again before I could answer. Another too-persuasive kiss.

“A little bit,” I admitted when I could speak. “But not about getting married.”

She kissed me another time, and kept going until my heart was racing and my skin was flushed.

“Look, Edythe,” I murmured, my voice wheedling, when she paused to kiss the palm of my hand.
“I said I would marry you, and I will. I promise. I swear. If you want, I’ll sign a contract in my own blood.”

“Not funny,” she murmured against the inside of my wrist.

“What I’m saying is this—I’m not going to trick you or anything. You know me better than that. So there’s really no reason to wait. We’re completely alone—how often does that happen?—and you’ve provided this very large and comfortable bed.…”

“Not tonight,” she said again.

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

Using the hand that she was still kissing, I pulled her face back up to where I could see her expression.

“Then what’s the problem? It’s not like you didn’t know you were going to win in the end.” I frowned and muttered, “You always win.”

“Just hedging my bets,” she said calmly.

“There’s something else,” I guessed, my eyes narrowing. There was a defensiveness about her face, a faint hint of some secret motive she was trying to hide behind her casual manner. “Are you planning to go back on your word?”

“No,” she promised solemnly. “I swear to you, we will try. After you marry me.”

I shook my head, and laughed glumly. “You make me feel like a villain in a melodrama—twirling my mustache while I try to steal some poor girl’s virtue.”

Her eyes were wary as they flashed across my face, then she quickly ducked down to press her lips against my collarbone.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” The short laugh that escaped me was more shocked than amused. “You’re trying to protect your virtue!” I covered my mouth with my hand to muffle the giggle that followed. The words were so… old-fashioned.

“No, silly girl,” she muttered against my shoulder. “I’m trying to protect yours. And you’re making it shockingly difficult.”

“Of all the ridiculous—”

“Let me ask you something,” she interrupted quickly. “We’ve had this discussion before, but humor me. How many people in this room have a soul? A shot at heaven, or whatever there is after this life?”

“Two,” I answered immediately, my voice fierce.

“All right. Maybe that’s true. Now, there’s a world full of dissension about this, but the vast majority seem to think that there are some rules that have to be followed.”

“Vampire rules aren’t enough for you? You want to worry about the human ones too?”

“It couldn’t hurt.” She shrugged. “Just in case.”
I glared at her through narrowed eyes.

“Now, of course, it might be too late for me, even if you are right about my soul.”

“No, it isn’t,” I argued angrily.

“’Thou shalt not kill’ is commonly accepted by most major belief systems. And I’ve killed a lot of people, Bella.”

“Only the bad ones.”

She shrugged. “Maybe that counts, maybe it doesn’t. But you haven’t killed anyone—”

“That you know about,” I muttered.

She smiled, but otherwise ignored the interruption. “And I’m going to do my best to keep you out of temptation’s way.”

“Okay. But we weren’t fighting over committing murder,” I reminded her.

“The same principle applies—the only difference is that this is the one area in which I’m just as spotless as you are. Can’t I leave one rule unbroken?”

“One?”

“You know that I’ve stolen, I’ve lied, I’ve coveted… my virtue is all I have left.” She grinned crookedly.

“I lie all the time.”

“Yes, but you’re such a bad liar that it doesn’t really count. Nobody believes you.”

“I really hope you’re wrong about that—because otherwise Charlie is about to burst through the door with a loaded gun.”

“Charlie is happier when he pretends to swallow your stories. He’d rather lie to himself than look too closely.” She grinned at me.

“But what did you ever covet?” I asked doubtfully. “You have everything.”

“I coveted you.” Her smile darkened. “I had no right to want you—but I reached out and took you anyway. And now look what’s become of you! Trying to seduce a vampire.” She shook her head in mock horror.

“You can covet what’s already yours,” I informed her. “Besides, I thought it was my virtue you were worried about.”

“It is. If it’s too late for me… Well, I’ll be damned—no pun intended—if I’ll let them keep you out, too.”

“You can’t make me go somewhere you won’t be,” I vowed. “That’s my definition of hell. Anyway, I have an easy solution to all this: let’s never die, all right?”

“Sounds simple enough. Why didn’t I think of that?”

She smiled at me until I gave up with an angry humph. “So that’s it. You won’t sleep with me until
“Technically, I can’t ever sleep with you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Very mature, Edythe.”

“But, other than that detail, yes, you’ve got it right.”

“I think you have an ulterior motive.”

Her eyes widened innocently. “Another one?”

“You know this will speed things up,” I accused.

She tried not to smile. “There is only one thing I want to speed up, and the rest can wait forever… but for that, it’s true, your impatient human hormones are my most powerful ally at this point.”

“I can’t believe I’m going along with this. When I think of Charlie… and Renée! Can you imagine what Angela will think? Or Jessica? Ugh. I can hear the gossip now.”

She raised one eyebrow at me, and I knew why. What did it matter what they said about me when I leaving soon and not coming back? Was I really so oversensitive that I couldn’t bear a few weeks of sidelong glances and leading questions?

Maybe it wouldn’t bug me so much if I didn’t know that I would probably be gossiping just as condescendingly as the rest of them if it was someone else getting married this summer.

Gah. Married this summer! I shuddered.

And then, maybe it wouldn’t bug me so much if I hadn’t been raised to shudder at the thought of marriage.

Edythe interrupted my fretting. “It doesn’t have to be a big production. I don’t need any fanfare. You won’t have to tell anyone or make any changes. We’ll go to Vegas—you can wear old jeans and we’ll go to the chapel with the drive-through window. I just want it to be official—that you belong to me and no one else.”

“It couldn’t be any more official than it already is,” I grumbled. But her description didn’t sound that bad. Only Archie would be disappointed.

“We’ll see about that.” She smiled complacently. “I suppose you don’t want your ring now?”

I had to swallow before I could speak. “You suppose correctly.”

She laughed at my expression. “That’s fine. I’ll get it on your finger soon enough.”

I glared at him. “You talk like you already have one.”

“I do,” she said, unashamed. “Ready to force upon you at the first sign of weakness.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“Do you want to see it?” she asked. Her liquid topaz eyes were suddenly shining with excitement.

“No!” I almost shouted, a reflex reaction. I regretted it at once. Her face fell ever so slightly. “Unless you really want to show it to me,” I amended. I gritted my teeth together to keep my
illogical terror from showing.

“That’s all right,” she shrugged. “It can wait.”

I sighed. “Show me the damn ring, Edythe.”

She shook her head. “No.”

I studied her expression for a long minute.

“Please?” I asked quietly, experimenting with my newly discovered weapon. I touched her face lightly with the tips of my fingers. “Please can I see it?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You are the most dangerous creature I’ve ever met,” she muttered. But she got up and moved with unconscious grace to kneel next to the small bedside table. She was back on the bed with me in an instant, sitting beside me with one arm around my shoulder. In her other hand was a little black box. She balanced it on my left knee.

“Go ahead and look, then,” she said brusquely.

It was harder than it should have been to pick up the inoffensive little box, but I didn’t want to hurt her again, so I tried to keep my hand from shaking. The surface was smooth with black satin. I brushed my fingers over it, hesitating.

“You didn’t spend a lot of money, did you? Lie to me, if you did.”

“I didn’t spend anything,” she assured me. “It’s just another hand-me-down. This is the ring my father gave to my mother.”

“Oh.” Surprise colored my voice. I pinched the lid between my thumb and forefinger, but didn’t open it.

“I supposed it’s a little outdated.” Her tone was playfully apologetic. “Old-fashioned, just like me. I can get you something more modern. Something from Tiffany’s?”

“I like old-fashioned things,” I mumbled as I hesitantly lifted the lid.

Nestled into the black satin, Elizabeth Masen’s ring sparkled in the dim light. The face was a long oval, set with slanting rows of glittering round stones. The band was gold—delicate and narrow. The gold made a fragile web around the diamonds. I’d never seen anything like it.

Unthinkingly, I stroked the shimmering gems.

“It’s so pretty,” I murmured to myself, surprised.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful.” I shrugged, feigning a lack of interest. “What’s not to like?”

She chuckled. “See if it fits.”

My left hand clenched into a fist.

“Bella,” she sighed. “I’m not going to solder it to your finger. Just try it on so I can see if it needs to be sized. Then you can take it right off.”
“Fine,” I grumbled.

I reached for the ring, but her long fingers beat me there. She took my left hand in hers, and slid the ring into place on my third finger. She held my hand out, and we both examined the oval sparkling against my skin. It wasn’t quite as awful as I’d feared, having it there.

“A perfect fit,” she said indifferently. “That’s nice—saves me a trip to the jeweler’s.”

I could hear some strong emotion burning under the casual tone of her voice, and I stared up at her face. It was there in her eyes, too, visible despite the careful nonchalance of her expression.

“You like that, don’t you?” I asked suspiciously, fluttering my fingers and thinking that it was really too bad that I had not broken my *left* hand.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Sure,” she said, still casual. “It looks very nice on you.”

I stared into her eyes, trying to decipher the emotion that smoldered just under the surface. She gazed back, and the casual pretense suddenly slipped away. She was glowing—her angel’s face brilliant with joy and victory. She was so glorious that it knocked me breathless.

Before I could catch that breath, she was kissing me, her lips exultant. I was lightheaded when she moved her mouth to whisper in my ear—but her breathing was just as ragged as mine.

“Yes, I like it. You have *no* idea.”

I laughed, gasping a little. “I believe you.”

“Do you mind if I do something?” she murmured, her arms tightening around me.

“Anything you want.”

But she let me go and slid away.

“Anything but that,” I complained.

She ignored me, taking my hand and pulling me off the bed, too. She stood in front of me, hands on my shoulders, face serious.

“Now, I want to do this right. Please, *please*, keep in mind that you’ve already agreed to this, and don’t ruin it for me.”

“Oh, no,” I gasped as she slid down onto one knee.

“Be nice,” she muttered.

I took a deep breath.

“Isabella Swan?” She looked up at me through her impossibly long lashes, her golden eyes soft but, somehow, still scorching. “I promise to love you forever—every single day of forever. Will you marry me?”

There were many things I wanted to say, some of them not nice at all, and others more disgustingly gooey and romantic than she probably dreamed I was capable of. Rather than embarrass myself with either, I whispered, “Yes.”

“Thank you,” she said simply. She took my left hand and kissed each of my fingertips before she
kissed the ring that was now mine.
I HATED TO WASTE ANY PART OF THE NIGHT IN SLEEP, but that was inevitable. The sun was bright outside the window-wall when I woke, with small clouds scuttling too quickly across the sky. The wind rocked the treetops till the whole forest looked as if it was going to shake apart.

She left me alone to get dressed, and I appreciated the chance to think. Somehow, my plan for last night had gone horribly awry, and I needed come to grips with the consequences. Though I’d given back the hand-me-down ring as soon as I could do it without hurting her feelings, my left hand felt heavier, like it was still in place, just invisible.

This shouldn’t bother me, I reasoned. It was no big thing—a road trip to Vegas. I would go one better than old jeans—I would wear old sweats. The ceremony certainly couldn’t take very long; no more than fifteen minutes at the most, right? So I could handle that.

And then, when it was over, she’d have to fulfill her side of the bargain. I would concentrate on that, and forget the rest.

She said I didn’t have to tell anyone, and I was planning to hold her to that. Of course, it was very stupid of me not to think of Archie.

The Cullens got home around noon. There was a new, businesslike feel to the atmosphere around them, and it pulled me back into the enormity of what was coming.

Archie seemed to be in an unusually bad mood. I chalked it up to his frustration with feeling normal, because his first words to Edythe were a complaint about working with the wolves.

“I think”—he made a face as he used the uncertain word—“that you’re going to want to pack for cold weather, Edythe. I can’t see where you are exactly, because you’re taking off with that dog this afternoon. But the storm that’s coming seems particularly bad in that general area.”

Edythe nodded.

“It’s going to snow on the mountains,” he warned her.

“Ew, snow,” I muttered to myself. It was June, for crying out loud.

“Wear a jacket,” Archie told me. His voice was unfriendly, and that surprised me. I tried to read his face, but he turned away.

I looked at Edythe, and she was smiling; whatever was bugging Archie amused her.

Edythe had more than enough camping gear to choose from—props in the human charade; the Cullens were good customers at the Newton’s store. She grabbed a down sleeping bag, a small tent, and several packets of dehydrated food—grinning when I made a face at them—and stuffed them all in a backpack.

Archie wandered into the garage while we were there, watching Edythe’s preparations without a word. She ignored him.

When she was done packing, Edythe handed me her phone. “Why don’t you call Julie and tell her we’ll be ready for her in an hour or so. She knows where to meet us.”
Julie wasn’t home, but Billy promised to call around until he could find an available werewolf to pass the news to.

“Don’t you worry about Charlie, Bella,” Billy said. “I’ve got my part of this under control.”

“Yeah, I know Charlie’ll be fine.” I didn’t feel so confident about his daughter’s safety, but I didn’t add that.

“I wish I could be with the rest of them tomorrow.” Billy chuckled regretfully. “Being an old man is a hardship, Bella.”

The urge to fight must be a defining characteristic of the Y chromosome. They were all the same.

“Have fun with Charlie.”

“Good luck, Bella,” he answered. “And… pass that along to the, er, Cullens for me.”

“I will,” I promised, surprised by the gesture.

As I gave the phone back to Edythe, I saw that she and Archie were having some kind of silent discussion. He was staring at her, pleading in his eyes. She was frowning back, unhappy with whatever he wanted.

“Billy said to tell you ‘good luck.’”

“That was generous of him,” Edythe said, breaking away from him.

“Bella, could I please speak to you alone?” Archie asked swiftly.

“You’re about to make my life harder than it needs to be, Archie,” Edythe warned him through her teeth. “I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“This isn’t about you, Edythe,” he shot back.

She laughed. Something about his response was funny to her.

“It’s not,” Archie insisted. “This is a female thing.”

Edythe arched an eyebrow. “Female? Has there been a change with you that I don’t know about?”

“Let him talk to me,” I told her. I was curious.

“This isn’t about you, Edythe,” he shot back.

She laughed. Something about his response was funny to her.

“It’s not,” Archie insisted. “This is a female thing.”

Edythe arched an eyebrow. “Female? Has there been a change with you that I don’t know about?”

“Let him talk to me,” I told her. I was curious.

“You asked for it,” she muttered. She laughed again—half angry, half amused—and strode out of the garage.

I turned to Archie, worried now, but he didn’t look at me. His bad mood hadn’t passed yet.

He went to sit on the hood of his Porsche, his face dejected. I followed, and leaned against the bumper beside him.

“Bella?” Archie asked in a sad voice, shifting over and curling up against my side. His voice sounded so miserable that I wrapped my arms around his shoulders in comfort.

“What’s wrong, Archie?”

“Don’t you love me?” he asked in that same sad tone.
Of course I do. You know that."

"Then why do I see you sneaking off to Vegas to get married without inviting me?"

"Oh," I muttered, my cheeks turning pink. I could see that I had seriously hurt his feelings, and I hurried to defend myself. "You know how I hate to make a big deal out of things. It was Edythe's idea, anyway."

"I don't care whose idea it was. How could you do this to me? I expect that kind of thing from Edythe, but not from you. I love you like you were my own sister."

"To me, Archie, I am your sister."

"Words!" he growled.

"Fine, you can come. There won't be much to see."

He was still grimacing.

"What?" I demanded.

"How much do you love me, Bella?"

"Why?"

He stared at me with pleading eyes, his long black eyebrows slanting up in the middle and pulling together, his lips trembling at the corners. It was a heart-breaking expression.

"Please, please, please," he whispered. "Please, Bella, please—if you really love me… Please let me do your wedding."

"Aw, Archie!" I groaned, pulling away and standing up. "No! Don't do this to me."

"If you really, truly love me, Bella."

I folded my arms across my chest. "That is so unfair. And Edythe kind of already used that one on me."

"I'll bet Edythe would like it better if you did this traditionally, though she'd never tell you that. And Earnest—think what it would mean to him!"

I groaned. "I'd rather face the newborns alone."

"I'll owe you for a decade."

"You'd owe me for a century!"

His eyes glowed. "Is that a yes?"

"No! I don't want to do this!"

"You won't have to do anything but walk a few yards and then repeat after the minister."

"Ugh! Ugh, ugh!"

"Please?" He started bouncing in place. "Please, please, please, please, please?"
“I’ll never, never ever forgive you for this, Archie.”

“Yay!” he squealed, clapping his hands together.

“That’s not a yes!”

“But it will be,” he sang.

“Edythe!” I yelled, stalking out of the garage. “I know you’re listening. Get over here.” Archie was right behind me, still clapping.

“Thanks so much, Archie,” Edythe said acidly, coming from behind me. I turned to let her have it, but her expression was so worried and upset that I couldn’t speak my complaints. I threw my arms around her instead, hiding my face, just in case the angry moisture in my eyes made it look like I was crying.

“Vegas,” Edythe promised in my ear.

“Not a chance,” Archie gloated. “Bella would never do that to me. You know, Edythe, as a sister, you are sometimes a disappointment.”

“Don’t be mean,” I grumbled at him. “She’s trying to make me happy, unlike you.”

“I’m trying to make you happy, too, Bella. It’s just that I know better what will make you happy… in the long run. You’ll thank me for this. Maybe not for fifty years, but definitely someday.”

“I never thought I’d see the day where I’d be willing to take a bet against you, Archie, but it has arrived.”

He laughed his silvery laugh. “So, are you going to show me the ring?”

I grimaced in horror as he grabbed my left hand and then dropped it just as quickly.

“Huh. I saw her put it on you…. Did I miss something?” he asked. He concentrated for half a second, furrowing his brow, before he answered his own questions. “No. Wedding’s still on.”

“Bella has issues with jewelry,” Edythe explained.

“What’s one more diamond? Well, I guess the ring has lots of diamonds, but my point is that she’s already got one on—”

“Enough, Archie!” Edythe cut him off suddenly. The way she glared at him… she looked like a vampire again. “We’re in a hurry.”

“I don’t understand. What’s that about diamonds?” I asked.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Archie said. “Edythe is right—you’d better get going. You’ve got to set a trap and make camp before the storm comes.” He frowned, and his expression was anxious, almost nervous. “Don’t forget your coat, Bella. It seems… unseasonably cold.”

“I’ve already got it,” Edythe assured him.

“Have a nice night,” he told us in farewell.

It was twice as far to the clearing as usual; Edythe took a long detour, making sure my scent would be nowhere near the trail Julie would hide later. She carried me in her arms, the bulky backpack in
my usual spot.

She stopped at the farthest end of the clearing and set me on my feet.

“All right. Just walk north for a ways, touching as much as you can. Archie gave me a clear picture of their path, and it won’t take long for us to intersect it.”

“North?”

She smiled and pointed out the right direction.

I wandered into the woods, leaving the clear yellow light of the strangely sunny day in the clearing behind me. Maybe Archie’s blurred sight would be wrong about the snow. I hoped so. The sky was mostly clear, though the wind whipped furiously through the open spaces. In the trees it was calmer, but much too cold for June—even in a long-sleeved shirt with a thick sweater over the top, there were goose bumps on my arms. I walked slowly, trailing my fingers over anything close enough: the rough tree bark, the wet ferns, the moss-covered rocks.

Edythe stayed with me, walking a parallel line about twenty yards away.

“Am I doing this right?” I called.

“Perfectly.”

I had an idea. “Will this help?” I asked as I ran my fingers through my hair and caught a few loose strands. I draped them over the ferns.

“Yes, that does make the trail stronger. But you don’t need to pull your hair out, Bella. It will be fine.”

“I’ve got a few extras I can spare.”

It was gloomy under the trees, and I wished I could walk closer to Edythe and hold her hand.

I wedged another hair into a broken branch that cut through my path.

“You don’t need to let Archie have his way, you know,” Edythe said.

“Don’t worry about it, Edythe. I’m not going to leave you at the altar, regardless.” I had a sinking feeling that Archie was going to get his way, mostly because he was totally unscrupulous when there was something he wanted, and also because I was a sucker for guilt trips.

“That’s not what I’m worried about. I want this to be what you want it to be.”

I repressed a sigh. It would hurt her feelings if I told the truth—that it didn’t really matter, because it was all just varying degrees of awful anyway.

“Well, even if he does get his way, we can keep it small. Just us. Eleanor can get a clerical license off the Internet.”

I giggled. “That does sound better.” It wouldn’t feel very official if Eleanor read the vows, which was a plus. But I’d have a hard time keeping a straight face.

“See,” she said with a smile. “There’s always a compromise.”

It took a while for me to reach the spot where the newborn army would be certain to cross my trail,
but Edythe never got impatient with my pace.

She had to lead a bit more on the way back, to keep me on the same path. It all looked alike to me.

We were almost to the clearing when I fell. I could see the wide opening ahead, and that’s probably why I got too eager and forgot to watch my feet. I caught myself before my head bashed into the nearest tree, but a small branch snapped off under my left hand and gouged into my palm.

“Ouch! Oh, fabulous,” I muttered.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Stay where you are. I’m bleeding. It will stop in a minute.”

She ignored me. She was right there before I could finish.

“I’ve got a first aid kit,” she said, pulling off the backpack. “I had a feeling I might need it.”

“It’s not bad. I can take care of it—you don’t have to make yourself uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable,” she said calmly. “Here—let me clean it.”

“Wait a second, I just got another idea.”

Without looking at the blood and breathing through my mouth, just in case my stomach might react, I pressed my hand against a rock within my reach.

“What are you doing?”

“Jasper will love this,” I muttered to myself. I started for the clearing again, pressing my palm against everything in my path. “I’ll bet this really gets them going.”

Edythe sighed.

“Hold your breath,” I told her.

“I’m fine. I just think you’re going overboard.”

“This is all I get to do. I want to do a good job.”

We broke through the last of the trees as I spoke. I let my injured hand graze across the ferns.

“Well, you have,” Edythe assured me. “The newborns will be frantic, and Jasper will be very impressed with your dedication. Now let me treat your hand—you’ve gotten the cut dirty.”

“Let me do it, please.”

She took my hand and smiled as she examined it. “This doesn’t bother me anymore.”

I watched her carefully as she cleaned the gash, looking for some sign of distress. She continued to breathe evenly in and out, the same small smile on her lips.

“Why not?” I finally asked as she smoothed a bandage across my palm.

She shrugged. “I got over it.”

“You… got over it? When? How?” I tried to remember the last time she’d held her breath around
me. All I could think of was my wretched birthday party last September.

Edythe pursed her lips, seeming to search for the words. “I lived through an entire twenty-four hours thinking that you were dead, Bella. That changed the way I look at a lot of things.”

“Did it change the way I smell to you?”

“Not at all. But… having experienced the way it feels to think I’ve lost you… my reactions have changed. My entire being shies away from any course that could inspire that kind of pain again.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

She smiled at my expression. “I guess that you could call it a very educational experience.”

The wind tore through the clearing then, lashing my hair around my face and making me shiver.

“All right,” she said, reaching into her pack again. “You’ve done your part.” She pulled out my heavy winter jacket and held it out for me to slide my arms in. “Now it’s out of our hands. Let’s go camping!”

I laughed at the mock enthusiasm in her voice.

She took my bandaged hand—the other was in worse shape, still in the brace—and started toward the other side of the clearing.

“Where are we meeting Julie?” I asked.

“Right here.” She gestured to the trees in front of us just as Julie stepped warily from their shadows.

It shouldn’t have surprised me to see her human. I wasn’t sure why I’d been looking for the big red-brown wolf.

Julie seemed bigger again—no doubt a product of my expectations; I must have unconsciously been hoping to see the smaller Julie from my memory, the easygoing friend who hadn’t made everything so difficult. She had her arms folded across her chest, a jacket clutched in one fist. Her face was expressionless as she watched us.

Edythe’s lips pulled down at the corners. “There had to have been a better way to do this.”

“Too late now,” I muttered glumly.

She sighed.

“Hey, Jules,” I greeted her when we got closer.

“Hi, Bella.”

“Hello, Julie,” Edythe said.

Julie ignored the pleasantries, all business. “Where do I take her?”

Edythe pulled a map from a side pocket on the pack and offered it to her. Julie unfolded it.

“We’re here now,” Edythe said, reaching over to touch the right spot. Julie recoiled from her hand automatically, and then steadied herself. Edythe pretended not to notice.
“And you’re taking her up here,” Edythe continued, tracing a serpentine pattern around the elevation lines on the paper. “Roughly nine miles.”

Julie nodded once.

“When you’re about a mile away, you should cross my path. That will lead you in. Do you need the map?”

“No, thanks. I know this area pretty well. I think I know where I’m going.”

Julie seemed to have to work harder than Edythe to keep the tone polite.

“I’ll take a longer route,” Edythe said. “And I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Edythe stared at me unhappily. She didn’t like this part of the plan.

“See you,” I murmured.

Edythe faded into the trees, heading in the opposite direction.

As soon as she was gone, Julie turned cheerful.

“What’s up, Bella?” she asked with a big grin.

I rolled my eyes. “Same old, same old.”

“I agree. Bunch of vampires trying to kill you. The usual.”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” she said as she shrugged into her jacket to free her arms. “Let’s get going.”

Making a face, I took a small step closer to her.

She bent down and swept her arm behind my knees, knocking them out from under me. Her other arm caught me before my head hit the ground.

“Jerk,” I muttered.

Julie chuckled, already running through the trees. She kept a steady pace, a brisk jog that a fit human could keep up with… across a level plane… if they weren’t burdened with a hundred-plus pounds as she was.

“You don’t have to run. You’ll get tired.”

“Running doesn’t make me tired,” she said. Her breathing was even—like the fixed tempo of a marathoner. “Besides, it will be colder soon. I hope she gets the camp set up before we get there.”

I tapped my finger against the thick padding of her parka. “I thought you didn’t get cold now.”

“I don’t. I brought this for you, just in case you weren’t prepared.” She looked at my jacket, almost as if she were disappointed that I was. “I don’t like the way the weather feels. It’s making me edgy. Notice how we haven’t seen any animals?”

“Um, not really.”

“I guess you wouldn’t. Your senses are too dull.”
I let that pass. “Archie was worried about the storm, too.”

“It takes a lot to silence the forest this way. You picked a hell of a night for a camping trip.”

“It wasn’t entirely my idea.”

The pathless way she took began to climb more and more steeply, but it didn’t slow her down. She leapt easily from rock to rock, not seeming to need her hands at all. Her perfect balance reminded me of a mountain goat.

“What’s with the addition to your bracelet?” she asked.

I looked down, and realized that the crystal heart was facing up on my wrist.

I shrugged guiltily. “Another graduation present.”

She snorted. “A rock. Figures.”

A rock? I was suddenly reminded of Archie’s unfinished sentence outside the garage. I stared at the bright white crystal and tried to remember what Archie had been saying before… about diamonds. Could he have been trying to say *she’s already got one on you*? As in, I was already wearing one diamond from Edythe? No, that was impossible. The heart would have to be five carats or something crazy like that! Edythe wouldn’t—

“So it’s been a while since you came down to La Push,” Julie said, interrupting my disturbing conjectures.

“I’ve been busy,” I told her. “And… I probably wouldn’t have visited, anyway.”

She grimaced. “I thought you were supposed to be the forgiving one, and I was the grudge-holder.”

I shrugged.

“Been thinking about that last time a lot, have you?”

“Nope.”

She laughed. “Either you’re lying, or you are the stubbornest person alive.”

“I don’t know about the second part, but I’m not lying.”

I didn’t like having this conversation under the present conditions—with her too-warm arms wrapped tightly around me and nothing at all I could do about it. Her face was closer than I wanted it to be. I wished I could take a step back.

“A smart person looks at all sides of a decision.”

“I have,” I retorted.

“If you haven’t thought at all about our… er, conversation the last time you came over, then that’s not true.”

“That *conversation* isn’t relevant to my decision.”

“Some people will go to any lengths to delude themselves.”
“I’ve noticed that werewolves in particular are prone to that mistake—do you think it’s a genetic thing?”

“Does that mean that she’s a better kisser that I am?” Julie asked, suddenly glum.

“I really couldn’t say, Jules. Edythe is the only person I’ve ever kissed.”

“Besides me.”

“But I don’t count that as a kiss, Julie. I think of it more as an assault.”

“Ouch! That’s cold.”

I shrugged. I wasn’t going to take it back.

“I did apologize about that,” she reminded me.

“And I forgave you… mostly. It doesn’t change the way I remember it.”

She muttered something unintelligible.

It was quiet then for a while; there was just the sound of his measured breathing and the wind roaring high above us in the treetops. A cliff face rose sheer beside us, bare, rough gray stone. We followed the base as it curved upward out of the forest.

“I still think it’s pretty irresponsible,” Julie suddenly said.

“Whatever you’re talking about, you’re wrong.”

“Think about it, Bella. According to you, you’ve kissed just one person—who isn’t even really a person—in your whole life, and you’re calling it quits? How do you know that’s what you want? Shouldn’t you play the field a little?”

I kept my voice cool. “I know exactly what I want.”

“Then it couldn’t hurt to double check. Maybe you should try kissing someone else—just for comparison’s sake… since what happened the other day doesn’t count. You could kiss me, for example. I don’t mind if you want to use me to experiment.”

She pulled me tighter against her chest, so that my face was closer to hers. She was smiling at her joke, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

“Don’t mess with me, Jules. I swear I won’t stop her if she wants to break your jaw.”

The panicky edge to my voice made her smile wider. “If you ask me to kiss you, she won’t have any reason to get upset. She said that was fine.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Jules—no, wait, I changed my mind. Go right ahead. Just hold your breath until I ask you to kiss me.”

“You’re in a bad mood today.”

“I wonder why?”

“Sometimes I think you like me better as a wolf.”
“Sometimes I do. It probably has something to do with the way you can’t talk.”

She pursed her broad lips thoughtfully. “No, I don’t think that’s it. I think it’s easier for you to be near me when I’m not human, because you don’t have to pretend that you’re not attracted to me.”

My mouth fell open with a little popping sound. I snapped it shut at once, grinding my teeth together.

She heard that. Her lips pulled tightly across her face in a triumphant smile.

I took a slow breath before I spoke. “No. I’m pretty sure it’s because you can’t talk.”

She sighed. “Do you ever get tired of lying to yourself? You have to know how aware you are of me. Physically, I mean.”

“How could anyone not be aware of you physically, Julie?” I demanded. “You’re an enormous monster who refuses to respect anyone else’s personal space.”

“I make you nervous. But only when I’m human. When I’m a wolf, you’re more comfortable around me.”

“Nervousness and irritation are not the same thing.”

She stared at me for a minute, slowing to a walk, the amusement draining from her face. Her eyes narrowed, turned black in the shadow of her brows. Her breathing, so regular as she ran, started to accelerate. Slowly, she leaned her face closer to mine.

I stared her down, knowing exactly what she was trying to do.

“It’s your face,” I reminded her.

She laughed loudly and started jogging again. “I don’t really want to fight with your vampire tonight—I mean, any other night, sure. But we both have a job to do tomorrow, and I wouldn’t want to leave the Cullens one short.”

The sudden, unexpected swell of shame distorted my expression.

“I know, I know,” she responded, not understanding. “You think she could take me.”

I couldn’t speak. I was leaving them one short. What if someone got hurt because I was so weak? But what if I was brave and Edythe… I couldn’t even think it.

“What’s the matter with you, Bella?” The joking bravado vanished from her face, revealing my Julie underneath, like pulling a mask away. “If something I said upset you, you know I was only kidding. I didn’t mean anything—hey, are you okay? Don’t cry, Bella,” she pled.

I tried to pull myself together. “I’m not going to cry.”

“What did I say?”

“It’s nothing you said. It’s just, well, it’s me. I did something… bad.”

She stared at me, her eyes wide with confusion.

“Edythe isn’t going to fight tomorrow,” I whispered the explanation. “I’m making her stay with me. I am a huge coward.”
She frowned. “You think this isn’t going to work? That they’ll find you here? Do you know something I don’t know?”

“No, no. I’m not afraid of that. I just… I can’t let her go. If she didn’t come back…” I shuddered, closing my eyes to escape the thought.

Julie was quiet.

I kept whispering, my eyes shut. “If anyone gets hurt, it will always be my fault. And even if no one does… I was horrible. I had to be, to convince her to stay with me. She won’t hold it against me, but I’ll always know what I’m capable of.” I felt just a tiny bit better, getting this off my chest.

Even if I could only confess it to Julie.

She snorted. My eyes opened slowly, and I was sad to see that the hard mask was back.

“I can’t believe she let you talk her out of going. I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, though.” She was suddenly backtracking. “That doesn’t mean that she loves you more than I do.”

“But you wouldn’t stay with me, even if I begged.”

She pursed her lips for a moment, and I wondered if she would try to deny it. We both knew the truth. “That’s only because I know you better,” she said at last. “Everything’s going to go without a hitch. Even if you’d asked and I’d said no, you wouldn’t be mad at me afterwards.”

“If everything does go without a hitch, you’re probably right. I wouldn’t be mad. But the whole time you’re gone, I’ll be sick with worry, Jules. Crazy with it.”

“Why?” she asked gruffly. “Why does it matter to you if something happens to me?”

“Don’t say that. You know how much you mean to me. I’m sorry it’s not in the way you want, but that’s just how it is. You’re my best friend. At least, you used to be. And still sometimes are… when you let your guard down.”

She smiled the old smile that I loved. “I’m always that,” she promised. “Even when I don’t… behave as well as I should. Underneath, I’m always in here.”

“I know. Why else would I put up with all of your crap?”

She laughed with me, and then her eyes were sad. “When are you finally going to figure out that you’re in love with me, too?”

“Leave it to you to ruin the moment.”

“I’m not saying you don’t love her. I’m not stupid. But it’s possible to love more than one person at a time, Bella. I’ve seen it in action.”

“I’m not some freaky werewolf, Julie.”

She wrinkled her nose, and I was about to apologize for that last jab, but she changed the subject.

“We’re not far now, I can smell her.”
I sighed in relief.

She misinterpreted my meaning. “I’d happily slow down, Bella, but you’re going to want to be under shelter before that hits.”

We both looked up at the sky.

A solid wall of purple-black cloud was racing in from the west, blackening the forest beneath it as it came.

“Wow,” I muttered. “You’d better hurry, Jules. You’ll want to get home before it gets here.”

“I’m not going home.”

I glared at her, exasperated. “You’re not camping with us.”

“Not technically—as in, sharing your tent or anything. I prefer the storm to the smell. But I’m sure your bloodsucker will want to keep in touch with the pack for coordination purposes, and so I will graciously provide that service.”

“I thought that was Seth’s job.”

“He’ll take over tomorrow, during the fight.”

The reminder silenced me for a second. I stared at her, worry springing up again with sudden fierceness.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way you’d just stay since you’re already here?” I suggested. “If I did beg? Or trade back the lifetime of servitude or something?”

“Tempting, but no. Then again, the begging might be interesting to see. You can give it a go if you like.”

“There’s really nothing, nothing at all I can say?”

“Nope. Not unless you can promise me a better fight. Anyway, Sam’s calling the shots, not me.”

That reminded me.

“Edythe told me something the other day… about you.”

She bristled. “It’s probably a lie.”

“Oh, really? You aren’t second in command of the pack, then?”

She blinked, her face going blank with surprise. “Oh. That.”

“How come you never told me that?”

“Why would I? It’s no big thing.”

“I don’t know. Why not? It’s interesting. So, how does that work? How did Sam end up as the Alpha, and you as the… the Beta?”

Julie chuckled at my invented term. “Sam was the first, the oldest. It made sense for him to take charge.”
I frowned. “But shouldn’t Jared or Paul be second, then? They were the next to change.”

“Well… it’s hard to explain,” Julie said evasively.

“Try.”

She sighed. “It’s more about the lineage, you know? Sort of old-fashioned. Why should it matter who your grandpa was, right?”

I remembered something Julie had told me a long time ago, before either of us had known anything about werewolves.

“Didn’t you say that Ephraim Black was the last chief the Quileutes had?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Because he was the Alpha. Did you know that, technically, Sam’s the chief of the whole tribe now?” He laughed. “Crazy traditions.”

I thought about that for a second, trying to make all the pieces fit. “But you also said that people listened to your dad more than anyone else on the council, because he was Ephraim’s grandson?”

“What about it?”

“Well, if it’s about the lineage… shouldn’t you be the chief, then?”

Julie didn’t answer me. She stared into the darkening forest, as if she suddenly needed to concentrate on where she was going.

“Jules?”

“No. That’s Sam’s job.” She kept her eyes on our pathless course.

“Why? His great-granddad was Levi Uley, right? Was Levi an Alpha, too?”

“There’s only one Alpha,” she answered automatically.

“So what was Levi?”

“Sort of a Beta, I guess.” She snorted at my term. “Like me.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I just want to understand.”

Julie finally met my confused gaze, and then sighed. “Yeah. I was supposed to be the Alpha.”

My eyebrows pulled together. “What, did they not let you because you’re a girl?”

“No one cared about that, after they got over the shock. I didn’t want to.”

“Why not?”

She frowned, uncomfortable with my questions. Well, it was her turn to feel uncomfortable.

“I didn’t want any of it, Bella. I didn’t want anything to change. I didn’t want to be some legendary chief. I didn’t want to be part of a pack of werewolves, let alone their leader. I wouldn’t take it
when Sam offered.”

I thought about this for a long moment. Julie didn’t interrupt. She stared into the forest again.

“But I thought you were happier. That you were okay with this,” I finally whispered.

Julie smiled down at me reassuringly. “Yeah. It’s really not so bad. Exciting sometimes, like with this thing tomorrow. But at first it sort of felt like being drafted into a war you didn’t know existed. There was no choice, you know? And it was so final.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I guess I’m glad now. It has to be done, and could I trust someone else to get it right? It’s better to make sure myself.”

I stared at her, feeling an unexpected kind of awe for my friend. She was more of a grown-up than I’d ever given her credit for. Like with Billy the other night at the bonfire, there was a majesty here that I’d never suspected.

“Chief Julie,” I whispered, smiling at the way the words sounded together.

She rolled her eyes.

Just then, the wind shook more fiercely through the trees around us, and it felt like it was blowing straight off a glacier. The sharp sound of wood cracking echoed off the mountain. Though the light was vanishing as the grisly cloud covered the sky, I could still see the little white specks that fluttered past us.

Julie stepped up the pace, keeping her eyes on the ground now as she flat out sprinted. I curled more willingly against her chest, recoiling from the unwelcome snow.

It was only minutes later that she dashed around to the lee side of the stony peak and we could see the little tent nestled up against the sheltering face. More flurries were falling around us, but the wind was too fierce to let them settle anywhere.

“Bella!” Edythe called out in acute relief. We’d caught her in the middle of pacing back and forth across the little open space.

She flashed to my side, sort of blurring as she moved so swiftly. Julie cringed, and then set me on my feet. Edythe ignored her reaction and caught me in a tight hug.

“Thank you,” Edythe said over my head. Her tone was unmistakably sincere. “That was quicker than I expected, and I truly appreciate it.”

I twisted to see Julie’s response.

Julie merely shrugged, all the friendliness wiped clean from her face. “Get her inside. This is going to be bad—my hair’s standing up on my scalp. Is that tent secure?”

“I all but welded it to the rock.”

“Good.”

Julie looked up at the sky—now black with the storm, sprinkled with the swirling bits of snow. Her nostrils flared.

“I’m going to change,” she said. “I want to know what’s going on back home.”

She hung her jacket on a low, stubby branch, and walked into the murky forest without a backward
glance.
THE WIND SHOOK THE TENT AGAIN, AND I SHOOK WITH IT.

The temperature was dropping. I could feel it through the down bag, through my jacket. I was fully dressed, my hiking boots still laced into place. It didn’t make any difference. How could it be so cold? How could it keep getting colder? It had to bottom out sometime, didn’t it?

“W-w-w-w-w-what t-t-t-t-time is it?” I forced the words through my rattling teeth.

“Two,” Edythe answered.

Edythe sat as far from me as possible in the cramped space, afraid to even breathe on me when I was already so cold. It was too dark to see her face, but her voice was wild with worry, indecision, and frustration.

“Maybe…”

“No, I’m f-f-f-f-f-fine, r-r-r-really. I don’t w-w-w-want to g-go outside.”

She’d tried to talk me into making a run for it a dozen times already, but I was terrified of leaving my shelter. If it was this cold in here, protected from the raging wind, I could imagine how bad it would be if we were running through it.

And it would waste all our efforts this afternoon. Would we have enough time to reset ourselves when the storm was over? What if it didn’t end? It made no sense to move now. I could shiver my way through one night.

I was worried that the trail I had laid would be lost, but she promised that it would still be plain to the coming monsters.

“What can I do?” she almost begged.

I just shook my head.

Out in the snow, Julie whined unhappily.

“G-g-g-get out of h-h-h-ere,” I ordered, again.

“She’s just worried about you,” Edythe translated. “She’s fine. Her body is equipped to deal with this.”

“H-h-h-h-h-h.” I wanted to say that she should still leave, but I couldn’t get it past my teeth. I nearly bit my tongue off trying. At least Julie did seem to be well equipped for the snow, better even than the others in her pack with his thicker, longer, shaggy russet fur. I wondered why that was.

Julie whimpered, a high-pitched, grating sound of complaint.

“What do you want me to do?” Edythe growled, too anxious to bother with politeness anymore. “Carry her through that? I don’t see you making yourself useful. Why don’t you go fetch a space heater or something?”

“I’m ok-k-k-k-k-kay,” I protested. Judging from Edythe’s groan and the muted growl outside the
tent, I hadn’t convinced anyone. The wind rocked the tent roughly, and I shuddered in harmony
with it.

A sudden howl ripped through the roar of the wind, and I covered my ears against the noise.
Edythe scowled.

“That was hardly necessary,” she muttered. “And that’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” she called
more loudly.

“Better than anything you’ve come up with,” Julie answered, her human voice startling me. “Go
fetch a space heater,” she grumbled. “I’m not a St. Bernard.”

I heard the sound of the zipper around the tent door pulling swiftly down.

Julie slid through the smallest opening she could manage, while the arctic air flowed in around her,
a few flecks of snow falling to the floor of the tent. I shivered so hard it was a convulsion.

“I don’t like this,” Edythe hissed as Jules zipped the tent door shut. “Just give her the coat and get
out.”

My eyes were adjusted enough to see shapes—Julie was carrying the parka that had been hanging
on a tree next to the tent.

I tried to ask what they were talking about, but all that came out of my mouth was, “W-w-w-w-w-
w,” as the shivering made me stutter uncontrollably.

“The parka’s for tomorrow—she’s too cold to warm it up by herself. It’s frozen.” She dropped it by
the door. “You said she needed a space heater, and here I am.” Julie held her arms as wide as the
tent allowed. As usual, when she’d been running around as a wolf, she’d only thrown on the bare
essentials—an old t-shirt this time, a pair of sweats, no shoes.


“Not me,” she said cheerfully. “I run at a toasty one-oh-eight point nine these days. I’ll have you
sweating in no time.”

Edythe snarled, but Julie didn’t even look at her. Instead, she crawled to my side and started
unzipping my sleeping bag.

Edythe’s hand was suddenly hard on her shoulder, restraining, snow white against the dark skin.
Julie’s jaw clenched, her nostrils flaring, her body recoiling from the cold touch. The long muscles
in her arms flexed automatically.

“Get your hand off of me,” she growled through her teeth.

“Keep your hands off of her,” Edythe answered blackly.

“D-d-d-don’t f-f-f-f-fight,” I pleaded. Another tremor rocked through me. It felt like my teeth were
going to shatter, they were slamming together so hard.

“I’m sure she’ll thank you for this when her toes turn black and drop off,” Julie snapped.

Edythe hesitated, then her hand fell away and she slid back to her position in the corner.

Her voice was flat and frightening. “Watch yourself.”
Julie chuckled.

“Scoot over, Bella,” she said, zipping the sleeping bag open farther.

I stared at her in outrage. No wonder Edythe was reacting this way.

“N-n-n-n-n,” I tried to protest.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said, exasperated. “Don’t you like having ten toes?”

She crammed her body into the nonexistent space, forcing the zipper up behind herself.

And then I couldn’t object—I didn’t want to anymore. She was so warm. Her arms constricted around me, holding me snugly against her chest. The heat was irresistible, like air after being underwater for too long. She cringed when I pressed my icy fingers eagerly against her skin.

“Jeez, you’re freezing, Bella,” she complained.

“S-s-s-s-sorry,” I stuttered.

“Try to relax,” she suggested as another shiver rippled through me violently. “You’ll be warm in a minute. Of course, you’d warm up faster if you took your clothes off.”

Edythe growled sharply.

“That’s just a simple fact,” Julie defended herself. “Survival one-oh-one.”

“C-c-cut it out, Jules,” I said angrily, though my body refused to even try to pull away from her. “N-n-n-nobody really n-n-n-n-needs all ten t-t-t-toes.”

“Don’t worry about the bloodsucker,” Julie suggested, and her tone was smug. “She’s just jealous.”

“Of course I am.” Edythe’s voice was velvet again, under control, a musical murmur in the darkness. “You don’t have the faintest idea how much I wish I could do what you’re doing for her, mongrel.”

“Those are the breaks,” Julie said lightly, but then her tone soured. “At least you know she wishes it was you.”

“True,” Edythe agreed.

The shuddering slowed, became bearable while they wrangled.

“There,” Julie said, pleased. “Feeling better?”

I was finally able to speak clearly. “Yes.”

“Your lips are still blue,” she mused. “Want me to warm those up for you, too? You only have to ask.”

Edythe sighed heavily.

“Behave yourself,” I muttered, pressing my face against her shoulder. She flinched again when my cold skin touched hers, and I smiled with slightly vindictive satisfaction.

It was already warm and snug inside the sleeping bag. Julie’s body heat seemed to radiate from
every side—maybe because there was so much of her. I kicked my boots off, and pushed my toes against her legs. She jumped slightly, and then leaned her head down to press her hot cheek against my numb ear.

I noticed that Julie’s skin had a woodsy, musky scent—it fit the setting, here in the middle of the forest. It was nice. I wondered if the Cullens and the Quileutes weren’t just playing up that whole odor issue because of their prejudices. Everyone smelled fine to me.

The storm howled like an animal attacking the tent, but it didn’t worry me now. Julie was out of the cold, and so was I. Plus, I was simply too exhausted to worry about anything—tired from just staying awake so late, and aching from the muscle spasms. My body relaxed slowly as I thawed, piece by frozen piece, and then turned limp.

“Jules?” I mumbled sleepily. “Can I ask you something? I’m not trying to be a jerk or anything, I’m honestly curious.” They were the same words she’d used in my kitchen… how long ago was it now?

“Sure,” she chuckled, remembering.

“Why are you so much furrier than your friends? You don’t have to answer if I’m being rude.” I didn’t know the rules for etiquette as they applied to werewolf culture.

“Because my hair is longer,” she said, amused—my question hadn’t offended her, at least. She shook her head so that her unkempt hair—grown out to her chin now—tickled my cheek.

“Oh.” I was surprised, but it made sense. So that was why they’d all cropped their hair in the beginning, when they joined the pack. “Then why don’t you cut it? Do you like to be shaggy?”

She didn’t answer right away this time, and Edythe laughed under her breath.

“Sorry,” I said, pausing to yawn. “I didn’t mean to pry. You don’t have to tell me.”

Julie made an annoyed sound. “Oh, she’ll tell you anyway, so I might as well…. I was growing my hair out because… it seemed like you liked it better long.”

“Oh.” I felt awkward. “I, er, like it both ways, Jules. You don’t need to be… inconvenienced.”

She shrugged. “Turns out it was very convenient tonight, so don’t worry about it.”

I didn’t have anything else to say. As the silence lengthened, my eyelids drooped and shut, and my breathing grew slower, more even.

“That’s right, honey, go to sleep,” Julie whispered.

I sighed, content, already half-unconscious.

“Seth is here,” Edythe muttered to Julie, and I suddenly understood the point of the howling.

“Perfect. Now you can keep an eye on everything else, while I take care of your girlfriend for you.”

Edythe didn’t answer, but I groaned groggily. “Stop it,” I muttered.

It was quiet then, inside at least. Outside, the wind shrieked insanely through the trees. The shimmying of the tent made it hard to sleep. The poles would suddenly jerk and quiver, pulling me back from the edge of unconsciousness each time I was close to slipping under. I felt so bad for the wolf, the boy that was stuck outside in the snow.
My mind wandered as I waited for sleep to find me. This warm little space made me think of the early days with Julie, and I remembered how it used to be when she was my replacement sun, the warmth that made my empty life livable. It had been a while since I’d thought of Jules that way, but here she was, warming me again.

“Please!” Edythe hissed. “Do you mind!”

“What?” Julie whispered back, her tone surprised.

“Do you think you could attempt to control your thoughts?” Edythe’s low whisper was furious.

“No one said you had to listen,” Julie muttered, defiant, yet still embarrassed. “Get out of my head.”

“I wish I could. You have no idea how loud your little fantasies are. It’s like you’re shouting them at me.”

“I’ll try to keep it down,” Julie whispered sarcastically.

There was a brief moment of silence.

“Yes,” Edythe answered an unspoken thought in a murmur so low I barely made it out. “I’m jealous of that, too.”

“I figured it was like that,” Julie whispered smugly. “Sort of evens the playing field up a little, doesn’t it?”

Edythe chuckled. “In your dreams.”

“You know, she could still change her mind,” Julie taunted her. “Considering all the things I could do with her that you can’t. At least, not without killing her, that is.”

“Go to sleep, Julie,” Edythe murmured. “You’re starting to get on my nerves.”

“I think I will. I’m really very comfortable.”

Edythe didn’t answer.

I was too far gone to ask them to stop talking about me like I wasn’t there. The conversation had taken on a dreamlike quality to me, and I wasn’t sure I was really awake.

“Maybe I would,” Edythe said after a moment, answering a question I hadn’t heard.

“But would you be honest?”

“You can always ask and see.” Edythe’s tone made me wonder if I was missing out on a joke.

“Well, you see inside my head—let me see inside yours tonight, it’s only fair,” Julie said.

“Your head is full of questions. Which one do you want me to answer?”

“The jealousy… it has to be eating at you. You can’t be as sure of yourself as you seem. Unless you have no emotions at all.”

“Of course it is,” Edythe agreed, no longer amused. “Right now it’s so bad that I can barely control my voice. Of course, it’s even worse when she’s away from me, with you, and I can’t see her.”
“Do you think about it all the time?” Julie whispered. “Does it make it hard to concentrate when she’s not with you?”

“Yes and no,” Edythe said; she seemed determined to answer honestly. “My mind doesn’t work quite the same as yours. I can think of many more things at one time. Of course, that means that I’m always able to think of you, always able to wonder if that’s where her mind is, when she’s quiet and thoughtful.”

They were both still for a minute.

“Yes, I would guess that she thinks about you often,” Edythe murmured in response to Julie’s thoughts. “More often than I like. She worries that you’re unhappy. Not that you don’t know that. Not that you don’t use that.”

“I have to use whatever I can,” Julie muttered. “I’m not working with your advantages—advantages like her knowing she’s in love with you.”

“That helps,” Edythe agreed in a mild tone.

Julie was defiant. “She’s in love with me, too, you know.”

Edythe didn’t answer.

Julie sighed. “But she doesn’t know it.”

“I can’t tell you if you’re right.”

“Does that bother you? Do you wish you could see what she’s thinking, too?”

“Yes… and no, again. She likes it better this way, and, though it sometimes drives me insane, I’d rather she was happy.”

The wind ripped around the tent, shaking it like an earthquake. Julie’s arms tightened around me protectively.

“Thank you,” Edythe whispered. “Odd as this might sound, I suppose I’m glad you’re here, Julie.”

“You mean, ‘as much as I’d love to kill you, I’m glad she’s warm,’ right?”

“It’s an uncomfortable truce, isn’t it?”

Julie’s whisper was suddenly smug. “I knew you were just as crazy jealous as I am.”

“I’m not such a fool as to wear it on my sleeve like you do. It doesn’t help your case, you know.”

“You have more patience than I do.”

“I should. I’ve had a hundred years to gain it. A hundred years of waiting for her.”

“So… at what point did you decide to play the very patient good guy?”

“When I saw how much it was hurting her to make her choose. It’s not usually this difficult to control. I can smother the… less civilized feelings I may have for you fairly easily most of the time. Sometimes I think she sees through me, but I can’t be sure.”

“I think you were just worried that if you really forced her to choose, she might not choose you.”
Edythe didn’t answer right away. “That was a part of it,” she finally admitted. “But only a small part. We all have our moments of doubt. Mostly I was worried that she’d hurt herself trying to sneak away to see you. After I’d accepted that she was more or less safe with you—as safe as Bella ever is—it seemed best to stop driving her to extremes.”

Julie sighed. “I’d tell her all of this, but she’d never believe me.”

“I know.” It sounded like Edythe was smiling.

“You think you know everything,” Julie muttered.

“I don’t know the future,” Edythe said, her voice suddenly unsure.

There was a long pause.

“What would you do if she changed her mind?” Julie asked.

“I don’t know that either.”

Julie chuckled quietly. “Would you try to kill me?” Sarcastic again, as if doubting Edythe’s ability to do it.

“No.”

“Why not?” Julie’s tone was still jeering.

“Do you really think I would hurt her that way?”

Julie hesitated for a second, and then sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. I know that’s right. But sometimes…”

“Sometimes it’s an intriguing idea.”

Julie pressed her face into the sleeping bag to muffle her laughter. “Exactly,” she eventually agreed.

What a strange dream this was. I wondered if it was the relentless wind that made me imagine all the whispering. Only the wind was screaming rather than whispering…

“What is it like? Losing her?” Julie asked after a quiet moment, and there was no hint of humor in her suddenly hoarse voice. “When you thought that you’d lost her forever? How did you… cope?”

“That’s very difficult for me to talk about.”

Julie waited.

“There were two different times that I thought that.” Edythe spoke each word just a little slower than normal. “The first time, when I thought I could leave her… that was… almost bearable. Because I thought she would forget me and it would be like I hadn’t touched her life. For over six months I was able to stay away, to keep my promise that I wouldn’t interfere again. It was getting close—I was fighting but I knew I wasn’t going to win; I would have come back… just to check on her. That’s what I would have told myself, anyway. And if I’d found her reasonably happy… I like to think that I could have gone away again.

“But she wasn’t happy. And I would have stayed. That’s how she convinced me to stay with her tomorrow, of course. You were wondering about that before, what could possibly motivate me… what she was feeling so needlessly guilty about. She reminded me of what it did to her when I left
—what it still does to her when I leave. She feels horrible about bringing that up, but she’s right. I’ll never be able to make up for that, but I’ll never stop trying anyway.”

Julie didn’t respond for a moment, listening to the storm or digesting what she’d heard, I didn’t know which.

“And the other time—when you thought she was dead?” Julie whispered roughly.

“Yes.” Edythe answered a different question. “It will probably feel like that to you, won’t it? The way you perceive us, you might not be able to see her as Bella anymore. But that’s who she’ll be.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Edythe’s voice came back fast and hard. “I can’t tell you how it felt. There aren’t words.”

Julie’s arms flexed around me.

“But you left because you didn’t want to make her a bloodsucker. You want her to be human.”

Edythe’s voice came back fast and hard. “I can’t tell you how it felt. There aren’t words.”

Julie’s arms flexed around me.

“But you left because you didn’t want to make her a bloodsucker. You want her to be human.”

Edythe spoke slowly. “Julie, from the second that I realized that I loved her, I knew there were only four possibilities. The first alternative, the best one for Bella, would be if she didn’t feel as strongly for me—if she got over me and moved on. I would accept that, though it would never change the way I felt. You think of me as a… living stone—hard and cold. That’s true. We are set the way we are, and it is very rare for us to experience a real change. When that happens, as when Bella entered my life, it is a permanent change. There’s no going back….

“The second alternative, the one I’d originally chosen, was to stay with her throughout her human life. It wasn’t a good option for her, to waste her life with someone who couldn’t be human with her, but it was the alternative I could most easily face. Knowing all along that, when she died, I would find a way to die, too. Sixty years, seventy years—it would seem like a very, very short time to me.… But then it proved much too dangerous for her to live in such close proximity with my world. It seemed like everything that could go wrong did. Or hung over us… waiting to go wrong. I was terrified that I wouldn’t get those sixty years if I stayed near her while she was human.

“So I chose option three. Which turned out to be the worst mistake of my very long life, as you know. I chose to take myself out of her world, hoping to force her into the first alternative. It didn’t work, and it very nearly killed us both.

“What do I have left but the fourth option? It’s what she wants—at least, she thinks she does. I’ve been trying to delay her, to give her time to find a reason to change her mind, but she’s very… stubborn. You know that. I’ll be lucky to stretch this out a few more months. She has a horror of getting older, and her birthday is in September….”

“I like option one,” Julie muttered.

Edythe didn’t respond.

“You know exactly how much I hate to accept this,” Julie whispered slowly, “but I can see that you do love her… in your way. I can’t argue with that anymore.

“Given that, I don’t think you should give up on the first alternative, not yet. I think there’s a very good chance that she would be okay. After time. You know, if she hadn’t jumped off a cliff in March… and if you’d waited another six months to check on her.… Well, you might have found her reasonably happy. I had a game plan.”
Edythe chuckled. “Maybe it would have worked. It was a well thought-out plan.”

“Yeah.” Jules sighed. “But…,” suddenly she was whispering so fast the words got tangled, “give me a year, bl—Edythe. I really think I could make her happy. She’s stubborn, no one knows that better than I do, but she’s capable of healing. She would have healed before. And she could be human, with Charlie and Renée, and she could grow up, and have kids and… be Bella.

“You love her enough that you have to see the advantages of that plan. She thinks you’re very unselfish… are you really? Can you consider the idea that I might be better for her than you are?”

“I have considered it,” Edythe answered quietly. “In some ways, you would be better suited for her than another human. Bella takes some looking after, and you’re strong enough that you could protect her from herself, and from everything that conspires against her. You have done that already, and I’ll owe you for that for as long as I live—forever—whichever comes first.…

“I even asked Archie if he could see that—see if Bella would be better off with you. He couldn’t, of course. He can’t see you, and then Bella’s sure of her course, for now.

“But I’m not stupid enough to make the same mistake I made before, Julie. I won’t try to force her into that first option again. As long as she wants me, I’m here.”

“And if she were to decide that she wanted me?” Julie challenged. “Okay, it’s a long shot, I’ll give you that.”

“I would let her go.”

“Just like that?”

“In the sense that I’d never show her how hard it was for me, yes. But I would keep watch. You see, Julie, you might leave her someday. Like Sam and Elliott, you wouldn’t have a choice. I would always be waiting in the wings, hoping for that to happen.”

Julie snorted quietly. “Well, you’ve been much more honest than I had any right to expect… Edythe. Thanks for letting me in your head.”

“As I said, I’m feeling oddly grateful for your presence in her life tonight. It was the least I could do…. You know, Julie, if it weren’t for the fact that we’re natural enemies and that you’re also trying to steal away the reason for my existence, I might actually like you.”

“Maybe… if you weren’t a disgusting vampire who was planning to suck out the life of the girl I love… well, no, not even then.”

Edythe chuckled.

“Can I ask you something?” Edythe said after a moment.

“Why would you have to ask?”

“I can only hear if you think of it. It’s just a story that Bella seemed reluctant to tell me about the other day. Something about a third wife…?”

“What about it?”

Edythe didn’t answer, listening to the story in Julie’s head. I heard her low hiss in the darkness.

“What?” Julie demanded again.
“Of course,” Edythe seethed. “Of course! I rather wish your elders had kept that story to
themselves, Julie.”

“You don’t like the leeches being painted as the bad guys?” Julie mocked. “You know, they are. Then and now.”

“I really couldn’t care less about that part. Can’t you guess which character Bella would identify with?”

It took Julie a minute. “Oh. Ugh. The third wife. Okay, I see your point.”

“She wants to be there in the clearing. To do what little she can, as she puts it.” She sighed. “That was the secondary reason for my staying with her tomorrow. She’s quite inventive when she wants something.”

“You know, your military brother gave her the idea just as much as the story did.”

“Neither side meant any harm,” Edythe whispered, peace-making now.

“And when does this little truce end?” Julie asked. “First light? Or do we wait until after the fight?”

There was a pause as they both considered.

“First light,” they whispered together, and then laughed quietly.

“Sleep well, Julie,” Edythe murmured. “Enjoy the moment.”

It was quiet again, and the tent held still for a few minutes. The wind seemed to have decided that it wasn’t going to flatten us after all, and was giving up the fight.

Edythe groaned softly. “I didn’t mean that quite so literally.”

“Sorry,” Julie whispered. “You could leave, you know—give us a little privacy.”

“Would you like me to help you sleep, Julie?” Edythe offered.

“You could try,” Julie said, unconcerned. “It would be interesting to see who walked away, wouldn’t it?”

“Don’t tempt me too far, wolf. My patience isn’t that perfect.”

Julie whispered a laugh. “I’d rather not move just now, if you don’t mind.”

Edythe started humming to herself, louder than usual—trying to drown out Julie’s thoughts, I assumed. But it was my lullaby she hummed, and, despite my growing discomfort with this whispered dream, I sank deeper into unconsciousness… into other dreams that made better sense. …
WHEN I WOKE UP IN THE MORNING, IT WAS VERY bright—even inside the tent, the sunlight hurt my eyes. And I was sweating, as Julie had predicted. Julie was snoring lightly in my ear, her arms still wrapped around me.

I pulled my head away from her feverishly warm chest and felt the sting of the cold morning on my clammy cheek. Julie sighed in her sleep; her arms tightened unconsciously.

I squirmed, unable to loosen her hold, struggling to lift my head enough to see.…

Edythe met my gaze evenly. Her expression was calm, but the pain in her eyes was unconcealed.

“Is it any warmer out there?” I whispered.

“Yes. I don’t think the space heater will be necessary today.”

I tried to get to the zipper, but I couldn’t free my arms. I strained, fighting against Julie’s inert strength. Julie muttered, still fast asleep, her arms constricting again.

“Some help?” I asked quietly.

Edythe smiled. “Did you want me to take her arms all the way off?”

“No, thank you. Just get me free. I’m going to get heat stroke.”

Edythe unzipped the sleeping bag in a swift, abrupt movement. Julie fell out, her bare back hitting the icy floor of the tent.

“Hey!” she complained, her eyes flying open. Instinctively, she flinched away from the cold, rolling onto me. I gasped as her weight knocked the breath out of me.

And then her weight was gone. I felt the impact as Julie flew into one of the tent poles and the tent shuddered.

The growling erupted from all around. Edythe was crouching in front of me, and I couldn’t see her face, but the snarls were ripping angrily out of her chest. Julie was half-crouched, too, her whole body quivering, while growls rumbled through her clenched teeth. Outside the tent, Seth Clearwater’s vicious snarls echoed off the rocks.

“Stop it, stop it!” I yelled, scrambling awkwardly to put myself between them. The space was so small that I didn’t have to stretch far to put one hand on each of their chests. Edythe wrapped her hand around my waist, ready to yank me out of the way.

“Stop it, now,” I warned her.

Under my touch, Julie began to calm herself. The shaking slowed, but her teeth were still bared, her eyes furiously focused on Edythe. Seth continued to growl, a long unbroken sound, a violent background to the sudden silence in the tent.

“Julie?” I asked, waiting until she finally dropped her glare to look at me. “Are you hurt?”

“Of course not!” she hissed.
I turned to Edythe. She was looking at me, her expression hard and angry. “That wasn’t nice. You should say sorry.”

Her eyes widened in disgust. “You must be joking—she was crushing you!”

“Because you dumped her on the floor! She didn’t do it on purpose, and she didn’t hurt me.”

Edythe groaned, revolted. Slowly, she looked up to glare at Julie with hostile eyes. “My apologies, dog.”

“No harm done,” Julie said, a taunting edge to her voice.

It was still cold, though not as cold as it had been. I curled my arms around my chest.

“Here,” Edythe said, calm again. She took the parka off the floor and wrapped it over the top of my coat.

“That’s Julie’s,” I objected.

“Julie has a fur coat,” Edythe hinted.

“I’ll just use the sleeping bag again, if you don’t mind.” Julie ignored her, climbing around us and sliding into the down bag. “I wasn’t quite ready to wake up. That wasn’t the best night’s sleep I ever had.”

“It was your idea,” Edythe said impassively.

Julie was curled up, her eyes already closed. She yawned. “I didn’t say it wasn’t the best night I’ve ever spent. Just that I didn’t get a lot of sleep. I thought Bella was never going to shut up.”

I winced, wondering what might have come out of my mouth in my sleep. The possibilities were horrifying.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” Edythe murmured.

Julie’s dark eyes fluttered open. “Didn’t you have a nice night, then?” she asked, smug.

“It wasn’t the worst night of my life.”

“Did it make the top ten?” Julie asked with perverse enjoyment.

“Possibly.”

Julie smiled and closed her eyes.

“But,” Edythe went on, “if I had been able to take your place last night, it would not have made the top ten of the best nights of my life. Dream about that.”

Julie’s eyes opened into a glare. She sat up stiffly, her shoulders tense.

“You know what? I think it’s too crowded in here.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

I elbowed Edythe in the ribs—probably giving myself a bruise.

“Guess I’ll catch up on my sleep later, then.” Julie made a face. “I need to talk to Sam anyway.”
She rolled to her knees and grabbed the door’s zipper.

Pain crackled down my spine and lodged in my stomach as I abruptly realized that this could be the last time I would see her. She was going back to Sam, back to fight the horde of bloodthirsty newborn vampires.

“Jules, wait—” I reached after her, my hand sliding down her arm.

She jerked her arm away before my fingers could find purchase.

“Please, Jules? Won’t you stay?”

“No.”

The word was hard and cold. I knew my face gave away my pain, because she exhaled and half a smile softened her expression.

“Don’t worry about me, Bells. I’ll be fine, just like I always am.” She forced a laugh. “Sides, you think I’m going to let Seth go in my place—have all the fun and steal all the glory? Right.” She snorted.

“Be careful—”

She shoved out of the tent before I could finish.

“Give it a rest, Bella,” I heard her mutter as she re-zipped the door.

I listened for the sound of her retreating footsteps, but it was perfectly still. No more wind. I could hear morning birdsong far away on the mountain, and nothing else. Julie moved in silence now.

I huddled in my coats, and leaned against Edythe’s shoulder. We were quiet for a long time.

“How much longer?” I asked.

“Archie told Sam it should be an hour or so,” Edythe said, soft and bleak.

“We stay together. No matter what.”

“No matter what,” she agreed, her eyes tight.

“I know,” I said. “I’m terrified for them, too.”

“They know how to handle themselves,” Edythe assured me, purposely making her voice light. “I just hate missing the fun.”

Again with the fun. My nostrils flared.

She put her arm around my shoulder. “Don’t worry,” she urged, and then she kissed my forehead.

As if there was any way to avoid that. “Sure, sure.”

“Do you want me to distract you?” She breathed, running her cold fingers along my cheekbone.

I shivered involuntarily; the morning was still frosty.

“Maybe not right now,” she answered herself, pulling her hand away.
“There are other ways to distract me.”

“What would you like?”

“You could tell me about your ten best nights,” I suggested. “I’m curious.”

She laughed. “Try to guess.”

I shook my head. “There’re too many nights I don’t know about. A century of them.”

“I’ll narrow it down for you. All of my best nights have happened since I met you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really—and by quite a wide margin, too.”

I thought for a minute. “I can only think of mine,” I admitted.

“They might be the same,” she encouraged.

“Well, there was the first night. The night you stayed.”

“Yes, that’s one of mine, too. Of course, you were unconscious for my favorite part.”

“That’s right,” I remembered. “I was talking that night, too.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

My face got hot as I wondered again what I might have said while sleeping in Julie’s arms. I couldn’t remember what I’d dreamed about, or if I’d dreamed at all, so that was no help.

“What did I say last night?” I whispered more quietly than before.

She shrugged instead of answering, and I winced.

“That bad?”

“Nothing too horrible,” she sighed.

“Please tell me.”

“Mostly you said my name, the same as usual.”

“That’s not bad,” I agreed cautiously.

“Near the end, though, you started mumbling some nonsense about ‘Julie, my Julie.’” I could hear the pain, even in the whisper. “Your Julie enjoyed that quite a lot.”

I stretched my neck up, straining to reach my lips to the edge of her jaw. I couldn’t see into her eyes. She was staring up at the ceiling of the tent.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “That’s just the way I differentiate.”

“Differentiate?”

“Between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Between the Julie I like and the one who annoys the hell out of me,” I explained.
“That makes sense.” She sounded slightly mollified. “Tell me another favorite night.”

“Flying home from Italy.”

She frowned.

“Is that not one of yours?” I wondered.

“No, it is one of mine, actually, but I’m surprised it’s on your list. Weren’t you under the ludicrous impression I was just acting from a guilty conscience, and I was going to bolt as soon as the plane doors opened?”

“Yes.” I smiled. “But, still, you were there.”

She kissed my hair. “You love me more than I deserve.”

I laughed at the impossibility of that idea. “Next would be the night after Italy,” I continued.

“Yes, that’s on the list. You were so funny.”

“Funny?” I objected.

“I had no idea your dreams were so vivid. It took me forever to convince you that you were awake.”

“I’m still not sure,” I muttered. “You’ve always seemed more like a dream than reality. Tell me one of yours, now. Did I guess your first place?”

“No—that would be two nights ago, when you finally agreed to marry me.”

I made a face.

“That doesn’t make your list?”

I thought about the way she’d kissed me, the concession I’d gained, and changed my mind. “Yes…it does. But with reservations. I don’t understand why it’s so important to you. You already had me forever.”

“A hundred years from now, when you’ve gained enough perspective to really appreciate the answer, I will explain it to you.”

“I’ll remind you to explain—in a hundred years.”

“Are you warm enough?” she asked suddenly.

“I’m fine,” I assured her. “Why?”

Before she could answer, the silence outside the tent was ripped apart by an earsplitting howl of pain. The sound ricocheted off the bare rock face of the mountain and filled the air so that it seared from every direction.

The howl tore through my mind like a tornado, both strange and familiar. Strange because I’d never heard such a tortured cry before. Familiar because I knew the voice at once—I recognized the sound and understood the meaning as perfectly as if I’d uttered it myself. It made no difference that Julie was not human when she cried out. I needed no translation.
Julie was close. Julie had heard every word we’d said. Julie was in agony.

The howl choked off into a peculiar gurgled sob, and then it was quiet again.

I did not hear her silent escape, but I could feel it—I could feel the absence I had wrongly assumed before, the empty space she left behind.

“Because your space heater has reached her limit,” Edythe answered quietly. “Truce over,” he added, so low I couldn’t be sure that was really what she’d said.

“Julie was listening,” I whispered. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“You knew.”

“Yes.”

I stared at nothing, seeing nothing.

“I never promised to fight fair,” she reminded me quietly. “And she deserves to know.”

My head fell into my hands.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked.

“Not you,” I whispered. “I’m horrified at me.”

“Don’t torment yourself,” she pleaded.

“Yes,” I agreed bitterly. “I should save my energy to torment Julie some more. I wouldn’t want to leave any part of her unharmed.”

“She knew what she was doing.”

“Do you think that matters?” I was blinking back tears, and this was easy to hear in my voice. “Do you think I care whether it’s fair or whether she was adequately warned? I’m hurting her. Every time I turn around, I’m hurting her again.” My voice was getting louder, more hysterical. “I’m a hideous person.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around me. “No, you’re not.”

“I am! What’s wrong with me?” I struggled against her arms, and she let them drop. “I have to go find her.”

“Bella, she’s already miles away, and it’s cold.”

“I don’t care. I can’t just sit here.” I shrugged off Julie’s parka, shoved my feet into my boots, and crawled stiffly to the door; my legs felt numb. “I have to—I have to…” I didn’t know how to finish the sentence, didn’t know what there was to do, but I unzipped the door anyway, and climbed out into the bright, icy morning.

There was less snow than I would have thought after the fury of last night’s storm. Probably it had blown away rather than melted in the sun that now shone low in the southeast, glancing off the snow that lingered and stabbing at my unadjusted eyes. The air still had a bite to it, but it was dead calm and slowly becoming more seasonable as the sun rose higher.
Seth Clearwater was curled up on a patch of dry pine needles in the shadow of a thick spruce, his head on his paws. His sand-colored fur was almost invisible against the dead needles, but I could see the bright snow reflect off his open eyes. He was staring at me with what I imagined was an accusation.

I knew Edythe was following me as I stumbled toward the trees. I couldn’t hear her, but the sun reflected off her skin in glittering rainbows that danced ahead of me. She didn’t reach out to stop me until I was several paces into the forest shadows.

Her hand caught my left wrist. She ignored it when I tried to yank myself free.

“You can’t go after her. Not today. It’s almost time. And getting yourself lost wouldn’t help anyone, regardless.”

I twisted my wrist, pulling uselessly.

“I’m sorry, Bella,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I did that.”

“You didn’t do anything. It’s my fault. I did this. I did everything wrong. I could have… When she… I shouldn’t have… I… I…” I was sobbing.

“Bella, Bella.”

Her arms folded around me, and my tears soaked into her shirt.

“I should have—told her—I should—have said—” What? What could have made this right? “She shouldn’t have—found out like this.”

“Do you want me to see if I can bring her back, so that you can talk to her? There’s still a little time,” Edythe murmured, hushed agony in her voice.

I nodded into her chest, afraid to see her face.

“Stay by the tent. I’ll be back soon.”

Her arms disappeared. She left so quickly that, in the second it took me to look up, she was already gone. I was alone.

A new sob broke from my chest. I was hurting everyone today. Was there anything I touched that didn’t get spoiled?

I didn’t know why it was hitting me so hard now. It wasn’t like I hadn’t known this was coming all along. But Julie had never reacted so strongly—lost her bold overconfidence and shown the intensity of her pain. The sound of her agony still cut at me, somewhere deep in my chest. Right beside it was the other pain. Pain for feeling pain over Julie. Pain for hurting Edythe, too. For not being able to watch Julie go with composure, knowing that it was the right thing, the only way.

I was selfish, I was hurtful. I tortured the ones I loved.

I was like Cathy, like Wuthering Heights, only my options were so much better than hers, neither one evil, neither one weak. And here I sat, crying about it, not doing anything productive to make it right. Just like Cathy.

I couldn’t allow what hurt me to influence my decisions anymore. It was too little, much too late, but I had to do what was right now. Maybe it was already done for me. Maybe Edythe would not be
able to bring her back. And then I would accept that and get on with my life. Edythe would never see me shed another tear for Julie Black. There would be no more tears. I wiped the last of them away with cold fingers now.

But if Edythe did return with Julie, that was it. I had to tell her to go away and never come back.

Why was that so hard? So very much more difficult than saying goodbye to my other friends, to Angela, to Mike? Why did that hurt? It wasn’t right. That shouldn’t be able to hurt me. I had what I wanted. I couldn’t have them both, because Julie could not be just my friend. It was time to give up wishing for that. How ridiculously greedy could any one person be?

I had to get over this irrational feeling that Julie belonged in my life. She couldn’t belong with me, could not be my Julie, when I belonged to someone else.

I walked slowly back to the little clearing, my feet dragging. When I broke into the open space, blinking against the sharp light, I threw one quick glance toward Seth—he hadn’t moved from his bed of pine needles—and then looked away, avoiding his eyes.

I could feel that my hair was wild, twisted into clumps like Medusa’s snakes. I yanked through it with my fingers, and then gave up quickly. Who cared what I looked like, anyway?

I grabbed the canteen hanging beside the tent door and shook it. It sloshed wetly, so I unscrewed the lid and took a swig to rinse my mouth with the ice water. There was food somewhere nearby, but I didn’t feel hungry enough to look for it. I started pacing across the bright little space, feeling Seth’s eyes on me the whole time. Because I wouldn’t look at him, in my head he became the boy again, rather than the gigantic wolf. So much like a younger Julie.

I wanted to ask Seth to bark or give some other sign if Julie was coming back, but I stopped myself. It didn’t matter if Julie came back. It might be easier if she didn’t. I wished I had some way to call Edythe.

Seth whined at that moment, and got to his feet.

“What is it?” I asked him stupidly.

He ignored me, trotting to the edge of the trees, and pointing his nose toward the west. He began whimpering.

“Is it the others, Seth?” I demanded. “In the clearing?”

He looked at me and yelped softly once, and then turned his nose alertly back to the west. His ears laid back and he whined again.

Why was I such a fool? What was I thinking, sending Edythe away? How was I supposed to know what was going on? I didn’t speak wolf.

A cold trickle of fear began to ooze down my spine. What if the time had run out? What if Julie and Edythe got too close? What if Edythe decided to join in the fight?

The icy fear pooled in my stomach. What if Seth’s distress had nothing to do with the clearing, and his yelp had been a denial? What if Julie and Edythe were fighting with each other, far away somewhere in the forest? They wouldn’t do that, would they?

With sudden, chilling certainty I realized that they would—if the wrong words were said. I thought of the tense standoff in the tent this morning, and I wondered if I’d underestimated how close it
had come to a fight.

It would be no more than I deserved if I somehow lost them both.

The ice locked around my heart.

Before I could collapse with fear, Seth grumbled slightly, deep in his chest, and then turned away from his watch and sauntered back toward his resting place. It calmed me, but irritated me. Couldn’t he scratch a message in the dirt or something?

The pacing was starting to make me sweat under all my layers. I threw my jacket into the tent, and then I went back to wearing a path across the center of the tiny break in the trees.

Seth jumped to his feet again suddenly, the hackles on the back of his neck standing up stiffly. I looked around, but saw nothing. If Seth didn’t cut it out, I was going to throw a pinecone at him.

He growled, a low warning sound, slinking back toward the western rim, and I rethought my impatience.

“It’s just us, Seth,” Julie called from a distance.

I tried to explain to myself why my heart kicked into fourth gear when I heard her. It was just fear of what I was going to have to do now, that was all. I could not allow myself to be relieved that she’d come back. That would be the opposite of helpful.

Edythe walked into view first, her face blank and smooth. When she stepped out from the shadows, the sun shimmered on her skin like it did on the snow. Seth went to greet her, looking intently into her eyes. Edythe nodded slowly, and worry creased her forehead.

“Yes, that’s all we need,” she muttered to herself before addressing the big wolf. “I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised. But the timing is going to be very close. Please have Sam ask Archie to try to nail the schedule down better.”

Seth dipped his head once, and I wished I was able to growl. Sure, he could nod now. I turned my head, annoyed, and realized that Julie was there.

She had her back to me, facing the way she’d come. I waited warily for her to turn around.

“Bella,” Edythe murmured, suddenly right beside me. She stared down at me with nothing but concern showing in her eyes. There was no end to her generosity. I deserved her now less than I ever had.

“There’s a bit of a complication,” she told me, her voice carefully unworried. “I’m going to take Seth a little ways away and try to straighten it out. I won’t go far, but I won’t listen, either. I know you don’t want an audience, no matter which way you decide to go.”

Only at the very end did the pain break into her voice.

I had to never hurt her again. That would be my mission in life. Never again would I be the reason for this look to come into her eyes.

I was too upset to even ask her what the new problem was. I didn’t need anything else right now.

“Hurry back,” I whispered.

She kissed me lightly on the lips, and then disappeared into the forest with Seth at her side.
Julie was still in the shadow of the trees; I couldn’t see her expression clearly.

“I’m in a hurry, Bella,” she said in a dull voice. “Why don’t you get it over with?”

I swallowed, my throat suddenly so dry I wasn’t sure if I could make sound come out.

“Just say the words, and be done with it.”

I took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry I’m such a rotten person,” I whispered. “I’m sorry I’ve been so selfish. I wish I’d never met you, so I couldn’t hurt you the way I have. I won’t do it anymore, I promise. I’ll stay far away from you. I’ll move out of the state. You won’t have to look at me ever again.”

“That’s not much of an apology,” she said bitterly.

I couldn’t make my voice louder than a whisper. “Tell me how to do it right.”

“What if I don’t want you to go away? What if I’d rather you stayed, selfish or not? Don’t I get any say, if you’re trying to make things up to me?”

“That won’t help anything, Jules. It was wrong to stay with you when we wanted such different things. It’s not going to get better. I’ll just keep hurting you. I don’t want to hurt you anymore. I hate it.” My voice broke.

She sighed. “Stop. You don’t have to say anything else. I understand.”

I wanted to tell her how much I would miss her, but I bit my tongue. That would not help anything, either.

She stood quietly for a moment, staring at the ground, and I fought against the urge to go and put my arms around her. To comfort her.

And then her head snapped up.

“Well, you’re not the only one capable of self-sacrifice,” she said, her voice stronger. “Two can play at that game.”

“What?”

“I’ve behaved pretty badly myself. I’ve made this much harder for you than I needed to. I could have given up with good grace in the beginning. But I hurt you, too.”

“This is my fault.”

“I won’t let you claim all the blame here, Bella. Or all the glory either. I know how to redeem myself.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. The sudden, frenzied light in her eyes frightened me.

She glanced up at the sun and then smiled at me. “There’s a pretty serious fight brewing down there. I don’t think it will be that difficult to take myself out of the picture.”

Her words sank into my brain, slowly, one by one, and I couldn’t breathe. Despite all my intentions to cut Julie out of my life completely, I didn’t realize until that precise second exactly how deep the knife would have to go to do it.
“Oh, no, Jules! No, no no no,” I choked out in horror. “No, Jules, no. Please, no.” My knees began to tremble.

“What’s the difference, Bella? This will only make it more convenient for everyone. You won’t even have to move.”

“No!” My voice got louder. “No, Julie! I won’t let you!”

“How will you stop me?” she taunted lightly, smiling to take the sting out of her tone.

“Julie, I’m begging you. Stay with me.” I would have fallen to my knees, if I could have moved at all.

“For fifteen minutes while I miss a good brawl? So that you can run away from me as soon as you think I’m safe again? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I won’t run away. I’ve changed my mind. We’ll work something out, Julie. There’s always a compromise. Don’t go!”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not. You know what a terrible liar I am. Look in my eyes. I’ll stay if you do.”

Her face hardened. “And I can be your maid of honor at the wedding?”

It was a moment before I could speak, and still the only answer I could give her was, “Please.”

“That’s what I thought,” she said, her face going calm again, but for the turbulent light in her eyes.

“I love you, Bella,” she murmured.

“I love you, Julie,” I whispered brokenly.

She smiled. “I know that better than you do.”

She turned to walk away.

“Anything,” I called after her in a strangled voice. “Anything you want, Julie. Just don’t do this!”

She paused, turning slowly.

“I don’t really think you mean that.”

“Stay,” I begged.

She shook her head. “No, I’m going.” She paused, as if deciding something. “But I could leave it to fate.”

“What do you mean?” I choked out.

“I don’t have to do anything deliberate—I could just do my best for my pack and let what happens happen.” She shrugged. “If you could convince me you really did want me to come back—more than you wanted to do the selfless thing.”

“How?” I asked.

“You could ask me,” she suggested.
“Come back,” I whispered. How could she doubt that I meant it?

She shook her head, smiling again. “That’s not what I’m talking about.”

It took me a second to grasp what she was saying, and all the while she was looking at me with this superior expression—so sure of my reaction. As soon as the realization hit, though, I blurted out the words without stopping to count the cost.

“Will you kiss me, Julie?”

Her eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed suspiciously. “You’re bluffing.”

“Kiss me, Julie. Kiss me, and then come back.”

She hesitated in the shadow, warring with herself. She half-turned again to the west, her torso twisting away from me while her feet stayed planted where they were. Still looking away, she took one uncertain step in my direction, and then another. She swung her face around to look at me, her eyes doubtful.

I stared back. I had no idea what expression was on my face.

Julie rocked back on her heels, and then lurched forward, closing the distance between us in three long strides.

I knew she would take advantage of the situation. I expected it. I held very still—my eyes closed, my fingers curled into fists at my sides—as her hands caught my face and her lips found mine with an eagerness that was not far from violence.

I could feel her anger as her mouth discovered my passive resistance. One hand moved to the nape of my neck, twisting into a fist around the roots of my hair. The other hand grabbed roughly at my shoulder, shaking me, then dragging me to her. Her hand continued down my arm, finding my wrist and pulling my arm up around her neck. I left it there, my hand still tightly balled up, unsure how far I could go in my desperation to keep her alive. All the while her lips, disconcertingly soft and warm, tried to force a response out of mine.

As soon as she was sure I wouldn’t drop my arm, she freed my wrist, her hand feeling its way down to my waist. Her burning hand found the skin at the small of my back, and she yanked me forward, bowing my body against hers.

Her lips gave up on mine for a moment, but I knew she was nowhere close to finished. Her mouth followed the line of my jaw, and then explored the length of my neck. She freed my hair, reaching for my other arm to draw it around her neck like the first.

Then both of her arms were constricted around my waist, and her lips found my ear.

“You can do better than this, Bella,” she whispered huskily. “You’re overthinking it.”

I shivered as I felt her teeth graze my earlobe.

“That’s right,” she murmured. “For once, just let yourself feel what you feel.”

I shook my head mechanically until one of her hands wound back into my hair and stopped me.

Her voice turned acidic. “Are you sure you want me to come back? Or did you really want me to die?”
Anger rocked through me like the whiplash after a heavy punch. That was too much—she wasn’t fighting fair.

My arms were already around her neck, so I grabbed two fistfuls of her hair—ignoring the stabbing pain in my right hand—and fought back, struggling to pull my face away from hers.

And Julie misunderstood.

She was too strong to recognize that my hands, trying to yank her hair out by the roots, meant to cause her pain. Instead of anger, she imagined passion. She thought I was finally responding to her.

With a wild gasp, she brought her mouth back to mine, her fingers clutching frantically against the skin at my waist.

The jolt of anger unbalanced my tenuous hold on self-control; her unexpected, ecstatic response overthrew it entirely. If there had been only triumph, I might have been able to resist her. But the utter defenselessness of her sudden joy cracked my determination, disabled it. My brain disconnected from my body, and I was kissing her back. Against all reason, my lips were moving with hers in strange, confusing ways they’d never moved before—because I didn’t have to be careful with Julie, and she certainly wasn’t being careful with me.

My fingers tightened in her hair, but I was pulling her closer now.

She was everywhere. The piercing sunlight turned my eyelids red, and the color fit, matched the heat. The heat was everywhere. I couldn’t see or hear or feel anything that wasn’t Julie.

The tiny piece of my brain that retained sanity screamed questions at me.

Why wasn’t I stopping this? Worse than that, why couldn’t I find in myself even the desire to want to stop? What did it mean that I didn’t want her to stop? That my hands clung to her shoulders, and liked that they were wide and strong? That her hands pulled me too tight against her body, and yet it was not tight enough for me?

The questions were stupid, because I knew the answer: I’d been lying to myself.

Julie was right. She’d been right all along. She was more than just my friend. That’s why it was so impossible to tell her goodbye—because I was in love with her. Too. I loved her, much more than I should, and yet, still nowhere near enough. I was in love with her, but it was not enough to change anything; it was only enough to hurt us both more. To hurt her worse than I ever had.

I didn’t care about more than that—than her pain. I more than deserved whatever pain this caused me. I hoped it was bad. I hoped I would really suffer.

In this moment, it felt as though we were the same person. Her pain had always been and would always be my pain—now her joy was my joy. I felt joy, too, and yet her happiness was somehow also pain. Almost tangible—it burned against my skin like acid, a slow torture.

For one brief, never-ending second, an entirely different path expanded behind the lids of my tear-wet eyes. As if I were looking through the filter of Julie’s thoughts, I could see exactly what I was going to give up, exactly what this new self-knowledge would not save me from losing. I could see Charlie and Renée mixed into a strange collage with Billy and Sam and La Push. I could see years passing, and meaning something as they passed, changing me. I could see the enormous red-brown wolf that I loved, always standing as protector if I needed her. For the tiniest fragment of that second, I saw the bobbing heads of two small, black-haired children, running away from me into the familiar forest. When they disappeared, they took the rest of the vision with them.
And then, quite distinctly, I felt the splintering along the fissure line in my heart as the smaller part wrenched itself away from the whole.

Julie’s lips were still before mine were. I opened my eyes and she was staring at me with wonder and elation.

“I have to leave,” she whispered.

“No.”

She smiled, pleased by my response. “I won’t be long,” she promised. “But one thing first…”

She bent to kiss me again, and there was no reason to resist. What would be the point?

This time was different. Her hands were soft on my face and her warm lips were gentle, unexpectedly hesitant. It was brief, and very, very sweet.

Her arms curled around me, and she hugged me securely while she whispered in my ear.

“That should have been our first kiss. Better late than never.”

Against her chest, where she couldn’t see, the tears welled up and spilled over.
I LAY FACEDOWN ACROSS THE SLEEPING BAG, WAITING for justice to find me. Maybe an avalanche would bury me here. I wished it would. I never wanted to have to see my face in the mirror again.

There was no sound to warn me. Out of nowhere, Edythe’s cold hand stroked against my knotted hair. I shuddered guiltily at her touch.

“Are you all right?” she murmured, her voice anxious.

“No. I want to die.”

“That will never happen. I won’t allow it.”

I groaned and then whispered, “You might change your mind about that.”

“Where’s Julie?”

“She went to fight,” I mumbled into the floor.

Julie had left the little camp joyfully—with a cheerful “I’ll be right back”—running full tilt for the clearing, already quivering as she prepared to shift to her other self. By now the whole pack knew everything. Seth Clearwater, pacing outside the tent, was an intimate witness to my disgrace.

Edythe was silent for a long moment. “Oh,” she finally said.

The tone of her voice worried me that my avalanche wasn’t coming fast enough. I peeked up at her and, sure enough, her eyes were unfocused as she listened to something I’d rather die than have her hear. I dropped my face back to the floor.

It stunned me when Edythe chuckled reluctantly.

“And I thought I fought dirty,” she said with grudging admiration. “She makes me look like the patron saint of ethics.” Her hand brushed against the part of my cheek that was exposed. “I’m not mad at you, love. Julie’s more cunning than I gave her credit for. I do wish you hadn’t asked her, though.”

“Edythe,” I whispered to the rough nylon. “I… I… I’m—”

“Shh,” she hushed me, her fingers soothing against my cheek. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just that she would have kissed you anyway—even if you hadn’t fallen for it—and now I don’t have an excuse to break her face. I would have really enjoyed that, too.”

“Fallen for it?” I mumbled almost incomprehensibly.

“Bella, did you really believe she was that noble? That she would go out in a flame of glory just to clear the way for me?”

I raised my head slowly to meet her patient gaze. Her expression was soft; her eyes were full of understanding rather than the revulsion I deserved to see.

“Yes, I did believe that,” I muttered, and then looked away. But I didn’t feel any anger at Julie for tricking me. There wasn’t enough room in my body to contain anything besides the hatred I felt.
toward myself.

Edythe laughed softly again. “You’re such a bad liar, you’ll believe anyone who has the least bit of skill.”

“Why aren’t you angry with me?” I whispered. “Why don’t you hate me? Or haven’t you heard the whole story yet?”

“I think I got a fairly comprehensive look,” she said in a light, easy voice. “Julie makes vivid mental pictures. I feel almost as bad for her pack as I do for myself. Poor Seth was getting nauseated. But Sam is making Julie focus now.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head in agony. The sharp nylon fibers of the tent floor scraped against my skin.

“You’re only human,” she whispered, stroking my hair again.

“That’s the most miserable defense I’ve ever heard.”

“But you are human, Bella. And, as much as I might wish otherwise, so is she…. There are holes in your life that I can’t fill. I understand that.”

“But that’s not true. That’s what makes me so horrible. There are no holes.”

“You love him,” she murmured gently.

Every cell in my body ached to deny it.

“I love you more,” I said. It was the best I could do.

“Yes, I know that, too. But… when I left you, Bella, I left you bleeding. Julie was the one to stitch you back up again. That was bound to leave its mark—on both of you. I’m not sure those kinds of stitches dissolve on their own. I can’t blame either of you for something I made necessary. I may gain forgiveness, but that doesn’t let me escape the consequences.”

“I should have known you’d find some way to blame yourself. Please stop. I can’t stand it.”

“What would you like me to say?”

“I want you to call me every bad name you can think of, in every language you know. I want you to tell me that you’re disgusted with me and that you’re going to leave so that I can beg and grovel on my knees for you to stay.”

“I’m sorry.” She sighed. “I can’t do that.”

“At least stop trying to make me feel better. Let me suffer. I deserve it.”

“No,” she murmured.

I nodded slowly. “You’re right. Keep on being too understanding. That’s probably worse.”

She was silent for a moment, and I sensed a charge in the atmosphere, a new urgency.

“It’s getting close,” I stated.

“Yes, a few more minutes now. Just enough time to say one more thing….”
I waited. When she finally spoke again, she was whispering. “I can be noble, Bella. I’m not going to make you choose between us. Just be happy, and you can have whatever part of me you want, or none at all, if that’s better. Don’t let any debt you feel you owe me influence your decision.”

I pushed off the floor, shoving myself up onto my knees.

“Dammit, stop that!” I shouted at her.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “No—you don’t understand. I’m not just trying to make you feel better, Bella, I really mean it.”

“I know you do,” I groaned. “What happened to fighting back? Don’t start with the noble self-sacrifice now! Fight!”

“How?” she asked, and her eyes were ancient with their sadness.

I scrambled into her lap, throwing my arms around her.

“I don’t care that it’s cold here. I don’t care that I stink like a dog right now. Make me forget how awful I am. Make me forget her. Make me forget my own name. Fight back!”

I didn’t wait for her to decide—or to have the chance to tell me she wasn’t interested in a cruel, faithless monster like me. I pulled myself against her and crushed my mouth to her snow-cold lips.

“Careful, love,” she murmured under my urgent kiss.

“No,” I growled.

She gently pushed my face a few inches back. “You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

“I’m not trying to prove something. You said I could have any part of you I wanted. I want this part. I want every part.” I wrapped my arms around her neck and strained to reach her lips. She bent her head to kiss me back, but her cool mouth was hesitant as my impatience grew more pronounced. My body was making my intentions clear, giving me away. Inevitably, her hands moved to restrain me.

“Perhaps this isn’t the best moment for that,” she suggested, too calm for my liking.

“Why not?” I grumbled. There was no point in fighting if she was going to be rational; I dropped my arms.

“Firstly, because it is cold.” She reached out to pull the sleeping bag off the floor; she wrapped it around me like a blanket.

“Wrong,” I said. “First, because you are bizarrely moral for a vampire.”

She chuckled. “All right, I’ll give you that. The cold is second. And thirdly… well, you do actually stink, love.”

She wrinkled her nose.

I sighed.

“Fourthly,” she murmured, dropping her face so that she was whispering in my ear. “We will try, Bella. I’ll make good on my promise. But I’d much rather it wasn’t in reaction to Julie Black.”
I cringed, and buried my face against her shoulder.

“And fifthly…”

“This is a very long list,” I muttered.

She laughed. “Yes, but did you want to listen to the fight or not?”

As she spoke, Seth howled stridently outside the tent.

My body stiffened to the sound. I didn’t realize my left hand was clenched into a fist, nails biting into my bandaged palm, until Edythe took it and gently smoothed my fingers out.

“It’s going to be fine, Bella,” she promised. “We’ve got skill, training, and surprise on our side. It will be over very soon. If I didn’t truly believe that, I would be down there now—and you’d be here, chained to a tree or something along those lines.”

“Archie is so small,” I moaned.

She chuckled. “That might be a problem… if it were possible for someone to catch him.”

Seth started to whimper.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded.

“He’s just angry that he’s stuck here with us. He knows the pack kept him out of the action to protect him. He’s salivating to join them.”

I scowled in Seth’s general direction.

“The newborns have reached the end of the trail—it worked like a charm, Jasper’s a genius—and they’ve caught the scent of the ones in the meadow, so they’re splitting into two groups now, as Archie said,” Edythe murmured, her eyes focused on something far away. “Sam’s taking us around to head off the ambush party.” She was so intent on what she was hearing that she used the pack plural.

Suddenly she looked down at me. “Breathe, Bella.”

I struggled to do what she asked. I could hear Seth’s heavy panting just outside the tent wall, and I tried to keep my lungs on the same even pace, so that I wouldn’t hyperventilate.

“The first group is in the clearing. We can hear the fighting.”

My teeth locked together.

She laughed once. “We can hear Eleanor—she’s enjoying herself.”

I made myself take another breath with Seth.

“The second group is getting ready—they aren’t paying attention, they haven’t heard us yet.”

Edythe growled.

“What?” I gasped.

“They’re talking about you.” Her teeth clenched together. “They’re supposed to make sure you
don’t escape…. Nice move, Leah! Mmm, she’s quite fast,” she murmured in approval. “One of the newborns caught our scent, and Leah took him down before he could even turn. Sam’s helping her finish him off. Paul and Julie got another one, but the others are on the defensive now. They have no idea what to make of us. Both sides are feinting…. No, let Sam lead. Stay out of the way,” she muttered. “Separate them—don’t let them protect each other’s backs.”

Seth whined.

“That’s better, drive them toward the clearing,” Edythe approved. Her body was shifting unconsciously as she watched, tensing for moves she would have made. Her hands still held mine; I twisted my fingers through hers. At least she wasn’t down there.

The sudden absence of sound was the only warning.

The deep rush of Seth’s breathing cut off, and—as I’d paced my breaths with his—I noticed.

I stopped breathing, too—too frightened to even make my lungs work as I realized that Edythe had frozen into a block of ice beside me.

Oh, no. No. No.

Who had been lost? Theirs or ours? Mine, all mine. What was my loss?

So quickly that I wasn’t exactly sure how it happened, I was on my feet and the tent was collapsing in ragged shreds around me. Had Edythe ripped our way out? Why?

I blinked, shocked, into the brilliant light. Seth was all I could see, right beside us, his face only six inches from Edythe’s. They stared at each other with absolute concentration for one infinite second. The sun shattered off Edythe’s skin and sent sparkles dancing across Seth’s fur.

And then Edythe whispered urgently, “Go, Seth!”

The huge wolf wheeled and disappeared into the forest shadows.

Had two entire seconds passed? It felt like hours. I was terrified to the point of nausea by the knowledge that something horrible had gone awry in the clearing. I opened my mouth to demand that Edythe take me there, and do it now. They needed her, and they needed me. If I had to bleed to save them, I would do it. I would die to do it, like the third wife. I had no silver dagger in my hand, but I would find a way—

Before I could get the first syllable out, I felt as if I was being flung through the air. But Edythe’s hands never let go of me—I was only being moved, so quickly that the sensation was like falling sideways.

I found myself with my back pressed against the sheer cliff face. Edythe stood in front of me, holding a posture that I knew at once.

Relief washed through my mind at the same time that my stomach dropped through the soles of my feet.

I’d misunderstood.

Relief—nothing had gone wrong in the clearing.

Horror—the crisis was here.
Edythe held a defensive position—half-crouched, her arms extended slightly—that I recognized with sickening certainty. The rock at my back could have been the ancient brick walls of the Italian alley where she had stood between me and the black-cloaked Volturi warriors.

Something was coming for us.

“Who?” I whispered.

The words came through her teeth in a snarl that was louder than I expected. Too loud. It meant that it was far too late to hide. We were trapped, and it didn’t matter who heard his answer.

“Victoria,” she said, spitting the word, making it a curse. “She’s not alone. She crossed my scent, following the newborns in to watch—she never meant to fight with them. She made a spur-of-the-moment decision to find me, guessing that you would be wherever I was. She was right. You were right. It was always Victoria.”

She was close enough that Edythe could hear her thoughts.

Relief again. If it had been the Volturi, we were both dead. But with Victoria, it didn’t have to be both. Edythe could survive this. She was a good fighter, as good as Jasper. If Victoria didn’t bring too many others, Edythe could fight her way out, back to her family. Edythe was faster than anyone. She could make it.

I was so glad she’d sent Seth away. Of course, there was no one Seth could run to for help. Victoria had timed her decision perfectly. But at least Seth was safe; I couldn’t see the huge sandy wolf in my head when I thought his name—just the gangly fifteen-year-old boy.

Edythe’s body shifted—only infinitesimally, but it told me where to look. I stared at the black shadows of the forest.

It was like having my nightmares walk forward to greet me.

Two vampires edged slowly into the small opening of our camp, eyes intent, missing nothing. They glistened like diamonds in the sun.

I could barely look at the blond boy—yes, he was just a boy, though he was muscular and tall, maybe my age when he was changed. His eyes—a more vivid red than I had ever seen before—could not hold mine. Though he was closest to Edythe, the nearest danger, I could not watch him.

Because, a few feet to the side and a few feet back, Victoria was staring at me.

Her orange hair was brighter than I’d remembered, more like a flame. There was no wind here, but the fire around her face seemed to shimmer slightly, as if it were alive.

Her eyes were black with thirst. She did not smile, as she always had in my nightmares—her lips were pressed into a tight line. There was a striking feline quality to the way she held her coiled body, a lioness waiting for an opening to spring. Her restless, wild gaze flickered between Edythe and me, but never rested on her for more than a half-second. She could not keep her eyes from my face any more than I could keep mine from hers.

Tension rolled off of her, nearly visible in the air. I could feel the desire, the all-consuming passion that held her in its grip. Almost as if I could hear her thoughts, too, I knew what she was thinking.

She was so close to what she wanted—the focus of her whole existence for more than a year now was just so close.
My death.

Her plan was as obvious as it was practical. The big blond boy would attack Edythe. As soon as Edythe was sufficiently distracted, Victoria would finish me.

It would be quick—she had no time for games here—but it would be thorough. Something that it would be impossible to recover from. Something that even vampire venom could not repair.

She’d have to stop my heart. Perhaps a hand shoved through my chest, crushing it. Something along those lines.

My heart beat furiously, loudly, as if to make her target more obvious.

An immense distance away, from far across the black forest, a wolf’s howl echoed in the still air. With Seth gone, there was no way to interpret the sound.

The blond boy looked at Victoria from the corner of his eye, waiting on her command.

He was young in more ways than one. I guessed from his brilliant crimson irises that he couldn’t have been a vampire for very long. He would be strong, but inept. Edythe would know how to fight him. Edythe would survive.

Victoria jerked her chin toward Edythe, wordlessly ordering the boy forward.

“Riley,” Edythe said in a soft, pleading voice.

The blond boy froze, his red eyes widening.

“She’s lying to you, Riley,” Edythe told him. “Listen to me. She’s lying to you just like she lied to the others who are dying now in the clearing. You know that she’s lied to them, that she had you lie to them, that neither of you were ever going to help them. Is it so hard to believe that she’s lied to you, too?”

Confusion swept across Riley’s face.

Edythe shifted a few inches to the side, and Riley automatically compensated with an adjustment of his own.

“She doesn’t love you, Riley.” Edythe’s soft voice was compelling, almost hypnotic. “She never has. She loved someone named James, and you’re no more than a tool to her.”

When she said James’s name, Victoria’s lips pulled back in a teeth-baring grimace. Her eyes stayed locked on me.

Riley cast a frantic glance in her direction.

“Riley?” Edythe said.

Riley automatically refocused on Edythe.

“She knows that I will kill you, Riley. She wants you to die so that she doesn’t have to keep up the pretense anymore. Yes—you’ve seen that, haven’t you? You’ve read the reluctance in her eyes, suspected a false note in her promises. You were right. She’s never wanted you. Every kiss, every touch was a lie.”

Edythe moved again, moved a few inches toward the boy, a few inches away from me.
Victoria’s gaze zeroed in on the gap between us. It would take her less than a second to kill me—she only needed the tiniest margin of opportunity.

Slower this time, Riley repositioned himself.

“You don’t have to die,” Edythe promised, her eyes holding the boy’s. “There are other ways to live than the way she’s shown you. It’s not all lies and blood, Riley. You can walk away right now. You don’t have to die for her lies.”

Edythe slid her feet forward and to the side. There was a foot of space between us now. Riley circled too far, overcompensating this time. Victoria leaned forward onto the balls of her feet.

“Last chance, Riley,” Edythe whispered.

Riley’s face was desperate as he looked to Victoria for answers.

“He’s the liar, Riley,” Victoria said, and my mouth fell open in shock at the sound of her voice. “I told you about their mind tricks. You know I love only you.”

Her voice was not the strong, wild, catlike growl I would have put with her face and stance. It was soft, it was high—a babyish, soprano tinkling. The kind of voice that went with blond curls and pink bubble gum. It made no sense coming through her bared, glistening teeth.

Riley’s jaw tightened, and he squared his shoulders. His eyes emptied—there was no more confusion, no more suspicion. There was no thought at all. He tensed himself to attack.

Victoria’s body seemed to be trembling, she was so tightly wound. Her fingers were ready claws, waiting for Edythe to move just one more inch away from me.

The snarl came from none of them.

A mammoth tan shape flew through the center of the opening, throwing Riley to the ground.

“No!” Victoria cried, her baby voice shrill with disbelief.

A yard and a half in front of me, the huge wolf ripped and tore at the blond vampire beneath him. Something white and hard smacked into the rocks by my feet. I cringed away from it.

Victoria did not spare one glance for the boy she’d just pledged her love to. Her eyes were still on me, filled with a disappointment so ferocious that she looked deranged.

“No,” she said again, through her teeth, as Edythe started to move toward her, blocking her path to me.

Riley was on his feet again, looking misshapen and haggard, but he was able to fling a vicious kick into Seth’s shoulder. I heard the bone crunch. Seth backed off and started to circle, limping. Riley had his arms out, ready, though he seemed to be missing part of one hand.…

Only a few yards away from that fight, Edythe and Victoria were dancing.

Not quite circling, because Edythe was not allowing her to position herself closer to me. She sashayed back, moving from side to side, trying to find a hole in Edythe’s defense. Edythe shadowed her footwork lithely, stalking her with perfect concentration. She began to move just a fraction of a second before Victoria moved, reading her intentions in her thoughts.

Seth lunged at Riley from the side, and something tore with a hideous, grating screech. Another
heavy white chunk flew into the forest with a thud. Riley roared in fury, and Seth skipped back—amazingly light on his feet for his size—as Riley took a swipe at him with one mangled hand.

Victoria was weaving through the tree trunks at the far end of the little opening now. She was torn, her feet pulling her toward safety while her eyes yearned toward me as if I were a magnet, reeling her in. I could see the burning desire to kill warring with her survival instinct.

Edythe could see that, too.

“Don’t go, Victoria,” she murmured in that same hypnotic tone as before. “You’ll never get another chance like this.”

Victoria showed her teeth and hissed at her, but she seemed unable to move farther away from me.

“You can always run later,” Edythe purred. “Plenty of time for that. It’s what you do, isn’t it? It’s why James kept you around. Useful, if you like to play deadly games. A partner with an uncanny instinct for escaping. He shouldn’t have left you—he could have used your skills when we caught up to him in Phoenix.”

A snarl ripped from between her lips.

“That’s all you ever were to him, though. Silly to waste so much energy avenging someone who had less affection for you than a hunter for his mount. You were never more than a convenience to him. I would know.”

Edythe’s lips pulled up on one side as she tapped her temple.

With a strangled screech, Victoria darted out of the trees again, feinting to the side. Edythe responded, and the dance began again.

Just then, Riley’s fist caught Seth’s flank, and a low yelp coughed out of Seth’s throat. Seth backed away, his shoulders twitching as if he were trying to shake off the pain.

Please, I wanted to plead with Riley, but I couldn’t find the muscles to make my mouth open, to pull the air up from my lungs. Please, he’s just a child!

Why hadn’t Seth run away? Why didn’t he run now?

Riley was closing the distance between them again, driving Seth toward the cliff face beside me. Victoria was suddenly interested in her partner’s fate. I could see her, from the corner of her eyes, judge the distance between Riley and me. Seth snapped at Riley, forcing him back again, and Victoria hissed.

Seth wasn’t limping anymore. His circling took him within inches of Edythe; his tail brushed Edythe’s back, and Victoria’s eyes bulged.

“No, he won’t turn on me,” Edythe said, answering the question in Victoria’s head. She used her distraction to slide closer. “You provided us with a common enemy. You allied us.”

She clenched her teeth, trying to keep her focus on Edythe alone.

“Look more closely, Victoria,” she murmured, pulling at the threads of her concentration. “Is he really so much like the monster James tracked across Siberia?”

Victoria’s eyes popped wide open, and then began flickering wildly from Edythe to Seth to me,
“Not the same?” she snarled in her little girl’s soprano. “Impossible!”

“Nothing is impossible,” Edythe murmured, voice velvet soft as she moved another inch closer to her. “Except what you want. You’ll never touch her.”

Victoria shook her head, fast and jerky, fighting Edythe’s diversions, and tried to duck around her, but Edythe was in place to block her as soon as she’d thought of the plan. Her face contorted in frustration, and then she shifted lower into her crouch, a lioness again, and stalked deliberately forward.

Victoria was no inexperienced, instinct-driven newborn. She was lethal. Even I could tell the difference between her and Riley, and I knew that Seth wouldn’t have lasted so long if he’d been fighting this vampire.

Edythe shifted, too, as they closed on each other, and it was lioness versus lioness.

The dance increased in tempo.

It was like Archie and Jasper in the meadow, a blurred spiraling of movement, only this dance was not as perfectly choreographed. Sharp crunches and crackings reverberated off the cliff face whenever someone slipped in their formation. But they were moving too fast for me to see who was making the mistakes….

Riley was distracted by the violent ballet, his eyes anxious for his partner. Seth struck, crunching off another small piece of the vampire. Riley bellowed and launched a massive backhanded blow that caught Seth full in his broad chest. Seth’s huge body soared ten feet and crashed into the rocky wall over my head with a force that seemed to shake the whole peak. I heard the breath whoosh from his lungs, and I ducked out of the way as he rebounded off the stone and collapsed on the ground a few feet in front of me.

A low whimper escaped through Seth’s teeth.

Sharp fragments of gray stone showered down on my head, scratching my exposed skin. A jagged spike of rock rolled down my right arm and I caught it reflexively. My fingers clenched around the long shard as my own survival instincts kicked in; since there was no chance of flight, my body—not caring how ineffectual the gesture was—prepared for a fight.

Adrenaline jolted through my veins. I knew the brace was cutting into my palm. I knew the crack in my knuckle was protesting. I knew it, but I could not feel the pain.

Behind Riley, all I could see was the twisting flame of Victoria’s hair and a blur of white. The increasingly frequent metallic snaps and tears, the gasps and shocked hissings, made it clear that the dance was turning deadly for someone.

But which someone?

Riley lurched toward me, his red eyes brilliant with fury. He glared at the limp mountain of sand-colored fur between us, and his hands—mangled, broken hands—curled into talons. His mouth opened, widened, his teeth glistening, as he prepared to rip out Seth’s throat.

A second kick of adrenaline hit like an electric shock, and everything was suddenly very clear.

Both fights were too close. Seth was about to lose his, and I had no idea if Edythe was winning or losing. They needed help. A distraction. Something to give them an edge.
My hand gripped the stone spike so tightly that a support in the brace snapped.

Was I strong enough? Was I brave enough? How hard could I shove the rough stone into my body? Would this buy Seth enough time to get back on his feet? Would he heal fast enough for my sacrifice to do him any good?

I raked the point of the shard up my arm, yanking my thick sweater back to expose the skin, and then pressed the sharp tip to the crease at my elbow. I already had a long scar there from my last birthday. That night, my flowing blood had been enough to catch every vampire’s attention, to freeze them all in place for an instant. I prayed it would work that way again. I steeled myself and sucked in one deep breath.

Victoria was distracted by the sound of my gasp. Her eyes, holding still for one tiny portion of a second, met mine. Fury and curiosity mingled strangely in her expression.

I wasn’t sure how I heard the low sound with all the other noises echoing off the stone wall and hammering inside my head. My own heartbeat should have been enough to drown it out. But, in the split second that I stared into Victoria’s eyes, I thought I heard a familiar, exasperated sigh.

In that same short second, the dance broke violently apart. It happened so quickly that it was over before I could follow the sequence of events. I tried to catch up in my head.

Victoria had flown out of the blurred formation and smashed into a tall spruce about halfway up the tree. She dropped back to the earth already crouched to spring.

Simultaneously, Edythe—all but invisible with speed—had twisted backward and caught the unsuspecting Riley by the arm. It had looked like Edythe planted her foot against Riley’s back, and heaved—

The little campsite was filled with Riley’s piercing shriek of agony.

At the same time, Seth leaped to his feet, cutting off most of my view.

But I could still see Victoria. And, though she looked oddly deformed—as if she were unable to straighten up completely—I could see the smile I’d been dreaming of flash across her wild face.

She coiled and sprang.

Something small and white whistled through the air and collided with her mid-flight. The impact sounded like an explosion, and it threw her against another tree—this one snapped in half. She landed on her feet again, crouched and ready, but Edythe was already in place. Relief swelled in my heart when I saw that he stood straight and perfect.

Victoria kicked something aside with a flick of her bare foot—the missile that had crippled her attack. It rolled toward me, and I realized what it was.

My stomach lurched.

The fingers were still twitching; grasping at blades of grass, Riley’s arm began to drag itself mindlessly across the ground.

Seth was circling Riley again, and now Riley was retreating. He backed away from the advancing werewolf, his face rigid with pain. He raised his one arm defensively.

Seth rushed Riley, and the vampire was clearly off-balance. I saw Seth sink his teeth into Riley’s
shoulder and tear, jumping back again.

With an earsplitting metallic screech, Riley lost his other arm.

Seth shook his head, flinging the arm into the woods. The broken hissing noise that came through Seth’s teeth sounded like snickering.

Riley screamed out a tortured plea. “Victoria!”

Victoria did not even flinch to the sound of her name. Her eyes did not flicker once toward her partner.

Seth launched himself forward with the force of a wrecking ball. The thrust carried both Seth and Riley into the trees, where the metallic screeching was matched by Riley’s screams. Screams that abruptly cut off, while the sounds of rock being ripped to shreds continued.

Though she spared Riley no farewell glance, Victoria seemed to realize that she was on her own. She began to back away from Edythe, frenzied disappointment blazing in her eyes. She threw me one short, agonized stare of longing, and then she started to retreat faster.

“No,” Edythe crooned, her voice seductive. “Stay just a little longer.”

Victoria wheeled and flew toward the refuge of the forest like an arrow from a bow.

But Edythe was faster—a bullet from a gun.

She caught Victoria’s unprotected back at the edge of the trees and, with one last, simple step, the dance was over.

Edythe’s mouth brushed once across her neck, like a caress. The squealing clamor coming from Seth’s efforts covered every other noise, so there was no discernible sound to make the image one of violence. She could have been kissing her.

And then the fiery tangle of hair was no longer connected to the rest of her body. The shivering orange waves fell to the ground, and bounced once before rolling toward the trees.
I FORCED MY EYES—FROZEN WIDE OPEN WITH SHOCK—to move, so that I could not examine too closely the oval object wrapped in tendrils of shivering, fiery hair.

Edythe was in motion again. Swift and coolly businesslike, she dismembered the headless corpse.

I could not go to her—I could not make my feet respond; they were bolted to the stone beneath them. But I scrutinized her every action minutely, looking for any evidence that she had been harmed. My heart slowed to a healthier rhythm when I found nothing. She was lithe and graceful as ever. I couldn’t even see a tear in her clothes.

She did not look at me—where I stood frozen to the cliff wall, horrified—while she piled the quivering, twitching limbs and then covered them with dry pine needles. She still did not meet my shocked gaze as she darted into the forest after Seth.

I didn’t have time to recover before both she and Seth were back, Edythe with her arms full of Riley. Seth was carrying a large chunk—the torso—in his mouth. They added their burden to the pile, and Edythe pulled a silver rectangle from her pocket. She flipped open the butane lighter and held the flame to the dry tinder. It caught at once; long tongues of orange fire licked rapidly across the pyre.

“Get every piece,” Edythe said in a low aside to Seth.

Together, the vampire and the werewolf scoured the campsite, occasionally tossing small lumps of white stone into the blaze. Seth handled the pieces with his teeth. My brain wasn’t working well enough for me to understand why he didn’t change back to a form with hands.

Edythe kept her eyes on her work.

And then they were done, and the raging fire was sending a pillar of choking purple toward the sky. The thick smoke curled up slowly, looking more solid than it should; it smelled like burning incense, and the scent was uncomfortable. It was heavy, too strong.

Seth made that snickering sound again, deep in his chest.

A smile flickered across Edythe’s tense face.

Edythe stretched out her arm, her hand curled into a fist. Seth grinned, revealing the long row of dagger teeth, and bumped his nose against Edythe’s hand.

“Nice teamwork,” Edythe murmured.

Seth coughed a laugh.

Then Edythe took a deep breath, and turned slowly to face me.

I did not understand her expression. Her eyes were as wary as if I were another enemy—more than wary, they were afraid. Yet she’d shown no fear at all when she’d faced Victoria and Riley…. My mind was stuck, stunned and useless as my body. I stared at her, bewildered.

“Bella, love,” she said in her softest tone, walking toward me with exaggerated slowness, her hands held up, palms forward. Dazed as I was, it reminded me oddly of a suspect approaching a
policeman, showing that she wasn’t armed.

“Bella, can you drop the rock, please? Carefully. Don’t hurt yourself.”

I’d forgotten all about my crude weapon, though I realized now that I was grasping it so hard that my knuckle was screaming in protest. Was it rebroken? Carlisle would put me in a cast for sure this time.

Edythe hesitated a few feet from me, her hands still in the air, her eyes still fearful.

It took me a few long seconds to remember how to move my fingers. Then the rock clattered to the ground, while my hand stayed frozen in the same position.

Edythe relaxed slightly when my hands were empty, but came no closer.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Bella,” Edythe murmured. “You’re safe. I won’t hurt you.”

The mystifying promise only confused me further. I stared at her like an imbecile, trying to understand.

“It’s going to be all right, Bella. I know you’re frightened now, but it’s over. No one is going to hurt you. I won’t touch you. I won’t hurt you,” she said again.

My eyes blinked furiously, and I found my voice. “Why do you keep saying that?”

I took an unsteady step toward her, and she leaned away from my advance.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered. “What do you mean?”

“Are you…” Her golden eyes were suddenly as confused as I felt. “Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Afraid of you? Why?”

I staggered forward another step, and then tripped over something—my own feet probably. Edythe caught me, and I buried my face in her chest and started to sob.

“Bella, Bella, I’m so sorry. It’s over, it’s over.”


Her arms tightened around me. “I’m so sorry,” she murmured again and again.

I clung to her until I could breathe, and then I was kissing her—her shoulder, her neck—every part of her that I could reach. Slowly, my brain started to work again.

“Are you okay?” I demanded between kisses. “Did she hurt you at all?”

“I am absolutely fine,” she promised, burying her face in my hair.

“Seth?”


“The others? Archie, Earnest? The wolves?”

“All fine. It’s over there, too. It went just as smoothly as I promised. We got the worst of it here.”
I let myself absorb that for a moment, let it sink in and settle in my head.

My family and my friends were safe. Victoria was never coming after me again. It was over.

We were all going to be fine.

But I couldn’t completely take in the good news while I was still so confused.

“Tell me why,” I insisted. “Why did you think I would be afraid of you?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, apologizing yet again—for what? I had no idea. “So sorry. I didn’t want you to see that. See me like that. I know I must have terrified you.”

I had to think about that for another minute, about the hesitant way she’d approached me, her hands in the air. Like I was going to run if she moved too fast….

“Seriously?” I finally asked. “You… what? Thought you’d scared me off?” I snorted. Snorting was good; a voice couldn’t tremble or break during a snort. It sounded impressively offhand.

She put her hand under my chin and tilted my head back to read my face.

“Bella, I just”—she hesitated and then forced the words out—“I just beheaded and dismembered a sentient creature not twenty yards from you. That doesn’t bother you?”

She frowned at me.

I shrugged. Shrugging was good, too. Very blasé. “Not really. I was only afraid that you and Seth were going to get hurt. I wanted to help, but there’s only so much I can do….”

Her suddenly livid expression made my voice fade out.

“Yes,” she said, her tone clipped. “Your little stunt with the rock. You know that you nearly gave me a heart attack? Not the easiest thing to do, that.”

Her furious glower made it hard to answer.

“I wanted to help… Seth was hurt….”

“Seth was only feigning that he was hurt, Bella. It was a trick. And then you…!” She shook her head, unable to finish. “Seth couldn’t see what you were doing, so I had to step in. Seth’s a bit disgruntled that he can’t claim a single-handed defeat now.”

“Seth was… faking?”

Edythe nodded sternly.

“Oh.”

We both looked at Seth, who was studiously ignoring us, watching the flames. Smugness radiated from every hair in his fur.

“Well, I didn’t know that,” I said, on the offense now. “And it’s not easy being the only helpless person around. Just you wait till I’m a vampire! I’m not going to be sitting on the sidelines next time.”

A dozen emotions flitted across her face before she settled on being amused. “Next time? Did you
anticipate another war soon?"

“With my luck? Who knows?”

She rolled her eyes, but I could see that she was flying—the relief was making us both lightheaded. It was over.

Or… was it?

“Hold on. Didn’t you say something before—?” I flinched, remembering what *exactly* it had been before—what was I going to say to Julie? My splintered heart throbbed out a painful, aching beat. It was hard to believe, almost impossible, but the hardest part of this day was *not* behind me—and then I soldiered on. “About a complication? And Archie, needing to nail down the schedule for Sam. You said it was going to be close. What was going to be close?”

Edythe’s eyes flickered back to Seth, and they exchanged a loaded glance.

“Well?” I asked.

“It’s nothing, really,” Edythe said quickly. “But we do need to be on our way…."

She started to pull me into place on her back, but I stiffened and drew away.

“Define nothing.”

Edythe took my face between her palms. “We only have a minute, so don’t panic, all right? I told you that you had no reason to be afraid. Trust me on that, please?”

I nodded, trying to hide the sudden terror—how much more could I handle before I collapsed? “No reason to be afraid. Got it.”

She pursed her lips for a second, deciding what to say. And then she glanced abruptly at Seth, as if the wolf had called her.

“What’s she doing?” Edythe asked.

Seth whined; it was an anxious, uneasy sound. It made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

Everything was dead silent for one endless second.

And then Edythe gasped, “No!” and one of her hands flew out as if to grab something that I couldn’t see. “Don’t—!”

A spasm rocked through Seth’s body, and a howl, blistering with agony, ripped from his lungs.

Edythe fell to her knees at the exact same moment, gripping the sides of her head with two hands, her face furrowed in pain.

I screamed once in bewildered terror, and dropped to my knees beside her. Stupidly, I tried to pull her hands from her face; my palms, clammy with sweat, slid off her marble skin.

“Edythe! Edythe!”

Her eyes focused on me; with obvious effort, she pulled her clenched teeth apart.

“It’s okay. We’re going to be fine. It’s—” She broke off, and winced again.
“What’s happening?” I cried out while Seth howled in anguish.

“We’re fine. We’re going to be okay,” Edythe gasped. “Sam—help her—”

And I realized in that instant, when she said Sam’s name, that she was not speaking of herself and Seth. No unseen force was attacking them. This time, the crisis was not here.

She was using the pack plural.

I’d burned through all my adrenaline. My body had nothing left. I sagged, and Edythe caught me before I could hit the rocks. She sprang to her feet, me in her arms.

“Seth!” Edythe shouted.

Seth was crouched, still tensed in agony, looking as if she meant to launch herself into the forest.

“No!” Edythe ordered. “You go straight home. Now. As fast as you can!”

Seth whimpered, shaking his great head from side to side.

“Seth. Trust me.”

The huge wolf stared into Edythe’s agonized eyes for one long second, and then he straightened up and flew into the trees, disappearing like a ghost.

Edythe cradled me tightly against her chest, and then we were also hurtling through the shadowy forest, taking a different path than the wolf.

“Edythe.” I fought to force the words through my constricted throat. “What happened, Edythe? What happened to Sam? Where are we going? What’s happening?”

“We have to go back to the clearing,” she told me in a low voice. “We knew there was a good probability of this happening. Earlier this morning, Archie saw it and passed it through Sam to Seth. The Volturi decided it was time to intercede.”

The Volturi.

Too much. My mind refused to make sense of the words, pretended it couldn’t understand.

The trees jolted past us. She was running downhill so fast that it felt as if we were plummeting, falling out of control.

“Don’t panic. They aren’t coming for us. It’s just the normal contingent of the guard that usually cleans up this kind of mess. Nothing momentous, they’re merely doing their job. Of course, they seem to have timed their arrival very carefully. Which leads me to believe that no one in Italy would mourn if these newborns had reduced the size of the Cullen family.” The words came through her teeth, hard and bleak. “I’ll know for sure what they were thinking when they get to the clearing.”

“Is that why we’re going back?” I whispered. Could I handle this? Images of flowing black robes crept into my unwilling mind, and I flinched away from them. I was close to a breaking point.

“It’s part of the reason. Mostly, it will be safer for us to present a united front at this point. They have no reason to harass us, but… Jane’s with them. If she thought we were alone somewhere away from the others, it might tempt her. Like Victoria, Jane will probably guess that I’m with you. Demetri, of course, is with her. He could find me, if Jane asked him to.”
I didn’t want to think that name. I didn’t want to see that blindingly exquisite, childlike face in my head. A strange sound came out of my throat.

“Shh, Bella, shh. It’s all going to be fine. Archie can see that.”

Archie could see? But… then where were the wolves? Where was the pack?

“The pack?”

“They had to leave quickly. The Volturi do not honor truces with werewolves.”

I could hear my breathing get faster, but I couldn’t control it. I started to gasp.

“I swear they will be fine,” Edythe promised me. “The Volturi won’t recognize the scent—they won’t realize the wolves are here; this isn’t a species they are familiar with. The pack will be fine.”

I couldn’t process her explanation. My concentration was ripped to shreds by my fears. We’re going to be fine, she had said before… and Seth, howling in agony… Edythe had avoided my first question, distracted me with the Volturi….

I was very close to the edge—just clinging by my fingertips.

The trees were a racing blur that flowed around her like jade waters.

“What happened?” I whispered again. “Before. When Seth was howling? When you were hurt?”

Edythe hesitated.

“Edythe! Tell me!”

“It was all over,” she whispered. I could barely hear her over the wind her speed created. “The wolves didn’t count their half… they thought they had them all. Of course, Archie couldn’t see….”

“What happened?!”

“One of the newborns was hiding…. Leah found him—she was being stupid, cocky, trying to prove something. She engaged him alone….”

“Leah,” I repeated, and I was too weak to feel shame for the relief that flooded through me. “Is she going to be okay?”

“Leah wasn’t hurt,” Edythe mumbled.

I stared at her for a long second.

Sam—help her—Edythe had gasped. Her. There were only two options.

“We’re almost there,” Edythe said, and she stared at a fixed point in the sky.

Automatically, my eyes followed hers. There was a dark purple cloud hanging low over the trees. A cloud? But it was so abnormally sunny…. No, not a cloud—I recognized the thick column of smoke, just like the one at our campsite.

“Edythe,” I said, my voice nearly inaudible. “Edythe, someone got hurt.”

I’d heard Seth’s agony, seen the torture in Edythe’s face.
“Yes,” she whispered.

“Who?” I asked, though, of course, I already knew the answer.

Of course I did. Of course.

The trees were slowing around us as we came to our destination.

It took her a long moment to answer me.

“Julie,” she said.

I was able to nod once.

“Of course,” I whispered.

And then I slipped off the edge I was clinging to inside my head.

Everything went black.

I was first aware of the cool hands touching me. More than one pair of hands. Arms holding me, a palm curved to fit my cheek, fingers stroking my forehead, and more fingers pressed lightly into my wrist.

Then I was aware of the voices. They were just a humming at first, and then they grew in volume and clarity like someone was turning up a radio.

“Carlisle—it’s been five minutes.” Edythe’s voice, anxious.

“She’ll come around when she’s ready, Edythe.” Carlisle’s voice, always calm and sure. “She’s had too much to deal with today. Let her mind protect itself.”

But my mind was not protected. It was trapped in the knowledge that had not left me, even in unconsciousness—the pain that was part of the blackness.

I felt totally disconnected from my body. Like I was caged in some small corner of my head, no longer at the controls. But I couldn’t do anything about it. I couldn’t think. The agony was too strong for that. There was no escape from it.

Julie.

Julie.

No, no, no, no, no…

“Archie, how long do we have?” Edythe demanded, her voice still tense; Carlisle’s soothing words had not helped.

From farther away, Archie’s voice. It was brightly chipper. “Another five minutes. And Bella will open her eyes in thirty-seven seconds. I wouldn’t doubt that she can hear us now.”

“Bella, honey?” This was Earnest’s soft, comforting voice. “Can you hear me? You’re safe now,
dear.”

Yes, I was safe. Did that really matter?

Then cool lips were at my ear, and Edythe was speaking the words that allowed me to escape from the torture that had me caged inside my own head.

“She’s going to live, Bella. Julie Black is healing as I speak. She’ll be fine.”

As the pain and dread eased, I found my way back to my body. My eyelids fluttered.

“Oh, Bella,” Edythe sighed in relief, and her lips touched mine.

“Edythe,” I whispered.

“Yes, I’m here.”

I got my lids to open, and I stared into warm gold.

“Julie is okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” she promised.

I watched her eyes carefully for some sign that she was placating me, but they were perfectly clear.

“I examined her myself,” Carlisle said then; I turned my head to find his face, only a few feet away. Carlisle’s expression was serious and reassuring at the same time. It was impossible to doubt him. “Her life is not in any danger. She was healing at an incredible rate, though her injuries were extensive enough that it will still be a few days before she is back to normal, even if the rate of repair holds steady. As soon as we’re done here, I will do what I can to help her. Sam is trying to get her to phase back to her human form. That will make treating her easier.” Carlisle smiled slightly. “I’ve never been to veterinarian school.”

“What happened to her?” I whispered. “How bad are her injuries?”

Carlisle’s face was serious again. “Another wolf was in trouble—”

“Leah,” I breathed.

“Yes. She knocked Leah out of the way, but she didn’t have time to defend herself. The newborn got his arms around her. Most of the bones on the right half of her body were shattered.”

I flinched.

“Sam and Paul got there in time. She was already improving when they took her back to La Push.”

“She’ll be back to normal?” I asked.

“Yes, Bella. She won’t have any permanent damage.”

I took a deep breath.

“Three minutes,” Archie said quietly.

I struggled, trying to get vertical. Edythe realized what I was doing and helped me to my feet.

I stared at the scene in front of me.
The Cullens stood in a loose semicircle around the bonfire. There were hardly any flames visible, just the thick, purple-black smoke, hovering like a disease against the bright grass. Jasper stood closest to the solid-seeming haze, in its shadow so that his skin did not glitter brilliantly in the sun the way the others did. He had his back to me, his shoulders tense, his arms slightly extended. There was something there, in his shadow. Something he crouched over with wary intensity.

I was too numb to feel more than a mild shock when I realized what it was.

There were eight vampires in the clearing.

The girl was curled into a small ball beside the flames, her arms wrapped around her legs. She was very young. Younger than me—she looked maybe fifteen, dark-haired and slight. Her eyes were focused on me, and the irises were a shocking, brilliant red. Much brighter than Riley’s, almost glowing. They wheeled wildly, out of control. They wheeled wildly, out of control.

Edythe saw my bewildered expression.

“She surrendered,” she told me quietly. “That’s one I’ve never seen before. Only Carlisle would think of offering. Jasper doesn’t approve.”

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the scene beside the fire. Jasper was rubbing absently at his left forearm.

“Is Jasper all right?” I whispered.

“He’s fine. The venom stings.”

“He was bitten?” I asked, horrified.

“He was trying to be everywhere at once. Trying to make sure Archie had nothing to do, actually.” Edythe shook his head. “Archie doesn’t need anyone’s help.”

Archie grimaced toward his true love. “Overprotective fool.”

The young female suddenly threw her head back like an animal and wailed shrilly.

Jasper growled at her and she cringed back, but her fingers dug into the ground like claws and her head whipped back and forth in anguish. Jasper took a step toward her, slipping deeper into his crouch. Edythe moved with overdone casualness, turning our bodies so that she was between the girl and me. I peeked around her arm to watch the thrashing girl and Jasper.

Carlisle was at Jasper’s side in an instant. He put a restraining hand on his most recent son’s arm.

“Have you changed your mind, young one?” Carlisle asked, calm as ever. “We don’t want to destroy you, but we will if you can’t control yourself.”

“How can you stand it?” the girl groaned in a high, clear voice. “I want her.” Her bright crimson irises focused on Edythe, through her, beyond her to me, and her nails ripped through the hard soil again.

“You must stand it,” Carlisle told her gravely. “You must exercise control. It is possible, and it is the only thing that will save you now.”

The girl clutched her dirt-encrusted hands around her head, yowling quietly.

“Shouldn’t we move away from her?” I whispered, tugging on Edythe’s arm. The girl’s lips pulled
back over her teeth when she heard my voice, her expression one of torment.

“We have to stay here,” Edythe murmured. “They are coming to the north end of the clearing now.”

My heart burst into a sprint as I scanned the clearing, but I couldn’t see anything past the thick pall of smoke.

After a second of fruitless searching, my gaze crept back to the young female vampire. She was still watching me, her eyes half-mad.

I met the girl’s stare for a long moment. Chin-length dark hair framed her face, which was alabaster pale. It was hard to tell if her features were beautiful, twisted as they were by rage and thirst. The feral red eyes were dominant—hard to look away from. She glared at me viciously, shuddering and writhing every few seconds.

I stared at her, mesmerized, wondering if I were looking into a mirror of my future.

Then Carlisle and Jasper began to back toward the rest of us. Eleanor, Rosalie, and Earnest all converged hastily around where Edythe stood with Archie and me. A united front, as Edythe had said, with me at the heart, in the safest place.

I tore my attention away from the wild girl to search for the approaching monsters.

There was still nothing to see. I glanced at Edythe, and her eyes were locked straight ahead. I tried to follow her gaze, but there was only the smoke—dense, oily smoke twisting low to the ground, rising lazily, undulating against the grass.

It billowed forward, darker in the middle.

“Hmm,” a dead voice murmured from the mist. I recognized the apathy at once.

“Welcome, Jane.” Edythe’s tone was coolly courteous.

The dark shapes came closer, separating themselves from the haze, solidifying. I knew it would be Jane in the front—the darkest cloak, almost black, and the smallest figure by more than two feet. I could just barely make out Jane’s angelic features in the shade of the cowl.

The four gray-shrouded figures hulking behind her were also somewhat familiar. I was sure I recognized the biggest one, and while I stared, trying to confirm my suspicion, Felix looked up. He let his hood fall back slightly so that I could see him wink at me and smile. Edythe was very still at my side, tightly in control.

Jane’s gaze moved slowly across the luminous faces of the Cullens and then touched on the newborn girl beside the fire; the newborn had her head in her hands again.

“I don’t understand.” Jane’s voice was toneless, but not quite as uninterested as before.

“She has surrendered,” Edythe explained, answering the confusion in her mind.

Jane’s dark eyes flashed to Edythe’s face. “Surrendered?”

Felix and another shadow exchanged a quick glance.

Edythe shrugged. “Carlisle gave her the option.”
“There are no options for those who break the rules,” Jane said flatly.

Carlisle spoke then, his voice mild. “That’s in your hands. As long as she was willing to halt her attack on us, I saw no need to destroy her. She was never taught.”

“That is irrelevant,” Jane insisted.

“As you wish.”

Jane stared at Carlisle in consternation. She shook her head infinitesimally, and then composed her features.

“Aro hoped that we would get far enough west to see you, Carlisle. He sends his regards.”

Carlisle nodded. “I would appreciate it if you would convey mine to him.”

“Of course.” Jane smiled. Her face was almost too lovely when it was animated. She looked back toward the smoke. “It appears that you’ve done our work for us today… for the most part.” Her eyes flickered to the hostage. “Just out of professional curiosity, how many were there? They left quite a wake of destruction in Seattle.”

“Eighteen, including this one,” Carlisle answered.

Jane’s eyes widened, and she looked at the fire again, seeming to reassess the size of it. Felix and the other shadow exchanged a longer glance.

“Eighteen?” she repeated, her voice sounding unsure for the first time.

“All brand-new,” Carlisle said dismissively. “They were unskilled.”

“All?” Her voice turned sharp. “Then who was their creator?”

“Her name was Victoria,” Edythe answered, no emotion in her voice.

“Was?” Jane asked.

Edythe inclined her head toward the eastern forest. Jane’s eyes snapped up and focused on something far in the distance. The other pillar of smoke? I didn’t look away to check.

Jane stared to the east for a long moment, and then examined the closer bonfire again.

“This Victoria—she was in addition to the eighteen here?”

“Yes. She had only one other with her. He was not as young as this one here, but no older than a year.”

“Twenty,” Jane breathed. “Who dealt with the creator?”

“I did,” Edythe told her.

Jane’s eyes narrowed, and she turned to the girl beside the fire.

“You there,” she said, her dead voice harsher than before. “Your name.”

The newborn shot a baleful glare at Jane, her lips pressed tightly together.

Jane smiled back angelically.
The newborn girl’s answering scream was ear-piercing; her body arched stiffly into a distorted, unnatural position. I looked away, fighting the urge to cover my ears. I gritted my teeth, hoping to control my stomach. The screaming intensified. I tried to concentrate on Edythe’s face, smooth and unemotional, but that made me remember when it had been Edythe under Jane’s torturing gaze, and I felt sicker. I looked at Archie instead, and Earnest next to her. Their faces were as empty as hers.

Finally, it was quiet.

“Your name,” Jane said again, her voice inflectionless.

“Bree,” the girl gasped.

Jane smiled, and the girl shrieked again. I held my breath until the sound of her agony stopped.

“She’ll tell you anything you want to know,” Edythe said through her teeth. “You don’t have to do that.”

Jane looked up, sudden humor in her usually dead eyes. “Oh, I know,” she said to Edythe, grinning at her before she turned back to the young vampire, Bree.

“Bree,” Jane said, her voice cold again. “Is his story true? Were there twenty of you?”

The girl lay panting, the side of her face pressed against the earth. She spoke quickly. “Nineteen or twenty, maybe more, I don’t know!” She cringed, terrified that her ignorance might bring on another round of torture. “Sara and the one whose name I don’t know got in a fight on the way.…"

“And this Victoria—did she create you?”

“I don’t know,” she said, flinching again. “Riley never said her name. I didn’t see that night… it was so dark, and it hurt.…” Bree shuddered. “He didn’t want us to be able to think of her. He said that our thoughts weren’t safe.…"

Jane’s eyes flickered to Edythe, and then back to the girl.

Victoria had planned this well. If she hadn’t followed Edythe, there would have been no way to know for certain that she was involved.…

“Tell me about Riley,” Jane said. “Why did he bring you here?”

“Riley told us that we had to destroy the strange yellow-eyes here,” Bree babbled quickly and willingly. “He said it would be easy. He said that the city was theirs, and they were coming to get us. He said once they were gone, all the blood would be ours. He gave us her scent.” Bree lifted one hand and stabbed a finger in my direction. “He said we would know that we had the right coven, because she would be with them. He said whoever got to her first could have her.”

I heard Edythe’s jaw flex beside me.

“It looks like Riley was wrong about the easy part,” Jane noted.

Bree nodded, seeming relieved that the conversation had taken this non-painful course. She sat up carefully. “I don’t know what happened. We split up, but the others never came. And Riley left us, and he didn’t come to help like he promised. And then it was so confusing, and everybody was in pieces.” She shuddered again. “I was afraid. I wanted to run away. That one”—she looked at Carlisle—“said they wouldn’t hurt me if I stopped fighting.”
“Ah, but that wasn’t his gift to offer, young one,” Jane murmured, her voice oddly gentle now. “Broken rules demand a consequence.”

Bree stared at her, not comprehending.

Jane looked at Carlisle. “Are you sure you got all of them? The other half that split off?”

Carlisle’s face was very smooth as he nodded. “We split up, too.”

Jane half-smiled. “I can’t deny that I’m impressed.” The big shadows behind her murmured in agreement. “I’ve never seen a coven escape this magnitude of offensive intact. Do you know what was behind it? It seems like extreme behavior, considering the way you live here. And why was the girl the key?” Her eyes rested unwilling on me for one short second.

I shivered.

“Victoria held a grudge against Bella,” Edythe told her, his voice impassive.

Jane laughed—the sound was golden, the bubbling laugh of a happy child. “This one seems to bring out bizarrely strong reactions in our kind,” she observed, smiling directly at me, her face beatific.

Edythe stiffened. I looked at her in time to see her face turning away, back to Jane.

“Would you please not do that?” she asked in a tight voice.

Jane laughed again lightly. “Just checking. No harm done, apparently.”

I shivered, deeply grateful that the strange glitch in my system—which had protected me from Jane the last time we’d met—was still in effect. Edythe’s arm tightened around me.

“Well, it appears that there’s not much left for us to do. Odd,” Jane said, apathy creeping back into her voice. “We’re not used to being rendered unnecessary. It’s too bad we missed the fight. It sounds like it would have been entertaining to watch.”

“Yes,” Edythe answered her quickly, her voice sharp. “And you were so close. It’s a shame you didn’t arrive just a half hour earlier. Perhaps then you could have fulfilled your purpose here.”

Jane met Edythe’s glare with unwavering eyes. “Yes. Quite a pity how things turned out, isn’t it?” Edythe nodded once to herself, his suspicions confirmed.

Jane turned to look at the newborn Bree again, her face completely bored. “Felix?” she drawled.

“Wait,” Edythe interjected.

Jane raised one eyebrow, but Edythe was staring at Carlisle while she spoke in an urgent voice. “We could explain the rules to the young one. She doesn’t seem unwilling to learn. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

“Of course,” Carlisle answered. “We would certainly be prepared to take responsibility for Bree.” Jane’s expression was torn between amusement and disbelief.

“We don’t make exceptions,” she said. “And we don’t give second chances. It’s bad for our reputation.
Which reminds me…” Suddenly, her eyes were on me again, and her cherubic face dimpled. “Caius will be so interested to hear that you’re still human, Bella. Perhaps he’ll decide to visit.”

“The date is set,” Archie told Jane, speaking for the first time. “Perhaps we’ll come to visit you in a few months.”

Jane’s smile faded, and she shrugged indifferently, never looking at Archie. She turned to face Carlisle. “It was nice to meet you, Carlisle—I’d thought Aro was exaggerating. Well, until we meet again…”

Carlisle nodded, his expression pained.

“Take care of that, Felix,” Jane said, nodding toward Bree, her voice dripping boredom. “I want to go home.”

“Don’t watch,” Edythe whispered in my ear.

I was only too eager to follow her instruction. I’d seen more than enough for one day—more than enough for one lifetime. I squeezed my eyes tightly together and turned my face into Edythe’s chest.

But I could still hear.

There was a deep, rumbling growl, and then a high-pitched keen that was horribly familiar. That sound cut off quickly, and then the only sound was a sickening crunching and snapping.

Edythe’s hand rubbed anxiously against my shoulders.

“Come,” Jane said, and I looked up in time to see the backs of the tall gray cloaks drifting away toward the curling smoke. The incense smell was strong again—fresh.

The gray cloaks disappeared into the thick mist.
THE COUNTER IN ARCHIE’S BATHROOM WAS COVERED WITH a thousand different products, all claiming to beautify a person’s surface. Since everyone in this house was both perfect and impermeable, I could only assume that he’d bought most of these things with me in mind. I read the labels numbly, struck by the waste.

I was careful never to look in the long mirror.

Archie combed through my hair with a slow, rhythmic motion.

“That’s enough, Archie,” I said tonelessly. “I want to go back to La Push.”

How many hours had I waited for Charlie to finally leave Billy’s house so that I could see Julie? Each minute, not knowing if Julie was still breathing or not, had seemed like ten lifetimes. And then, when at last I’d been allowed to go, to see for myself that Julie was alive, the time had gone so quickly. I felt like I’d barely caught my breath before Archie was calling Edythe, insisting that I keep up this ridiculous sleepover façade. It seemed so insignificant….

“Julie’s still unconscious,” Archie answered. “Carlisle or Edythe will call when she’s awake. Anyway, you need to go see Charlie. He was there at Billy’s house, he saw that Carlisle and Edythe are back in from their trip, and he’s bound to be suspicious when you get home.”

I already had my story memorized and corroborated. “I don’t care. I want to be there when Julie wakes up.”

“You need to think of Charlie now. You’ve had a long day—sorry, I know that doesn’t begin to cover it—but that doesn’t mean that you can shirk your responsibilities.” His voice was serious, almost chiding. “It’s more important now than ever that Charlie stays safely in the dark. Play your role first, Bella, and then you can do what you want second. Part of being a Cullen is being meticulously responsible.”

Of course he was right. And if not for this same reason—a reason that was more powerful than all my fear and pain and guilt—Carlisle would never have been able to talk me into leaving Julie’s side, unconscious or not.


I stood, and the blood flowed down to my feet, stinging like the pricks of a thousand needles. I’d been sitting still for a long time.

“That dress is adorable on you,” Archie cooed.


“You need the evidence,” Archie said, his eyes innocent and wide. “What’s a shopping trip without a new outfit? It’s very flattering, if I do say so myself.”

I blinked, unable to remember what he’d dressed me in. I couldn’t keep my thoughts from skittering away every few seconds, insects running from the light….

“Julie is fine, Bella,” Archie said, easily interpreting my preoccupation. “There’s no hurry. If you realized how much extra morphine Carlisle had to give her—what with her temperature burning it
off so quickly—you would know that she’s going to be out for a while.”

At least she wasn’t in any pain. Not yet.

“Is there anything you want to talk about before you leave?” Archie asked sympathetically. “You must be more than a little traumatized.”

I knew what he was curious about. But I had other questions.

“Will I be like that?” I asked him, my voice subdued. “Like that girl Bree in the meadow?”

There were many things I needed to think of, but I couldn’t seem to get her out of my head, the newborn whose other life was now—abruptly—over. Her face, twisted with desire for my blood, lingered behind my eyelids.

Archie stroked my arm. “Everyone is different. But something like that, yes.”

I was very still, trying to imagine.

“It passes,” he promised.

“How soon?”

He shrugged. “A few years, maybe less. It might be different for you. I’ve never seen anyone go through this who’s chosen it beforehand. It should be interesting to see how that affects you.”

“Interesting,” I repeated.

“We’ll keep you out of trouble.”

“I know that. I trust you.” My voice was monotone, dead.

Archie’s forehead puckered. “If you’re worried about Carlisle and Edythe, I’m sure they’ll be fine. I believe Sam is beginning to trust us… well, to trust Carlisle, at least. It’s a good thing, too. I imagine the atmosphere got a little tense when Carlisle had to rebreak the fractures—”

“Please, Archie.”

“Sorry.”

I took a deep breath to steady myself. Julie had begun healing too quickly, and some of her bones had set wrong. She’d been out cold for the process, but it was still hard to think about.

“Archie, can I ask you a question? About the future?”

He was suddenly wary. “You know I don’t see everything.”

“It’s not that, exactly. But you do see my future, sometimes. Why is that, do you think, when nothing else works on me? Not what Jane can do, or Edythe or Aro…” My sentence trailed off with my interest level. My curiosity on this point was fleeting, heavily overshadowed by more pressing emotions.

Archie, however, found the question very interesting. “Jasper, too, Bella—his talent works on your body just as well as it does on anyone else’s. That’s the difference, do you see it? Jasper’s abilities affect the body physically. He really does calm your system down, or excite it. It’s not an illusion. And I see visions of outcomes, not the reasons and thoughts behind the decisions that create them.
It’s outside the mind, not an illusion, either; reality, or at least one version of it. But Jane and Edythe and Aro and Demetri—they work inside the mind. Jane only creates an illusion of pain. She doesn’t really hurt your body, you only think you feel it. You see, Bella? You are safe inside your mind. No one can reach you there. It’s no wonder that Aro was so curious about your future abilities.”

He watched my face to see if I was following his logic. In truth, his words had all started to run together, the syllables and sounds losing their meaning. I couldn’t concentrate on them. Still, I nodded. Trying to look like I got it.

He wasn’t fooled. He stroked my cheek and murmured, “She’s going to be okay, Bella. I don’t need a vision to know that. Are you ready to go?”

“One more thing. Can I ask you another question about the future? I don’t want specifics, just an overview.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said, doubtful again.

“Can you still see me becoming a vampire?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Sure, I do.”

I nodded slowly.

He examined my face, his eyes unfathomable. “Don’t you know your own mind, Bella?”

“I do. I just wanted to be sure.”

“I’m only as sure as you are, Bella. You know that. If you were to change your mind, what I see would change… or disappear, in your case.”

I sighed. “That isn’t going to happen, though.”

He put his arms around me. “I’m sorry. I can’t really empathize. My first memory is of seeing Jasper’s face in my future; I always knew that he was where my life was headed. But I can empathize. I’m so sorry you have to choose between two good things.”

I shook off his arms. “Don’t feel sorry for me.” There were people who deserved sympathy. I wasn’t one of them. And there wasn’t any choice to make—there was just breaking a good heart to attend to now. “I’ll go deal with Charlie.”

I drove my truck home, where Charlie was waiting just as suspiciously as Archie had expected.

“Hey, Bella. How was your shopping trip?” he greeted me when I walked into the kitchen. He had his arms folded over his chest, his eyes on my face.

“Long,” I said dully. “We just got back.”

Charlie assessed my mood. “I guess you already heard about Jules, then?”

“Yes. The rest of the Cullens beat us home. Earnest told us where Carlisle and Edythe were.”

“Are you okay?”

“Worried about Jules. As soon as I make dinner, I’m going down to La Push.”
“I told you those motorcycles were dangerous. I hope this makes you realize that I wasn’t kidding around.”

I nodded as I started pulling things out of the fridge. Charlie settled himself in at the table. He seemed to be in a more talkative mood than usual.

“I don’t think you need to worry about Jules too much. Anyone who can cuss with that kind of energy is going to recover.”

“Jules was awake when you saw her?” I asked, spinning to look at him.

“Oh, yeah, she was awake. You should have heard her—actually, it’s better you didn’t. I don’t think there was anyone in La Push who couldn’t hear her. I don’t know where she picked up that vocabulary, but I hope she hasn’t been using that kind of language around you.”

“She had a pretty good excuse today. How did she look?”

“Messed up. Her friends carried him in. Good thing they’re big boys, ’cause that kid’s an armful. Carlisle said her right leg is broken, and her right arm. Pretty much the whole right side of her body got crushed when she wrecked that damn bike.” Charlie shook his head. “If I ever hear of you riding again, Bella—”

“No problem there, Dad. You won’t. Do you really think Julie’s okay?”

“Sure, Bella, don’t worry. She was herself enough to tease me.”

“Tease you?” I echoed in shock.

“Yeah—in between insulting somebody’s mother and taking the Lord’s name in vain, she said, ‘Bet you’re glad she loves Cullen instead of me today, huh, Charlie?’”

I turned back to the fridge so that he couldn’t see my face.

“And I couldn’t argue. Edythe’s more mature than Julie when it comes to your safety, I’ll give her that much.”

“Julie’s plenty mature,” I muttered defensively. “I’m sure this wasn’t her fault.”

“Weird day today,” Charlie mused after a minute. “You know, I don’t put much stock in that superstitious crap, but it was odd…. It was like Billy knew something bad was going to happen to Jules. He was nervous as a turkey on Thanksgiving all morning. I don’t think he heard anything I said to him.

“And then, weirder than that—remember back in February and March when we had all that trouble with the wolves?”

I bent down to get a frying pan out of the cupboard, and hid there an extra second or two.

“Yeah,” I mumbled.

“I hope we’re not going to have a problem with that again. This morning, we were out in the boat, and Billy wasn’t paying any attention to me or the fish, when all of a sudden, you could hear wolves yowling in the woods. More than one, and, boy, was it loud. Sounded like they were right there in the village. Weirdest part was, Billy turned the boat around and headed straight back to the harbor like they were calling to him personally. Didn’t even hear me ask what he was doing.
“The noise stopped before we got the boat docked. But all of a sudden Billy was in the biggest hurry not to miss the game, though we had hours still. He was mumbling some nonsense about an earlier showing… of a live game? I tell you, Bella, it was odd.

“Well, he found some game he said he wanted to watch, but then he just ignored it. He was on the phone the whole time, calling Sue, and Elliott, and your friend Quil’s grandpa. Couldn’t quite make out what he was looking for—he just chatted real casual with them.

“Then the howling started again right outside the house. I’ve never heard anything like it—I had goose bumps on my arms. I asked Billy—had to shout over the noise—if he’d been setting traps in his yard. It sounded like the animal was in serious pain.”

I winced, but Charlie was so caught up in his story that he didn’t notice.

“Course I forgot all about that till just this minute, ’cause that’s when Jules made it home. One minute it was that wolf yowling, and then you couldn’t hear it anymore—Julie’s cussing drowned it right out. Got a set of lungs on her, that girl does.”

Charlie paused for a minute, his face thoughtful. “Funny that some good should come out of this mess. I didn’t think they were ever going to get over that fool prejudice they have against the Cullens down there. But somebody called Carlisle, and Billy was real grateful when he showed up. I thought we should get Jules up to the hospital, but Billy wanted to keep her home, and Carlisle agreed. I guess Carlisle knows what’s best. Generous of him to sign up for such a long stretch of house calls.”

“And…” he paused, as if unwilling to say something. He sighed, and then continued. “And Edythe was really… nice. She seemed as worried about Julie as you are—like that was her sister lying there. The look in her eyes…” Charlie shook his head. “She’s a decent girl, Bella. I’ll try to remember that. No promises, though.” He grinned at me.

“I won’t hold you to it,” I mumbled.

Charlie stretched his legs and groaned. “It’s nice to be home. You wouldn’t believe how crowded Billy’s little place gets. Seven of Julie’s friends all squished themselves into that little front room—I could hardly breathe. Have you ever noticed how big those Quileute kids all are?”

“Yeah, I have.”

Charlie stared at me, his eyes abruptly more focused. “Really, Bella, Carlisle said Jules will be up and around in no time. Said it looked a lot worse than it was. She’s going to be fine.”

I just nodded.

Julie had looked so… strangely fragile when I’d hurried down to see her as soon as Charlie had left. She’d had braces everywhere—Carlisle said there was no point in plaster, as fast as she was healing. Her face had been pale and drawn, deeply unconscious though she was at the time. Breakable. Huge as she was, she’d looked very breakable. Maybe that had just been my imagination, coupled with the knowledge that I was going to have to break her.

If only I could be struck by lightning and be split in two. Preferably painfully. For the first time, giving up being human felt like a true sacrifice. Like it might be too much to lose.

I put Charlie’s dinner on the table next to his elbow and headed for the door.

“Er, Bella? Could you wait just a second?”
“Did I forget something?” I asked, eyeing his plate.

“No, no. I just… want to ask a favor.” Charlie frowned and looked at the floor. “Have a seat—this won’t take long.”

I sat across from him, a little confused. I tried to focus. “What do you need, Dad?”

“Here’s the gist of it, Bella.” Charlie flushed. “Maybe I’m just feeling… superstitious after hanging out with Billy while he was being so strange all day. But I have this… hunch. I feel like… I’m going to lose you soon.”

“Don’t be silly, Dad,” I mumbled guiltily. “You want me to go to school, don’t you?”

“Just promise me one thing.”

I was hesitant, ready to rescind. “Okay…”

“Will you tell me before you do anything major? Before you run off with her or something?”

“Dad…,” I moaned.

“I’m serious. I won’t kick up a fuss. Just give me some advance notice. Give me a chance to hug you goodbye.”

Cringing mentally, I held up my hand. “This is silly. But, if it makes you happy,… I promise.”

“Thanks, Bella,” he said. “I love you, kid.”

“I love you, too, Dad.” I touched his shoulder, and then shoved away from the table. “If you need anything, I’ll be at Billy’s.”

I didn’t look back as I ran out. This was just perfect, just what I needed right now. I grumbled to myself all the way to La Push.

Carlisle’s black Mercedes was not in front of Billy’s house. That was both good and bad. Obviously, I needed to talk to Julie alone. Yet I still wished I could somehow hold Edythe’s hand, like I had before, when Julie was unconscious. Impossible. But I missed Edythe—it had seemed like a very long afternoon alone with Archie. I supposed that made my answer quite obvious. I already knew that I couldn’t live without Edythe. That fact wasn’t going to make this any less painful.

I tapped quietly on the front door.

“Come in, Bella,” Billy said. The roar of my truck was easy to recognize.

I let myself in.

“Hey, Billy. Is she awake?” I asked.

“She woke up about a half hour ago, just before the doctor left. Go on in. I think she’s been waiting for you.”

I flinched, and then took a deep breath. “Thanks.”

I hesitated at the door to Julie’s room, not sure whether to knock. I decided to peek first, hoping—coward that I was—that maybe she’d gone back to sleep. I felt like I could use just a few more
I opened the door a crack and leaned hesitantly in.

Julie was waiting for me, her face calm and smooth. The haggard, gaunt look was gone, but only a careful blankness took its place. There was no animation in her dark eyes.

It was hard to look at her face, knowing that I loved her. It made more of a difference than I would have thought. I wondered if it had always been this hard for her, all this time.

Thankfully, someone had covered her with a quilt. It was a relief not to have to see the extent of the damage.

I stepped in and shut the door quietly behind me.

“Hi, Jules,” I murmured.

She didn’t answer at first. She looked at my face for a long moment. Then, with some effort, she rearranged her expression into a slightly mocking smile.

“Yeah, I sort of thought it might be like that.” She sighed. “Today has definitely taken a turn for the worse. First I pick the wrong place, miss the best fight, and Seth gets all the glory. Then Leah has to be an idiot trying to prove she’s as tough as the rest of us and I have to be the idiot who saves her. And now this.” She waved her left hand toward me where I hesitated by the door.

“How are you feeling?” I mumbled. What a stupid question.

“A little stoned. Dr. Fang isn’t sure how much pain medication I need, so he’s going with trial and error. Think he overdid it.”

“But you’re not in pain.”

“No. At least, I can’t feel my injuries,” she said, smiling mockingly again.

I bit my lip. I was never going to get through this. Why didn’t anyone ever try to kill me when I wanted to die?

The wry humor left her face, and her eyes warmed up. Her forehead creased, like she was worried.

“How about you?” she asked, sounding really concerned. “Are you okay?”

“Me?” I stared at her. Maybe she had taken too many drugs. “Why?”

“Well, I mean, I was pretty sure that she wouldn’t actually hurt you, but I wasn’t sure how bad it was going to be. I’ve been going a little crazy with worrying about you ever since I woke up. I didn’t know if you were going to be allowed to visit or anything. The suspense was terrible. How did it go? Was she mean to you? I’m sorry if it was bad. I didn’t mean for you to have to go through that alone. I was thinking I’d be there….”

It took me a minute to even understand. She babbled on, looking more and more awkward, until I got what she was saying. Then I hurried to reassure her.

“No, no, Jules! I’m fine. Too fine, really. Of course she wasn’t mean. I wish!”

Her eyes widened in what looked like horror. “What?”
“She wasn’t even mad at me—she wasn’t even mad at you! She’s so unselfish it makes me feel even worse. I wish she would have yelled at me or something. It’s not like I don’t deserve… well, much worse than getting yelled at. But she doesn’t care. She just wants me to be happy.”

“She wasn’t mad?” Julie asked, incredulous.

“No. She was… much too kind.”

Julie stared for another minute, and then she suddenly frowned. “Well, damn!” she growled.

“What’s wrong, Jules? Does it hurt?” My hands fluttered uselessly as I looked around for her medication.

“No,” she grumbled in a disgusted tone. “I can’t believe this! She didn’t give you an ultimatum or anything?”

“Not even close—what’s wrong with you?”

She scowled and shook her head. “I was sort of counting on her reaction. Damn it all. She’s better than I thought.”

The way she said it, though angrier, reminded me of Edythe’s tribute to Julie’s lack of ethics in the tent this morning. Which meant that Jules was still hoping, still fighting. I winced as that stabbed deep.

“She’s not playing any game, Jules,” I said quietly.

“You bet she is. She’s playing every bit as hard as I am, only she knows what she’s doing and I don’t. Don’t blame me because she’s a better manipulator than I am—I haven’t been around long enough to learn all her tricks.”

“She isn’t manipulating me!”

“Yes, she is! When are you going to wake up and realize that she’s not a perfect as you think she is?”

“At least she didn’t threaten to kill herself to make me kiss her,” I snapped. As soon as the words were out, I flushed with chagrin. “Wait. Pretend that didn’t slip out. I swore to myself that I wasn’t going to say anything about that.”

She took a deep breath. When she spoke, she was calmer. “Why not?”

“Because I didn’t come here to blame you for anything.”

“It’s true, though,” she said evenly. “I did do that.”

“I don’t care, Jules. I’m not mad.”

She smiled. “I don’t care, either. I knew you’d forgive me, and I’m glad I did it. I’d do it again. At least I have that much. At least I made you see that you do love me. That’s worth something.”

“Is it? Is it really better than if I was still in the dark?”

“Don’t you think you ought to know how you feel—just so that it doesn’t take you by surprise someday when it’s too late and you’re a married vampire?”
I shook my head. “No—I didn’t mean better for me. I meant better for you. Does it make things better or worse for you, having me know that I’m in love with you? When it doesn’t make a difference either way. Would it have been better, easier for you, if I never clued in?”

She took my question as seriously as I’d meant it, thinking carefully before she answered. “Yes, it’s better to have you know,” she finally decided. “If you hadn’t figured it out… I’d have always wondered if your decision would have been different if you had. Now I know. I did everything I could.” She dragged in an unsteady breath, and closed her eyes.

This time I did not—could not—resist the urge to comfort her. I crossed the small room and kneeled by her head, afraid to sit on the bed in case I jostled it and hurt her, and leaned in to touch my forehead to her cheek.

Julie sighed, and put her hand on my hair, holding me there.

“I’m so sorry, Jules.”

“I always knew this was a long shot. It’s not your fault, Bella.”

“Not you, too,” I moaned. “Please.”

She pulled away to look at me. “What?”

“It is my fault. And I’m so sick of being told it’s not.”

She grinned. It didn’t touch her eyes. “You want me to haul you over the coals?”

“Actually… I think I do.”

She pursed her lips as she measured how much I meant it. A smile flashed across her face briefly, and then she twisted her expression into a fierce scowl.

“Kissing me back like that was inexcusable.” She spit the words at me. “If you knew you were just going to take it back, maybe you shouldn’t have been quite so convincing about it.”

I winced and nodded. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t make anything better, Bella. What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t,” I whispered.

“You should have told me to go die. That’s what you want.”

“No, Julie,” I whimpered, fighting against the budding tears. “No! Never.”

“You’re not crying?” she demanded, her voice suddenly back to its normal tone. She twitched impatiently on the bed.

“Yeah,” I muttered, laughing weakly at myself through the tears that were suddenly sobs.

She shifted her weight, throwing her good leg off the bed as if she were going to try to stand.

“What are you doing?” I demanded through the tears. “Lie down, you idiot, you’ll hurt yourself!” I jumped to my feet and pushed her good shoulder down with two hands.

She surrendered, leaning back with a gasp of pain, but she grabbed me around my waist and pulled
me down on the bed, against her good side. I curled up there, trying to stifle the silly sobs against her hot skin.

“I can’t believe you’re crying,” she mumbled. “You know I just said those things because you wanted me to. I didn’t mean them.” Her hand rubbed against my shoulders.

“I know.” I took a deep, ragged breath, trying to control myself. How did I end up being the one crying while she did the comforting? “It’s all still true, though. Thanks for saying it out loud.”

“Do I get points for making you cry?”

“Sure, Jules.” I tried to smile. “As many as you want.”

“Don’t worry, Bella, honey. It’s all going to work out.”

“I don’t see how,” I muttered.

She patted the top of my head. “I’m going to give in and be good.”

“More games?” I wondered, tilting my chin so that I could see her face.

“Maybe.” She laughed with a bit of effort, and then winced. “But I’m going to try.”

I frowned.

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” she complained. “Give me a little credit.”

“What do you mean by ‘be good’?”

“I’ll be your friend, Bella,” she said quietly. “I won’t ask for more than that.”

“I think it’s too late for that, Jules. How can we be friends, when we love each other like this?”

She looked at the ceiling, her stare intent, as if she were reading something that was written there. “Maybe… it will have to be a long-distance friendship.”

I clenched my teeth together, glad she wasn’t looking at my face, fighting against the sobs that threatened to overtake me again. I needed to be strong, and I had no idea how.…

“You know that story in the Bible?” Julie asked suddenly, still reading the blank ceiling. “The one with the king and the two women fighting over the baby?”

“Sure. King Solomon.”

“That’s right. King Solomon,” she repeated. “And he said, cut the kid in half… but it was only a test. Just to see who would give up their share to protect it.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

She looked back at my face. “I’m not going to cut you in half anymore, Bella.”

I understood what she was saying. She was telling me that she loved me the most, that her surrender proved it. I wanted to defend Edythe, to tell Julie how Edythe would do the same thing if I wanted, if I would let her. I was the one who wouldn’t renounce my claim there. But there was no point in starting an argument that would only hurt her more.
I closed my eyes, willing myself to control the pain. I couldn’t impose that on her.

We were quiet for a moment. She seemed to be waiting for me to say something; I was trying to think of something to say.

“Can I tell you what the worst part is?” she asked hesitantly when I said nothing. “Do you mind? I am going to be good.”

“Will it help?” I whispered.

“It might. It couldn’t hurt.”

“What’s the worst part, then?”

“The worst part is knowing what would have been.”

“What might have been.” I sighed.

“No.” Julie shook her head. “I’m exactly right for you, Bella. It would have been effortless for us—comfortable, easy as breathing. I was the natural path your life would have taken…” She stared into space for a moment, and I waited. “If the world was the way it was supposed to be, if there were no monsters and no magic…”

I could see what she saw, and I knew that she was right. If the world was the sane place it was supposed to be, Julie and I would have been together. And we would have been happy. She was my soul mate in that world—would have been my soul mate still if her claim had not been overshadowed by something stronger, something so strong that it could not exist in a rational world.

Was it out there for Julie, too? Something that would trump a soul mate? I had to believe that it was.

Two futures, two soul mates… too much for any one person. And so unfair that I wouldn’t be the only one to pay for it. Julie’s pain seemed too high a price. Cringing at the thought of that price, I wondered if I would have wavered, if I hadn’t lost Edythe once. If I didn’t know what it was like to live without her. I wasn’t sure. That knowledge was so deep a part of me, I couldn’t imagine how I would feel without it.

“She’s like a drug for you, Bella.” Her voice was still gentle, not at all critical. “I see that you can’t live without her now. It’s too late. But I would have been healthier for you. Not a drug; I would have been the air, the sun.”

The corner of my mouth turned up in a wistful half-smile. “I used to think of you that way, you know. Like the sun. My personal sun. You balanced out the clouds nicely for me.”

She sighed. “The clouds I can handle. But I can’t fight with an eclipse.”

I touched her face, laying my hand against her cheek. She exhaled at my touch and closed her eyes. It was very quiet. For a minute I could hear the beating of her heart, slow and even.

“Tell me the worst part for you,” she whispered.

“I think that might be a bad idea.”

“Please.”
“I think it will hurt.”

“How could I deny her anything at this point?”

“The worst part…” I hesitated, and then let words spill out in a flood of truth. “The worst part is that I saw the whole thing—our whole life. And I want it bad, Jules, I want it all. I want to stay right here and never move. I want to love you and make you happy. And I can’t, and it’s killing me. It’s like Sam and Elliott, Jules—I never had a choice. I always knew nothing would change. Maybe that’s why I was fighting against you so hard.”

She seemed to be concentrating on breathing evenly.

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you that.”

She shook her head slowly. “No. I’m glad you did. Thank you.” She kissed the top of my head, and then she sighed. “I’ll be good now.”

I looked up, and she was smiling.

“So you’re going to get married, huh?”

“We don’t have to talk about that.”

“I’d like to know some of the details. I don’t know when I’ll talk to you again.”

I had to wait for a minute before I could speak. When I was pretty sure that my voice wouldn’t break, I answered her question.

“It’s not really my idea… but, yes. It means a lot to her. I figure, why not?”

Jules nodded. “That’s true. It’s not such a big thing—in comparison.”

Her voice was very calm, very practical. I stared at her, curious about how she was managing, and that ruined it. She met my eyes for a second, and then twisted her head away. I waited to speak until her breathing was under control.

“Yes. In comparison,” I agreed.

“How long do you have left?”

“That depends on how long it takes Archie to pull a wedding together.” I suppressed a groan, imagining what Archie would do.

“Before or after?” she asked quietly.

I knew what she meant. “After.”

She nodded. This was a relief to her. I wondered how many sleepless nights the thought of my graduation had given him.

“Are you scared?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I whispered back.
“What are you afraid of?” I could barely hear her voice now. She stared down at my hands.

“Lots of things.” I worked to make my voice lighter, but I stayed honest. “I’ve never been much of a masochist, so I’m not looking forward to the pain. And I wish there was some way to keep her away—I don’t want her to suffer with me, but I don’t think there’s any way around it. There’s dealing with Charlie, too, and Renée…. And then afterward, I hope I’ll be able to control myself soon. Maybe I’ll be such a menace that the pack will have to take me out.”

She looked up with a disapproving expression. “I’d hamstring any one of my brothers who tried.”

“Thanks.”

She smiled halfheartedly. Then she frowned. “But isn’t it more dangerous than that? In all of the stories, they say it’s too hard… they lose control… people die.…” She gulped.

“No, I’m not afraid of that. Silly Julie—don’t you know better than to believe vampire stories?”

She obviously didn’t appreciate my attempt at humor.

“Well, anyway, lots to worry about. But worth it, in the end.”

She nodded unwillingly, and I knew that she in no way agreed with me.

I stretched my neck up to whisper in her ear, laying my cheek against her warm skin. “You know I love you.”

“I know,” she breathed, her arm tightening automatically around my waist. “You know how much I wish it was enough.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll always be waiting in the wings, Bella,” she promised, lightening her tone and loosening her arm. I pulled away with a dull, dragging sense of loss, feeling the tearing separation as I left a part of me behind, there on the bed next to her. “You’ll always have that spare option if you want it.”

I made an effort to smile. “Until my heart stops beating.”

She grinned back. “You know, I think maybe I’d still take you—maybe. I guess that depends on how much you stink.”

“Should I come back to see you? Or would you rather I didn’t?”

“I’ll think it through and get back to you,” she said. “I might need the company to keep from going crazy. The vampire surgeon extraordinaire says I can’t phase until he gives the okay—it might mess up the way the bones are set.” Julie made a face.

“Be good and do what Carlisle tells you to do. You’ll get well faster.”

“Sure, sure.”

“I wonder when it will happen,” I said. “When the right girl is going to catch your eye.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Bella.” Julie’s voice was abruptly sour. “Though I’m sure it would be a relief for you.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I probably won’t think she’s good enough for you. I wonder how jealous I’ll
be.”

“That part might be kind of fun,” she admitted.

“Let me know if you want me to come back, and I’ll be here,” I promised.

With a sigh, she turned her cheek toward me.

I leaned in and kissed her face softly. “Love you, Julie.”

She laughed lightly. “Love you more.”

She watched me walk out of her room with an unfathomable expression in her black eyes.
I DIDN'T GET VERY FAR BEFORE DRIVING BECAME IMPOSSIBLE.

When I couldn’t see anymore, I let my tires find the rough shoulder and rolled slowly to a stop. I slumped over on the seat and allowed the weakness I’d fought in Julie’s room crush me. It was worse than I’d thought—the force of it took me by surprise. Yes, I had been right to hide this from Julie. No one should ever see this.

But I wasn’t alone for very long—just exactly long enough for Archie to see me here, and then the few minutes it took her to arrive. The door creaked open, and she pulled me into her arms.

At first it was worse. Because there was that smaller part of me—smaller, but getting louder and angrier every minute, screaming at the rest of me—that craved a different set of arms. So then there was fresh guilt to season the pain.

She didn’t say anything, she just let me sob until I began to blubber out Charlie’s name.

“Are you really ready to go home?” she asked doubtfully.

I managed to convey, after several attempts, that it wasn’t going to get any better anytime soon. I needed to get past Charlie before it got late enough for him to call Billy.

So she drove me home—for once not even getting close to my truck’s internal speed limit—keeping one arm wrapped tightly around me. The whole way, I fought for control. It seemed to be a doomed effort at first, but I didn’t give up. Just a few seconds, I told myself. Just time for a few excuses, or a few lies, and then I could break down again. I had to be able to do that much. I scrambled around in my head, searching desperately for a reserve of strength.

There was just enough for me to quiet the sobs—hold them back but not end them. The tears didn’t slow. I couldn’t seem to find any handle to even begin to work with those.

“Wait for me upstairs,” I mumbled when we were in front of the house.

She hugged me closer for one minute, and then she was gone.

Once inside, I headed straight for the stairs.

“Bella?” Charlie called after me from his usual place on the sofa as I walked by.

I turned to look at him without speaking. His eyes bugged wide, and he lurched to his feet.


I must look worse than I’d imagined.

“Nothing, Dad. I… just had to talk to Julie about… some things that were hard. I’m fine.”
The anxiety calmed, and was replaced by disapproval.

“Was this really the best time?” he asked.

“Probably not, Dad, but I didn’t have any alternatives—it just got to the point where I had to choose.... Sometimes, there isn’t any way to compromise.”

He shook his head slowly. “How did she handle it?”

I didn’t answer.

He looked at my face for a minute, and then nodded. That must have been answer enough.

“I hope you didn’t mess up her recovery.”

“She’s a quick healer,” I mumbled.

Charlie sighed.

I could feel the control slipping.

“I’ll be in my room,” I told him, shrugging out from underneath his hands.

“‘Kay,” Charlie agreed. He could probably see the waterworks starting to escalate. Nothing scared Charlie worse than tears.

I made my way to my room, blind and stumbling.

Once inside, I fought with the clasp on my bracelet, trying to undo it with shaking fingers.

“No, Bella,” Edythe whispered, capturing my hands. “It’s part of who you are.”

She pulled me into the cradle of her arms as the sobs broke free again.

This longest of days seemed to stretch on and on and on. I wondered if it would ever end.

But, though the night dragged relentlessly, it was not the worst night of my life. I took comfort from that. And I was not alone. There was a great deal of comfort in that, too.

Charlie’s fear of emotional outbursts kept him from checking on me, though I was not quiet—he probably got no more sleep than I did.

My hindsight seemed unbearably clear tonight. I could see every mistake I’d made, every bit of harm I’d done, the small things and the big things. Each pain I’d caused Julie, each wound I’d given Edythe, stacked up into neat piles that I could not ignore or deny.

And I realized that I’d been wrong all along about the magnets. It had not been Edythe and Julie that I’d been trying to force together, it was the two parts of myself, Edythe’s Bella and Julie’s Bella. But they could not exist together, and I never should have tried.

I’d done so much damage.

At some point in the night, I remembered the promise I’d made to myself early this morning—that I would never make Edythe see me shed another tear for Julie Black. The thought brought on a round of hysteria which frightened Edythe more than the weeping. But it passed, too, when it had run its course.
Edythe said little; she just held me on the bed and let me ruin her shirt, staining it with salt water.

It took longer than I thought it would for that smaller, broken part of me to cry herself out. It happened, though, and I was eventually exhausted enough to sleep. Unconsciousness did not bring full relief from the pain, just a numbing, dulling ease, like medicine. Made it more bearable. But it was still there; I was aware of it, even asleep, and that helped me to make the adjustments I needed to make.

The morning brought with it, if not a brighter outlook, at least a measure of control, some acceptance. Instinctively, I knew that the new tear in my heart would always ache. That was just going to be a part of me now. Time would make it easier—that’s what everyone always said. But I didn’t care if time healed me or not, so long as Julie could get better. Could be happy again.

When I woke up, there was no disorientation. I opened my eyes—finally dry—and met her anxious gaze.

“Hey,” I said. My voice was hoarse. I cleared my throat.

She didn’t answer. She watched me, waiting for it to start.

“No, I’m fine,” I promised. “That won’t happen again.”

Her eyes tightened at my words.

“I’m sorry that you had to see that,” I said. “That wasn’t fair to you.”

She put her hands on either side of my face.

“Bella… are you sure? Did you make the right choice? I’ve never seen you in so much pain—”

Her voice broke on the last word.

But I had known worse pain.

I touched her lips. “Yes.”

“I don’t know….” Her brow creased. “If it hurts you so much, how can it possibly be the right thing for you?”

“Edythe, I know who I can’t live without.”

“But…”

I shook my head. “You don’t understand. You may be brave enough or strong enough to live without me, if that’s what’s best. But I could never be that self-sacrificing. I have to be with you. It’s the only way I can live.”

She still looked dubious. I should never have let her stay with me last night. But I had needed her so much….

“Hand me that book, will you?” I asked, pointing over her shoulder.

Her eyebrows pulled together in confusion, but she gave it to me quickly.

“This again?” she asked.

“I just wanted to find this one part I remembered… to see how she said it…” I flipped through the
book, finding the page I wanted easily. The corner was dog-eared from the many times I’d stopped here. “Cathy’s a monster, but there were a few things she got right,” I muttered. I read the lines quietly, mostly to myself. “If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.” I nodded, again to myself. “I know exactly what she means. And I know who I can’t live without.”

Edythe took the book from my hands and flipped it across the room—it landed with a light thud on my desk. She wrapped her arms around my waist.

A small smile lit her perfect face, though worry still lined her forehead. “Heathcliff had his moments, too,” she said. She didn’t need the book to get it word perfect. She pulled me closer and whispered in my ear, “I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!”

“Yes,” I said quietly. “That’s my point.”

“Bella, I can’t stand for you to be miserable. Maybe…”

“No, Edythe. I’ve made a real mess of things, and I’m going to have to live with that. But I know what I want and what I need… and what I’m going to do now.”

“What are we going to do now?”

I smiled just a bit at her correction, and then I sighed. “We are going to go see Archie.”

Archie was on the bottom porch step, too hyper to wait for us inside. He looked about to break into a celebration dance, so excited was he about the news he knew I was there to deliver.

“Thank you, Bella!” he sang as we got out of the truck.

“Hold it, Archie,” I warned him, lifting a hand up to halt his glee. “I’ve got a few limitations for you.”

“I know, I know, I know. I only have until August thirteenth at the latest, you have veto power on the guest list, and if I go overboard on anything, you’ll never speak to me again.”

“Oh, okay. Well, yeah. You know the rules, then.”

“Don’t worry, Bella, it will be perfect. Do you want to see your dress?”

I had to take a few deep breaths. Whatever makes him happy, I said to myself.

“Sure.”

Archie’s smile was smug.

“Um, Archie,” I said, keeping the casual, unruffled tone in my voice. “When did you get me a dress?”

It probably wasn’t much of a show. Edythe squeezed my hand.

Archie led the way inside, heading for the stairs. “These things take time, Bella,” Archie explained. His tone seemed… evasive. “I mean, I wasn’t sure things were going to turn out this way, but there
was a distinct possibility.…”

“When?” I asked again.

“Perrine Bruyere has a waiting list, you know,” he said, defensive now. “Fabric masterpieces don’t happen overnight. If I hadn’t thought ahead, you’d be wearing something off the rack!”

It didn’t look like I was going to get a straight answer. “Per—who?”

“He’s not a major designer, Bella, so there’s no need to throw a hissy fit. He’s got promise, though, and he specializes in what I needed.”

“I’m not throwing a fit.”

“No, you’re not.” He eyed my calm face suspiciously. Then, as we walked into his room, he turned on Edythe.

“You—out.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“Bella,” he groaned. “You know the rules. She’s not supposed to see the dress till the day of.”

I took another deep breath. “It doesn’t matter to me. And you know she’s already seen it in your head. But if that’s how you want it.…”

He shoved Edythe back out the door. She didn’t even look at him—her eyes were on me, wary, afraid to leave me alone.

I nodded, hoping my expression was tranquil enough to reassure her.

Archie shut the door in her face.

“All right!” he muttered. “C’mon.”

He grabbed my wrist and towed me to his closet—which was bigger than my bedroom—and then dragged me to the back corner, where a long white garment bag had a rack all to itself.

He unzipped the bag in one sweeping movement, and then slipped it carefully off the hanger. He took a step back, holding his hand out to the dress like he was a game show hostess.

“Well?” he asked breathlessly.

I appraised it for a long moment, playing with him a bit. His expression turned worried.

“Ah,” I said, and I smiled, letting his relax. “I see.”

“What do you think?” he demanded.

It was my Anne of Green Gables vision all over again.

“It’s perfect, of course. Exactly right. You’re a genius.”

He grinned. “I know.”

“Nineteen-eighteen?” I guessed.
“More or less,” he said, nodding. “Some of it is my design, the train, the veil….” He touched the white satin as he spoke. “The lace is vintage. Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful. It’s just right for her.”

“But is it just right for you?” he insisted.

“Yes, I think it is, Archie. I think it’s just what I need. I know you’ll do a great job with this… if you can keep yourself in check.”

He beamed.

“Can I see your outfit?” I asked.

He blinked, his face blank.

“Didn’t you order your tuxedo at the same time? I wouldn’t want my maid of honor to wear something off the rack.” I pretended to wince in horror.

He threw his arms around my waist. “Thank you, Bella!”

“How could you not see that one coming?” I teased, kissing his spiky hair. “Some psychic you are!”

Archie danced back, and his face was bright with fresh enthusiasm. “I’ve got so much to do! Go play with Edythe. I have to get to work.”

He dashed out of the room, yelling, “Earnest!” as he disappeared.

I followed at my own pace. Edythe was waiting for me in the hallway, leaning against the wood-paneled wall.

“That was very, very nice of you,” she told me.

“He seems happy,” I agreed.

She touched my face; her eyes—too dark, it had been so long since she’d left me—searched my expression minutely.

“Let’s get out of here,” she suddenly suggested. “Let’s go to our meadow.”

It sounded very appealing. “I guess I don’t have to hide out anymore, do I?”

“No. The danger is behind us.”

She was quiet, thoughtful, as she ran. The wind blew on my face, warmer now that the storm had really passed. The clouds covered the sky, the way they usually did.

The meadow was a peaceful, happy place today. Patches of summer daisies interrupted the grass with splashes of white and yellow. I lay back, ignoring the slight dampness of the ground, and looked for pictures in the clouds. They were too even, too smooth. No pictures, just a soft, gray blanket.

Edythe lay next to me and held my hand.

“August thirteenth?” she asked casually after a few minutes of comfortable silence.
“That gives me a month till my birthday. I didn’t want to cut it too close.”

She sighed. “Earnest is three years older than Carlisle—technically. Did you know that?”

I shook my head.

“It hasn’t made any difference to them.”

My voice was serene, a counterpoint to his anxiety. “My age is not really that important. Edythe, I’m ready. I’ve chosen my life—now I want to start living it.”

She stroked my hair. “The guest list veto?”

“I don’t care really, but I…” I hesitated, not wanting to explain this one. Best to get it over with. “I’m not sure if Archie would feel the need to invite… a few werewolves. I don’t know if… Jules would feel like… like she should come. Like that’s the right thing to do, or that I’d get my feelings hurt if she didn’t. She shouldn’t have to go through that.”

Edythe was quiet for a minute. I stared at the tips of the treetops, almost black against the light gray of the sky.

Suddenly, Edythe grabbed me around the waist and pulled me onto her chest.

“Tell me why you’re doing this, Bella. Why did you decide, now, to give Archie free reign?”

I repeated for her the conversation I had with Charlie last night before I’d gone to see Julie. “It wouldn’t be fair to keep Charlie out of this,” I concluded. “And that means Renée and Phil. I might as well let Archie have his fun, too. Maybe it will make the whole thing easier for Charlie if he gets his proper goodbye. Even if he thinks it’s much too early, I wouldn’t want to cheat him out of the chance to walk me down the aisle.” I grimaced at the words, then took another deep breath. “At least my mom and dad and my friends will know the best part of my choice, the most I’m allowed to tell them. They’ll know I chose you, and they’ll know we’re together. They’ll know I’m happy, wherever I am. I think that’s the best I can do for them.”

Edythe held my face, searching it for a brief time.

“Deal’s off,” she said abruptly.

“What?” I gasped. “You’re backing out? No!”

“I’m not backing out, Bella. I’ll still keep my side of the bargain. But you’re off the hook. Whatever you want, no strings attached.”

“Why?”

“Bella, I see what you’re doing. You’re trying to make everyone else happy. And I don’t care about anyone else’s feelings. I only need you to be happy. Don’t worry about breaking the news to Archie. I’ll take care of it. I promise he won’t make you feel guilty.”

“But I—”

“No. We’re doing this your way. Because my way doesn’t work. I call you stubborn, but look at what I’ve done. I’ve clung with such idiotic obstinacy to my idea of what’s best for you, though it’s only hurt you. Hurt you so deeply, time and time again. I don’t trust myself anymore. You can have happiness your way. My way is always wrong. So.” She shifted under me, squaring her shoulders.
“We’re doing it your way, Bella. Tonight. Today. The sooner the better. I’ll speak to Carlisle. I was thinking that maybe if we gave you enough morphine, it wouldn’t be so bad. It’s worth a try.” She gritted her teeth.

“Edythe, no—”

She put her finger to my lips. “Don’t worry, Bella, love. I haven’t forgotten the rest of your demands.”

Her hands were in my hair, her lips moving softly—but very seriously—against mine, before I realized what she was saying. What she was doing.

There wasn’t much time to act. If I waited too long, I wouldn’t be able to remember why I needed to stop her. Already, I couldn’t breathe right. My hands were gripping her arms, pulling myself tighter to her, my mouth glued to hers and answering every unspoken question hers asked.

I tried to clear my head, to find a way to speak.

She rolled gently, pressing me into the cool grass.

Oh, never mind! my less noble side exulted. My head was full of the sweetness of her breath.

No, no, no, I argued with myself. I shook my head, and her mouth moved to my neck, giving me a chance to breathe.

“Stop, Edythe. Wait.” My voice was as weak as my will.

“Why?” she whispered into the hollow of my throat.

I labored to put some resolve into my tone. “I don’t want to do this now.”

“Don’t you?” she asked, a smile in her voice. She moved her lips back to mine and made speaking impossible. Heat coursed through my veins, burning where my skin touched hers.

I made myself focus. It took a great deal of effort just to force my hands to free themselves from her hair, to move them to her shoulders. But I did it. And then I shoved against her, trying to push her away. I could not succeed alone, but she responded as I knew she would.

She pulled back a few inches to look at me, and her eyes did nothing to help my resolve. They were black fire. They smoldered.

“Why?” she asked again, her voice low and rough. “I love you. I want you. Right now.”

The butterflies in my stomach flooded my throat. She took advantage of my speechlessness.

“Wait, wait,” I tried to say around her lips.

“Not for me,” she murmured in disagreement.

“Please?” I gasped.

She groaned, and pushed herself away from me, rolling onto her back again.

We both lay there for a minute, trying to slow our breathing.

“Tell me why not, Bella,” she demanded. “This had better not be about me.”
Everything in my world was about her. What a silly thing to expect.

“Edythe, this is very important to me. I am going to do this right.”

“Who’s definition of right?”

“Mine.”

She rolled onto her elbow and stared at me, her expression disapproving.

“How are you going to do this right?”

I took a deep breath. “Responsibly. Everything in the right order. I will not leave Charlie and Renée without the best resolution I can give them. I won’t deny Archie his fun, if I’m having a wedding anyway. And I will tie myself to you in every human way, before I ask you to make me immortal. I’m following all the rules, Edythe. Your soul is far, far too important to me to take chances with. You’re not going to budge me on this.”

“I’ll bet I could,” she murmured, her eyes burning again.

“But you wouldn’t,” I said, trying to keep my voice level. “Not knowing that this is what I really need.”

“You don’t fight fair,” she accused.

I grinned at him. “Never said I did.”

She smiled back, wistful. “If you change your mind…”

“You’ll be the first to know,” I promised.

The rain started to drip through the clouds just then, a few scattered drops that made faint thuds as they struck the grass.

I glowered at the sky.

“I’ll get you home.” She brushed the tiny beads of water from my cheeks.

“Rain’s not the problem,” I grumbled. “It just means that it’s time to go do something that will be very unpleasant and possibly even highly dangerous.”

Her eyes widened in alarm.

“It’s a good thing you’re bulletproof.” I sighed. “I’m going to need that ring. It’s time to tell Charlie.”

She laughed at the expression on my face. “Highly dangerous,” she agreed. She laughed again and then reached into the pocket of his jeans. “But at least there’s no need for a side trip.”

She once again slid my ring into place on the third finger of my left hand.

Where it would stay—conceivably for the rest of eternity.
“Julie, do you think this is going to take too much longer?” Leah demanded. Impatient. Whiny.

My teeth clenched together.

Like anyone in the pack, Leah knew everything. She knew why I came here—to the very edge of the earth and sky and sea. To be alone. She knew that this was all I wanted. Just to be alone.

But Leah was going to force her company on me, anyway.

Besides being crazy annoyed, I did feel smug for a brief second. Because I didn’t even have to think about controlling my temper. It was easy now, something I just did, natural. The red haze didn’t wash over my eyes. The heat didn’t shiver down my spine. My voice was calm when I answered.

“Jump off a cliff, Leah.” I pointed to the one at my feet.

“Really, kid.” She ignored me, throwing herself into a sprawl on the ground next to me. “You have no idea how hard this is for me.”

“For you?” It took me a minute to believe she was serious. “You have to be the most self-absorbed person alive, Leah. I’d hate to shatter the dream world you live in—the one where the sun is orbiting the place where you stand—so I won’t tell you how little I care what your problem is. Go. Away.”

“Just look at this from my perspective for a minute, okay?” she continued as if I hadn’t said anything. If she was trying to break my mood, it worked. I started laughing. The sound hurt in strange ways.

“Stop snorting and pay attention,” she snapped.

“If I pretend to listen, will you leave?” I asked, glancing over at the permanent scowl on her face. I wasn’t sure if she had any other expressions anymore.

I remembered back to when I used to think that Leah was pretty, maybe even beautiful. That was a long time ago. No one thought of her that way now. Except for Sam. He was never going to forgive himself. Like it was his fault that she’d turned into this bitter harpy.

Her scowl heated up, as if she could guess what I was thinking. Probably could.

“This is making me sick, Julie. Can you imagine what this feels like to me? I don’t even like Bella Swan. And you’ve got me grieving over this leech-lover like I’m in love with her, too. Can you see where that might be a little confusing? I dreamed about kissing her last night! What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

“Do I care?”

“I can’t stand being in your head anymore! Get over her already! She’s going to marry that thing. The leech is going to try to change her into one of them! Time to move on, girl.”
“Shut up,” I growled.

It would be wrong to strike back. I knew that. I was biting my tongue. But she’d be sorry if she didn’t walk away. Now.

“She’ll probably just kill her anyway,” Leah said. Sneering. “All the stories say that happens more often than not. Maybe a funeral will be better closure than a wedding. Ha.”

This time I had to work. I closed my eyes and fought the hot taste in my mouth. I pushed and shoved against the slide of fire down my back, wrestling to keep my shape together while my body tried to shake apart.

When I was in control again, I glowered at her. She was watching my hands as the tremors slowed. Smiling.

Some joke.

“If you’re upset about confused feelings, Leah…,” I said. Slow, emphasizing each word. “How do you think the rest of us like looking at Sam through your eyes? It’s bad enough that Elliott has to deal with your fixation. He doesn’t need the rest of us panting after Sam, too.”

Pissed as I was, I still felt guilty when I watched the spasm of pain shoot across her face.

She scrambled to her feet—pausing only to spit in my direction—and ran for the trees, vibrating like a tuning fork.

I laughed darkly. “You missed.”

Sam was going to give me hell for that, but it was worth it. Leah wouldn’t bug me anymore. And I’d do it again if I had the chance.

Because her words were still there, scratching themselves into my brain, the pain of it so strong that I could hardly breathe.

It didn’t matter so much that Bella’d chosen someone else over me. That agony was nothing at all. That agony I could live with for the rest of my stupid, too long, stretched-out life.

But it did matter that she was giving up everything—that she was letting her heart stop and her skin ice over and her mind twist into some crystallized predator’s head. A monster. A stranger.

I would have thought there was nothing worse than that, nothing more painful in the whole world.

But, if she killed her…

Again, I had to fight the rage. Maybe, if not for Leah, it would be good to let the heat change me into a creature who could deal with it better. A creature with instincts so much stronger than human emotions. An animal who couldn’t feel pain in the same way. A different pain. Some variety, at least. But Leah was running now, and I didn’t want to share her thoughts. I cussed her under my breath for taking away that escape, too.

My hands were shaking in spite of me. What shook them? Anger? Agony? I wasn’t sure what I was fighting now.

I had to believe that Bella would survive. But that required trust—a trust I didn’t want to feel, a trust in that bloodsucker’s ability to keep her alive.
She would be different, and I wondered how that would affect me. Would it be the same as if she had died, to see her standing there like a stone? Like ice? When her scent burned in my nostrils and triggered the instinct to rip, to tear… How would that be? Could I want to kill her? Could I not want to kill one of them?

I watched the swells roll toward the beach. They disappeared from sight under the edge of the cliff, but I heard them beat against the sand. I watched them until it was late, long after dark.

Going home was probably a bad idea. But I was hungry, and I couldn’t think of another plan.

I made a face as I pulled my arm through the sling and grabbed my crutches. If only Charlie hadn’t seen me that day and spread the word of my “motorcycle accident.” Stupid props. I hated them.

Going hungry started to look better when I walked in the house and got a look at my dad’s face. He had something on his mind. It was easy to tell—he always overdid it. Acted all casual.

He also talked too much. He was rambling about his day before I could get to the table. He never jabbered like this unless there was something that he didn’t want to say. I ignored him as best I could, concentrating on the food. The faster I choked it down…

“…and Sue stopped by today.” My dad’s voice was loud. Hard to ignore. As always. “Amazing woman. She’s tougher than grizzlies, that one. I don’t know how she deals with that daughter of hers, though. Now Sue, she would have made one hell of a wolf. Leah’s more of a wolverine.” He chuckled at his own joke.

He waited briefly for my response, but didn’t seem to see my blank, bored-out-of-my-mind expression. Most days that bugged him. I wished he would shut up about Leah. I was trying not to think about her.

“Seth’s a lot easier. Of course, you were easier than your sisters, too, until… well, you have more to deal with than they did.”

I sighed, long and deep, and stared out the window.

Billy was quiet for a second too long. “We got a letter today.”

I could tell that this was the subject he’d been avoiding.

“A letter?”

“A… wedding invitation.”

Every muscle in my body locked into place. A feather of heat seemed to brush down my back. I held onto the table to keep my hands steady.

Billy went on like he hadn’t noticed. “There’s a note inside that’s addressed to you. I didn’t read it.”

He pulled a thick ivory envelope from where it was wedged between his leg and the side of his wheelchair. He laid it on the table between us.

“You probably don’t need to read it. Doesn’t really matter what it says.”

Stupid reverse psychology. I yanked the envelope off the table.

It was some heavy, stiff paper. Expensive. Too fancy for Forks. The card inside was the same, too
done-up and formal. Bella’d had nothing to do with this. There was no sign of her personal taste in
the layers of see-through, petal-printed pages. I’d bet she didn’t like it at all. I didn’t read the
words, not even to see the date. I didn’t care.

There was a piece of the thick ivory paper folded in half with my name handwritten in black ink on
the back. I didn’t recognize the handwriting, but it was as fancy as the rest of it. For half a second, I
wondered if the bloodsucker was into gloating.

I flipped it open.

Julie,

I’m breaking the rules by sending you this. She was afraid of hurting you, and she didn’t want to
make you feel obligated in any way. But I know that, if things had gone the other way, I would
have wanted the choice.

I promise I will take care of her, Julie. Thank you—for her—for everything.

Edythe

“Jules, we only have the one table,” Billy said. He was staring at my left hand.

My fingers were clamped down on the wood hard enough that it really was in danger. I loosened
them one by one, concentrating on that action alone, and then clenched my hands together so I
couldn’t break anything.

“Yeah, doesn’t matter anyway,” Billy muttered.

I got up from the table, shrugging out of my t-shirt as I stood. Hopefully Leah had gone home by
now.

“Not too late,” Billy mumbled as I punched the front door out of my way.

I was running before I hit the trees, my clothes strewn out behind me like a trail of crumbs—as if I
wanted to find my way back. It was almost too easy now to phase. I didn’t have to think. My body
already knew where I was going and, before I asked it to, it gave me what I wanted.

I had four legs now, and I was flying.

The trees blurred into a sea of black flowing around me. My muscles bunched and released in an
effortless rhythm. I could run like this for days and I would not be tired. Maybe, this time, I
wouldn’t stop.

But I wasn’t alone.

So sorry, Embry whispered in my head.

I could see through his eyes. He was far away, to the north, but he had wheeled around and was
racing to join me. I growled and pushed myself faster.

*Wait for us,* Quil complained. He was closer, just starting out from the village.

*Leave me alone,* I snarled.

I could feel their worry in my head, try hard as I might to drown it in the sound of the wind and the forest. This was what I hated most—seeing myself through their eyes, worse now that their eyes were full of pity. They saw the hate, but they kept running after me.

A new voice sounded in my head.

*Let her go.* Sam’s thought was soft, but still an order. Embry and Quil slowed to a walk.

If only I could stop hearing, stop seeing what they saw. My head was so crowded, but the only way to be alone again was to be human, and I couldn’t stand the pain.

*Phase back,* Sam directed them. *I’ll pick you up, Embry.*

First one, then another awareness faded into silence. Only Sam was left.

*Thank you,* I managed to think.

*Come home when you can.* The words were faint, trailing off into blank emptiness as he left, too. And I was alone.

So much better. Now I could hear the faint rustle of the matted leaves beneath my toenails, the whisper of an owl’s wings above me, the ocean—far, far in the west—moaning against the beach. Hear this, and nothing more. Feel nothing but speed, nothing but the pull of muscle, sinew, and bone, working together in harmony as the miles disappeared behind me.

If the silence in my head lasted, I would never go back. I wouldn’t be the first one to choose this form over the other. Maybe, if I ran far enough away, I would never have to hear again….

I pushed my legs faster, letting Julie Black disappear behind me.

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