A Dove's Cry

by karenc

Summary

Bella's innocence was taken from her at a young age; the secret has dominated her life ever since. When she meets a reluctant vampire, Bella decides to ask his help in seeking revenge. Warning: This story contains sensitive and graphic material. BxE, AU

Collaboration with transitory07

Nominated for a Twilight Eclipse Award for Best Suspense-Thriller.
Nominated for a Sunflower Award for Best Edward.
Winner 2012 Torch Award for Best Reviewer, Renee Aubin.
A Dove's Cry banner: http://bit.ly/LtQWdt

A Dove's Cry outtake, Hidden, was contributed to the Fandom For No Kid Hungry cause.
Fandom 4NKH website: http://fandomcause.info/how-to-donate/

Notes

transitory07 and I have been talking about collaborating on a story for a while now and finally decided to take the plunge. The story inspiration for A Dove's Cry is transitory07's and we've each assumed a point-of-view, taking turns writing and looking over each chapter. transitory07 will write Bella's chapters, I will write Edward's chapters.
Warning: This story contains sensitive and graphic material, including descriptions of violence and sexual assault.

Thank you for reading.

Authors: transitory07 and karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.
Suddenly I know I'm not sleeping.  
Hello, I'm still here.  
All That's left of yesterday.  
"Hello" - Evanescence

Isabella Swan

I slammed my locker shut and adjusted the hem of my favorite cornflower blue blouse. It hung loosely over the same faded jeans I'd been wearing for two years now. During lunch, Jessica had made a sneering comment about how "anorexic" I looked. Normally I'd know better than to take anything Jessica Stanley said to heart but after peeking at my reflection in the girls' restroom, I started to wonder if I really did look unhealthy. I'd always been thin but not wiry or athletic, just soft. Weak.

Tears began to sting in the backs of my eyes the way they did when I was angry and I quickly shoved my books in my backpack. Someone called my name at that exact moment and I didn't want to be seen with tears streaming down my face. That would be humiliating.

"Bella?"

I turned to see Angela walking towards me from her history class. She hesitated a few feet away. "Are you okay?" she inquired, her eyebrows set in a worried crease. "You look a bit down."

I should have been grateful that she wasn't Jessica but Angela, for all her sweetness and honesty, was a lot more perceptive. And sometimes I got tired of lying. The fact that she was kind and quite possibly the only person I'd allowed myself to get close to since coming here made me feel even worse about having to do it.

"Yeah, I'm just tired. I had two exams today and a project due yesterday."

Angela nodded slowly, probably assessing the circles under my eyes from sleepless nights. Of course, those were due to the nightmares I had, not homework overload.
"It's been a busy week for me too," she said gently. "Do you want to go get something to eat at the diner?"

I shrugged my backpack over one shoulder and tried to sound less pathetic. "Umm... I'd love to but I need to stop by the store." I really did need to stock up on groceries at the Thriftway so at least that wasn't a lie.

"Okay. Another time then?" Angela smiled when I nodded and headed for the double doors at the end of the hallway.

I sighed, watching her leave, mentally kicking myself but also knowing it was necessary. Once you let someone in, you can't get out without hurting them or being hurt yourself. It wouldn't make a difference to me but Angela didn't deserve that.

After stocking up on ingredients for next week's dinner menu, I drove back to Charlie's house. It wasn't raining but my truck was engulfed in a thin layer of fog. As I pulled into Charlie's driveway, the cell phone Mom gave me for my birthday started ringing. Because she was usually the only one who called that phone, I assumed it was her. But Jacob's husky voice greeted me instead.

"Hey, Bells. What's up?"

I sat back in the seat, shivering as I twisted the key out of the ignition, thus cutting off the soothing heat inside. "Hi, Jake. Umm... not much. How are you?"

"Fine. A little bored. Do you want to hang out this weekend?"

I chewed on my bottom lip. Going to La Push didn't sound so bad... it might even be comforting, seeing Jacob and Billy again; it had been awhile. But I felt anxious at the thought of his Jacob's other friends being there... especially Leah Clearwater. On the few occasions that I'd seen her, I'd gotten the feeling that she saw me as a nuisance. It made me nervous.

"Umm..." I deliberated, staring out the windshield at the front of the house.

Jacob cut in before I could decide how to respond. "We could just hang out in the garage or take a walk on the beach. You could even stay for dinner if you want, though my dad isn't as great a cook as you and Emily are." Hearing Jacob's throaty chuckle at the end made me smile. There were rare moments when I could do that.

"Okay, Jake. How's Saturday?" I finally agreed, opening the door and hopping out of the truck.

"Sounds great! I'll see at around 10:00?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Awesome! See you later, then."

I snapped the phone shut and went around to get the grocery bags from the passenger side.

During dinner Charlie seemed impressed by my plans to hang out with Jake and it made me feel kind of embarrassed.

"Let me clean up," Charlie volunteered when we were done and I stood to gather the dirty dishes.
"You look tired, honey."

"Okay," I replied, not really knowing what he meant; I always looked this way. "Good night, Dad."

"Good night, Baby."

I tried to smile as I paused at the entrance to the living room. He stood with a dishrag in one hand and a plate in the other, looking at me as though he wanted to say more but didn't know if it was the best idea. I really hated that look. It made me incredibly sad and disappointed in myself whenever I saw it in his face... and my mom's. It was that look that said, "I wish you trusted me enough to tell me what's wrong." I quickly turned towards the stairs.

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I'm underwater. There are bubbles and then my head pushes up to the surface of the pool. There are hands wrapped around my waist, keeping me from sinking back down. But I want to. I want to go back under the pristine electric blue water because the hands are too big and hot and dry. They slide over my stomach to the little V of my bathing suit.

It was 4:02 A.M. when I jerked awake, my breathing shallow and heart drumming fast. The glow from the alarm clock on my bedside table revealed that it was still too dark out and that I should have been sleeping because even Chief Swan was still snoring in the other room. But was very difficult to go back to sleep after this. I rolled over on my back and stared up at the ceiling. There was this kind of vibration in my legs, almost like losing my balance, except I was completely still. I tried to take slow breaths in and out to see if my body would calm down.

Jimmy was our neighbor when we lived in Yuba County, California. Renee dated him for a few months but decided they couldn't be more than friends. She let him pick me up from school and dropped me off at his house on the weekends even after they'd broken up. At the time, Renee was taking college courses to get her teaching degree, as well as working for a cleaning company.

Jimmy touched me from the time I was eight years old until I turned eleven. I never told Renee. Renee was hired as a kindergarten teacher when I was eleven and we moved to West Sacramento. She met Phil three years later and got remarried last summer. Because Phil's job as a minor league baseball player required that he travel often, I decided to let her go with him without worrying about me. Charlie had always been alone after the divorce and I figured it was time I helped him out, seeing as Phil was a great guy and capable of taking care of Mom.

It turned out I'd been right about Charlie needing someone around because he couldn't cook anything besides fried eggs. I didn't think Renee was completely supportive. I'd only spent a limited amount of time with my dad as a kid; a few summers in his hometown of Forks, Washington until I was twelve. Then Charlie flew to California and spent the winter holidays with us instead. But it seemed to be going okay, despite the inevitable awkwardness of sharing one bathroom with my dad and being the police chief's daughter in a tiny, overcast town where the simplest thing was big news. It was only moments when I'd woken up from another nightmare that I'd wonder; who was I fooling?

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Edward Cullen

Alice's screams are what I remember. The sensation of her hands grabbing at me desperately as she was lifted away from me. Her face was shiny with tears as she sobbed my name over and over. I couldn't help her or fight off the monster carrying her away. I was burning.
I stood by the big windows in the living room, silently fighting against the memories threatening to overwhelm me. Sensing my distress, Esme stood by my side with a gentle hand on my shoulder, her touch as comforting as any mother's. I knew without looking that the others were nearby, drawing together to offer their support. My adopted parents and siblings understood how difficult this day was for me. As much as I loved them, I found little solace in their efforts. This day marked five years since Alice was taken.

"We'll find her, Edward," Carlisle said, his voice gently paternal. "There are new searching resources being made available all the time; one of them is bound to pick up something soon."

I kept my eyes on the sky, stained orange and scarlet by the setting sun. The resignation in my voice shamed me. "It's been five years. I can't help thinking that if there were anything to find, it would have turned up by now."

"You can't give up, Edward. Not until we know for sure." Rosalie's voice was soft but steely with conviction. She joined Esme and me at the window, taking my hand in hers with a light squeeze. Her lovely face was determined when I glanced at her, and I did my best to return her smile.

"But we could be searching forever," I whispered. It was difficult for me to confess my deepest fears about finding Alice; I had still never voiced my biggest fear. That the monster who had taken Alice hadn't changed her as he had me. That he had killed her.

"Then that's what we'll do," Emmett declared quietly, his deep voice steadying me. "You know we're all behind you on this, Edward. For as long as it takes."

I turned, looking around the room at the family that had taken me in when I was at my lowest point. They stood, united with me: Carlisle, Esme, Rosalie, Emmett, Jasper, so strong and compassionate. Gratitude flashed through me for their quiet acceptance and support. They had calmed me during the frenzied first year following my change when I struggled against the insatiable newborn thirst. They taught me the ways of our world and how to make the most of this strange life I'd been dragged into. They helped me close out the human chapter of my life with dignity and stood by my side as I searched for my sister.

"Thank you," I murmured with a nod, before turning back to the window and my memories.

aDc

Being a vampire isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sure, there are advantages most humans would give their eyeteeth for. We don't age, sicken, or die. We're not hard to look at and there's something about the way we smell that is luscious. We're incredibly strong and fast, and our brains process limitless threads of information at speeds that beat most computers.

Some of us even have extra "gifts" that enable us to do things beyond the realm of "normal" vampire powers. I happen to be able to hear the thoughts of anyone around me. Sometimes that ability feels less like a gift and more like a practical joke that the universe is playing on me.

But there are drawbacks to this life, too, some that might surprise you. We don't sleep. We can't eat human food. Our emotional barometers are painfully heightened and sensitive. A blue day for a vampire is something like one hundred human years of crippling depression.

And there is, of course, the matter of what we can eat. While the concept of subsisting on a diet of human blood is simple, its practice is not easy. One must be ever vigilant and meticulously careful with kills to avoid tipping off both humans and vampires. And if you are among the population of vampires repulsed by killing humans, you wrestle with the moral ramifications of hunting men. We
Cullens are members of that small minority, abstaining from human blood in favor of hunting game.

It is the combination of all these factors that presents one issue that can never be permanently addressed in the life of a vampire: avoiding discovery. The most we can hope for is seven to ten years in any one place before the humans begin to notice that something is not quite right. Showing no signs of age, being just too smart at school or jobs... higher than average missing persons reports. Even the most devout animal-eating vampires are known to slip around that human who smells just so.

That need to move on is what brought us to Washington and to Port Angeles in particular. We set up house just outside the city limits in a big house far enough into the woods to discourage casual visitors. In the eyes of those around us, we filled our family roles flawlessly. The Cullen family presented a dazzling front to the world, appearing beautiful, brilliant, and aloof. Carlisle was a surgeon and Esme an architect, their careers alone making them desirable additions to any community. Four foster "children" only served to sweeten the deal, showing a benevolent side behind the glamour. Rarely did anyone suspect that there was more to the family than met the eye. Even those who found us faintly unsettling never guessed the truth; that the doctor, architect, and high school students were, in fact, undead.

I spent most of my hours outside of school at the computer terminals in the library, combing databases and the internet for information about Alice or the vampire that had attacked us. I was often joined by my siblings and Esme, and Carlisle contributed when he found time in between hospital rotations.

After five years of searching without a trace, I had begun to grow discouraged, though I struggled to hide it. I knew that, even with my inexhaustible brain, my emotional state had begun to fray. The best thing for me would have been a hiatus from the search, taking time to recharge. But I couldn't stop. I owed it to Alice to keep searching. I knew without a doubt that in my place Alice would have never stopped until she found me.

aDc

Alice and I were young when our parents were killed. We were home from university over Christmas break and my parents had gone out for dinner and dancing. Alice and I watched the Lord of the Rings trilogy over pizza and beer, imitating Frodo and Samwise for laughs. Sometime during our movie marathon, Ed and Liz Masen died on a lonely country road at the hands of a drunk driver.

Many of my hazy human memories have faded over time. But I remember with perfect clarity opening the door to see two police officers bearing terrible news. The sound of Alice's shocked cry as she sagged against me while we listened to the troopers. The feeling that the whole world was sinking inside me, that it was cracked and crashing all over, and that there simply had to be a mistake.

The days that followed were a storm of grief and numbness. Our godparents and neighbors helping us with funeral arrangements and wills we'd never known existed. Rubbing Alice's back while she huddled in her bed crying quietly. The wake, with hundreds of hands to press and sympathetic murmuring voices. The burial, grinding my teeth at the minister's well-meaning but hollow words; God's plan should never have included taking our parents. Watching the sunlight filter through the dirt falling into their graves as Alice and I held on to each other's hands for dear life.

Looking back, I wonder how long he had been watching us. Did he start before our parents died? While we stumbled out of the hospital after identifying their bodies? Was he at the wake, during the evening hours? Lurking somewhere in the church during the service? I wonder if he visited my parents grave after night fell or if he went directly to our house. Perhaps he knew us well enough by
then to know that Alice and I would not be sleeping.

Alice and I were sitting on the back sun porch, talking into the night about Mom and Dad. One moment I was cry-laughing at Alice's impression of our father singing and the next, the lights had gone out, a crunch like splintering wood loud in my ears before Alice's pained gasp. And then nothing. Silent stillness painted black.

A searing pain split my head when I opened my eyes again. It was still dark and I felt cold, wet concrete under my face and hands. Somewhere above my head Alice was crying, her voice strained and weary.

"Alice," I croaked out, groggily trying to sit up.

My sister gasped. "Edward! Oh, thank God," she said and began crying harder. "I thought you were dead. Oh, Edward."

I shushed her softly as I sat up, the pain in my head nearly making me vomit. "It's okay, Alice," I muttered when I finally could, pressing my hands against my head in an effort to steady it. "I'm okay."

Whatever Alice planned to say in answer was interrupted by the sound of laughter, soft and menacing. "Thank you for joining us, my dear boy. We can finally begin."
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07

Warning: This story contains sensitive and graphic material, including descriptions of violence and sexual assault.

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

"Quietly, he laughs and shaking his head, Creeps closer now, closer to the foot of the bed."
"Lullaby" - The Cure

"Whoa! You okay?"

Jacob reached a hand out to steady me from toppling over the long piece of driftwood I was standing on. I sighed impatiently but let his hand wrap around my elbow; only long enough for me to regain my balance. I pulled my arm away from his searing touch as soon as I felt steady.

"Don't sneak up on me, Jake," I scolded shakily, "You know I hate that."

"I wasn't sneaking." Jacob answered casually, and seemed unperturbed by the note of irritation in my voice. He sat down on the driftwood as I continued to gaze out at the storm-colored waves thrashing angrily against the cliffs.

I really hoped the weather would clear up so we could go swimming. I was sick of staying in the garage, just sitting around watching Jacob work on his new Volkswagen. Though I was the farthest thing from outdoorsy, the tedium of homework and chores was starting to get on my nerves. I needed a bigger distraction from my restless thoughts.

"Think we can go cliff-diving today?" I asked, stepping off the driftwood and sitting down on it instead.

Jacob picked up a stick and began drawing circles in the sand. "Don't you think it's cold?"

I scowled. "It's always cold."

Jacob didn't respond and kept his eyes on the ground. After a moment, he asked, "Why are you always so jumpy?"

It caught me off guard and I felt my shoulders tense. But I curled into myself and answered as steadily as I could. "That was just the one time, Jake. You know how I hate being surprised. It's annoying."

I snatched the stick out of Jacob and started drawing the infinity symbol over his circles.
"Okay," Jacob said finally, jumping to his feet. "Cliff-diving? You're sure?"

I nodded up at him enthusiastically. Jacob rolled his eyes and extended a hand out to help me up but I was already scrambling off the driftwood. I pretended not to see the strawberry blush rising beneath the russet skin of his cheek.

"Just don't blame me when you get a fever and have to stay home bored tomorrow," he said. "You'll be wishing you could go out with me again."

I returned his grin with a smirk.

"So now you're my mom?" I asked sarcastically as we walked back towards the road through the salty pinewoods.

The water was freezing, almost unbearably so. But Jacob had this smug know-it-all look on his face so I couldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me shivering. I kept ducking in and out of the surf, hoping the quick pace between dives would warm my body a little. The jump from the cliff wasn't as thrilling as I'd hoped; the cliff wasn't that high, which made the fall time short. Jacob still refused to take me to the one he and his friends jumped.

_One of these days I'm going by myself_, I grumbled internally. It was fear of such a high fall that kept me from doing it.

After our icy swim, Jacob and I went back to his house and watched TV on the couch with the heat on at full blast.

"Damn, Jake!" I shrieked when my arm grazed his as we both reached for the remote. His skin felt like the hot end of a curling iron. "You're the same temperature as the furnace."

Jacob shrugged. "I've always been this way."

I rolled my eyes at the note of smugness in his voice and leaned towards the other side of the couch when he made to bump me on the shoulder. I snatched a small pillow and playfully threw it at his head. Jacob grabbed it but all traces of teasing suddenly drained from his face.

"What?" I asked, wondering why he was staring at me like I'd grown another head.

"Do I seriously repulse you or something?"

I almost jumped. "What? Of course not! Why would you say that, Jake?"

His eyes were black as flint and he turned his whole body around to face me. I thought he'd sound angry but instead his voice was softer when he spoke, even a little timid. "Bella, we've been friends since we were kids, right?"

"Yeah," I said slowly, not knowing what he was getting at.

"Then why is it that whenever I try to hug you or take your hand, you freak out like I've got rabies?"

I dropped my eyes from the concern in his eyes. I twisted my hands in my lap and stared at my half-chewed fingernails in disgust.

"Come on, Jake."

"What?" I felt the cushion beneath me creak as he scooted closer. "Just tell me, Bells."
"Mom, I can go with you!" I insisted for what felt like the hundredth time that afternoon. Renee had to take a night class that was in another district. She didn't want to leave me home alone and was dropping me off at Jimmy's house. I would've preferred staying home alone any day, but your opinion doesn't matter much when you're nine years old.

"Honey, the class ends at 10:00. You can't be up that late," Renee said as she drove down the street leading out of my elementary school parking lot.

"But I can stay in the library. I won't bother anyone. Please!" I was close to tears, my throat aching like there was something grinding against my windpipe.

Renee turned her eyes from the windshield in front to look at me. "Why don't you want to stay with Uncle Jimmy, baby?" Her tone was worried and gentle and I almost broke down right then.

But instead, I glanced at the Winnie the Pooh backpack sitting in my lap, and gave her the best answer I could that wasn't the truth. "I just don't want to. Not tonight."

Renee reached over and stroked my hair with one hand. "Oh honey, I won't be gone long. You'll be asleep by the time I come back. It'll be okay."

I held the Winnie the Pooh backpack tightly against my chest as Renee walked me up the steps to Jimmy's door. Maybe I thought that little backpack would be enough to shield my body once I was inside. Maybe I thought that this time I'd be strong.

I did a good job at blocking them most of the time. Whenever Renee and I were alone, I was able to concentrate on other things like having fun with her; we went to bookstores, did arts and crafts in the living room of our house, and sunbathed in the backyard. But as soon as she mentioned Jimmy, I'd remember again. I'd remember sitting on his couch, trying to do my homework. I always pretended I had more than had been assigned so he wouldn't bother me. But he didn't always care how much I claimed to have. He'd just sit down and turn on the TV, run his fingers through my hair, and his nails gritty against my neck.

I hated myself for letting those memories seep into my mind after so many years. I let out a long sigh as they receded. Could I really tell Jacob? He wouldn't want to know. Nobody would.

He was still gazing at me with that quizzical expression. I met his stare unflinchingly. "There's nothing to tell," I said with finality. "I just like my private space."

Jacob settled back on his side of the couch, folding his thick arms over his chest. "Then why don't you just wear a burqa?"

Now this made me jump. "Dude, it's not enough to mock me, you're making fun of people's religious beliefs now, too? Why are you being such a jerk?" I was yelling and my hands balled into fists at my sides. I was sure I looked like a little kid having a tantrum but I honestly didn't care. Jacob knew better than to say such moronic things.

"Bella, come on! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it the way it came out."

Ignoring him, I stormed out of the Blacks' tiny living room and wrenched the front door open.

"Bella!" Jacob was right behind me but knew not to touch me; my earlier outburst had made that
very clear.

"Just forget it, Jake," I muttered, almost running to my truck.

His freakishly tall form was blurred by the rain hitting the windshield when I drove away.

My computer was so slow that I had time to heat up some tea and start dinner downstairs before the login screen was fully loaded. For some reason, that night I found myself typing the words "abuse" and "support" into my favorite search engine. I'd never once gone looking for that type of thing. I preferred to forget rather than dwell on the memories of Jimmy and all the times I lied to my mom.

Perhaps it was the fight with Jacob that prompted an urge to search for other people who knew how it felt to keep such an ugly secret. After all, Jacob couldn't understand, no matter how hard he tried.

There were lists and lists of results. Articles and statistics. Facts and myths. Different types of abuse; domestic, sexual, child sexual abuse, even assault; which is apparently different. I clicked through page after page, my vision growing hazy from the glaring light of the screen. Finally, I pushed away from the desk and went back down to check on the meat loaf cooking in the oven.

As I trudged back upstairs, I told myself that I'd look at just one more page and if I didn't find something useful, I'd end the search completely. After all, the damaged was already done, right? What good would learning about it do me now?

But one site caught my eye. It was a chat room, actually, for teens who had suffered some kind of trauma. There were several groups and topics for specific types of traumas. Among them, of course, was sexual abuse. The rules of the site required that I create an account before joining chats but I spent twenty minutes or so just reading over the journal posts and articles.

The oven timer beeped when I was in the middle of somebody's detailed description about being in foster care. I didn't want to stop reading. To my amazement, I felt like I could relate to this person's feelings of loneliness and fear. Even though I had my mom and now Charlie, I was still alone with my secret.

The poster's username was Ali_pixy. She had six other posts but Charlie's cruiser pulled in the driveway at that moment and I rushed back downstairs to set the dinner table.

"Bells, this is delicious," Charlie said as I served him and myself. I made it a point to drop a helping of salad on his plate too, as a reminder of that he should be watching his cholesterol.

"Thanks, Dad." I sat down and began to pick at my food. I really wanted to go back to reading more posts on that website.

Charlie and I ate in silence and I was just about done when he spoke again. "I stopped by the Blacks' on the way home."

I pushed my lettuce around with my fork but maintained an indifferent tone. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, there was an accident just a few miles from the reservation. The guy took a sharp turn at this insane speed, crashed in a ditch. Anyway, Jacob asked me to tell you he was sorry about-"

"It's fine, Dad," I cut him off before the embarrassment set in for both of us. Jacob probably figured I wouldn't have answered the phone and that was why he hadn't called to apologize himself. He was usually more persistent so the fact that he thought I was beyond forgiving him made me flush. We'd
never fought like this before.

Quickly, I began gathering up the dirty dishes.

"Hey, Bells. I can do that." Charlie stood up as I moved towards the sink.

Not really wanting to linger, I gave him a small grateful smile and started moving towards the living room.

"Bella?"

I stopped at the foot of the stairs and turned back to see Charlie standing at the entrance to the kitchen with a dishtowel in one hand.

"Yeah, Dad?"

Charlie cleared his throat. "Uh... I know you'd rather talk to your mom but if there's something bothering you, I listen too." Then he smiled his crinkly-eyed smile that I'd seen him wear in photographs with Renee. My throat tightened at the sight.

"Thanks, Dad. I'll keep that in mind," I answered hurriedly, my words almost running together, "But I just had a bad day, you know, with school and Jake..."

Charlie nodded. "Right. Well, just you know. I'm here, Bells." He smiled again and went back into the kitchen. I couldn't run up the stairs fast enough.

aDc

I created an account on the support chat website and read all of Ali_pixy's posts, along with some others. There one user's experience with bipolar disease that really touched me because of their young age. But Ali_pixy's entries spoke to me the most. Her profile page said that she was from the southern US and had been in the foster system for six years.

Ali_pixy had turned seventeen the month before, in February. I read the post she wrote on her birthday:

February 12

Happy birthday to me! :)

If I had my way, this would be a brilliant sun-shiny day filled with shopping, chocolate croissants, and friends to come over and watch Gossip Girl. Instead, I'm under the roof of a bleached blond psychopath. She doesn't give a damn about my needs as long as she gets child support money so dream birthday for me. But if I just go back to bed and cry, which is what I feel like doing, I'll be giving crazy Laura what she wants; which is to make me miserable. So I'm taking the bus to the Greenville Mall, whether Laura grounds me or not afterward (she probably will), and buying myself a gorgeous new tote bag and maybe a scarf. I guess the possibilities are endless when you don't give a damn!

I could tell Ali_pixy had a bubbly personality that was suppressed by her circumstances. Some journal entries weren't so upbeat.

March 3

Laura decided that she can't handle three kids and is sending me back to the home. I can't say I'm
upset; after all, she is a hag. All she wanted me for was to be her personal servant, especially in front of her neighbors. She made me wash her pathetic little station wagon and trim her overgrown garden. I even had to do her hair right on the porch as she flipped through magazines, hoping people walking by would notice and be jealous of her trailer park luxuries. Give me a break. Who would be envious of a fake blonde with fading roots who smells of drugstore perfume and has a job in a two-star steak house? Don't get me wrong, I'm not psyched about going back to the group home. And it frightens me to think of where I'll end up next. I just wish I knew where Edward was. It's totally unfair that they won't tell me anything. He's my brother. I have a right to know, damn it!

Ali_pixy wrote about her brother, Edward, in an earlier post. They were originally from Chicago and had lost their parents four years ago in a car accident. They had lived in the same group home for a while. But then they were separated. Edward was sent to live with a foster family in Massachusetts while Ali_pixy was sent to her first foster home near Biloxi.

March 18

The old lady in the house next door leaves her kitchen windows open while cleaning. I heard her playing Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet and it reminded me of Edward. Mom and Dad got him a baby grand for his 10th birthday. Sometimes you'd have to yank him away from that thing; he wouldn't leave it even for dinner. Every morning he'd sit down before we left for school and play Chopin or Debussy, but he liked writing compositions of his own too. I could listen to him play forever. It sounded so calming. I miss it so much.

I met Ali_pixy one night when she came on chat. I was feeling particularly tired from school and Jessica's prying, not to mention my truck had chosen that morning to be difficult, making me a few minutes late for class. Tired as I was, I didn't want to miss the opportunity to talk to the interesting and mysterious Ali_pixy and was excited when she answered me.

Bells_forever: Hi.

Ali_pixy: Hey there!

Bells_forever: I really like your journals.

Ali_pixy: Thanks! Wish I could say the same :(.

Bells_forever: Yeah it must be tough. But I'm not feeling so great either and reading your stuff makes my day a whole lot better.

Ali_pixy: Aww! You're sweet. Glad I could be of service :)

Bells_forever: In your last entry you said you were in Hickory, MS. Are you still there?

Ali_pixy: Yep. I prefer Greenville cuz at least it has a Blues festival and strip malls. Hickory is just that. Hick! LOL


Ali_pixy: Really? A town named after silverware?

Bells_forever: Don't even get me started. Nothing has changed here since the 70s.

Ali_pixy: Wow. Hold old are you?

Bells_forever: 17.
Ali_pixy: Coolness. So am I, though I guess you already knew that.

Bells_forever: Yeah... Happy late birthday!

Ali_pixy: Thanks. It wasn't so bad.

Bells_forever: I'm so sorry about your brother. I don't have any siblings but I'm really close to my mom.

Ali_pixy: That's nice. I miss Edward so much. He's the best big brother in the world. We were into lots of the same things.

Bells_forever: Really? Like what?


Bells_forever: Cars, really?

Ali_pixy: Heck, yeah! I might be girly but I do love the thrill of a good sports car.

Bells_forever: That's so cool. I don't know anything about cars haha.

Ali_pixy: Well, I've always been a little strange.

aDe

I chatted with Ali_pixy almost every day after that first conversation. I didn't tell her all the details of my unhappiness in the beginning. But it was strangely easy to talk to her about things I normally didn't share with others. Not even Jacob knew how insignificant I felt. It would probably be too much for him to handle.

Ali_pixy seemed genuinely concerned with my mediocre worries. She sounded compassionate and nonjudgmental when I told her how guilty I felt about lying to Renee. I told her that when I was around people, I felt more damaged and abnormal than usual. Deep down, I knew our interactions could very well be fake. This was the Internet, after all. And yet, I felt the need to continue talking to this girl because, somehow, she'd managed to make a dent in the wall of resistance I'd built around myself for the past eight years.

Chapter End Notes

A/N

Thank you for reading and reviewing, if you leave one. We love hearing from you.

The next chapter will be Edward's.
I turned away from the monitors when the alarm on my phone sounded for the second time. It was 7:15 a.m. The sound of my siblings in their rooms was audible as they readied themselves to spend another day with the humans. If I cared enough to focus my attention, I could hear their thoughts as well, and those of our parents. But I rarely listened to anyone in that way these days. My mind was always preoccupied with turning over memorized information, and sifting through the minutiae of data.

Footsteps approached the library door and paused for a moment before continuing down the hall, acting as a wordless reminder that I was expected to rejoin the family soon. I knew that if I didn't at least make a show of getting myself together, the next person to stop at the door would be Esme.

The hardest thing I had to do each day was to stop searching for Alice. If permitted, I wouldn't stir from the terminals or stop weeding through data. I would keep writing emails and creating posts, continue scouring websites and message boards for information. I would search until I finally had an answer to the question that dogged me every day: what had happened to my sister?

If I lived alone, there would have been no need to stop. But I wasn't on my own. I was part of a family and I had obligations to fulfill.

I played a part in the Cullen family's human disguise, and stood alongside the others as we filled our roles. I needed to be seen at the high school each weekday, and to act the part of the responsible student for eight hours. Together, we worked to ensure that the Cullens appeared to be a normal, reasonably happy family of overachievers. We were admired and praised for our achievements, but stayed far enough below the radar to avoid exposing ourselves.

I was also part of the family that existed beneath the disguise, the coven of vampires who depended on and supported each other. My family needed me just as I needed them. Despite our dead hearts, we shared deep connections, and cared for one another with affection and great love. Any one of us withdrawing for too long was cause for concern. Of course, I was the one most often withdrawing.

And I needed to hunt. I had put it off for as long as I had dared, telling myself I needed that time for...
searching. Now the thirst burned the back of my throat as I made my way to my room and I knew my discomfort at school today would be sharp.

I left the library and made my way to my room on the third floor, passing Emmett on the stairs.

He gasped in mock surprise to see me and then shouted, "Edward's out of the library before 7:30. Someone owes me twenty bucks!"

I chuckled and rolled my eyes when I heard Jasper groan from the first floor.

In my room, I changed my clothes absently and made a passing attempt at taming the hopeless mess of hair on my head. It was comforting in some ways, going through the motions of making myself presentable. But it was difficult to care very much and, as always, a part of my mind was with Alice, wondering and hoping.

In the beginning, when I had started the search for my sister, I hoped only that she was alive. That she had not been turned as I had and was living a healthy human life somewhere. Carlisle and the others guided me through the first year after my change, when I was uncontrollably bloodthirsty and strong. As I changed and learned about my new world, and how to conduct myself around others, I made plans for how things would be after I found Alice. I knew how I would reinsert myself into her human life, and how I would disguise myself so Alice would never know what I had become. It would grow more difficult over time as she aged and I did not, but it didn't matter to me. I was determined to be there for Alice for as long as possible.

It sounds foolish, but it never occurred to me that my sister would disappear so completely. That the days and months without word of her whereabouts would turn into one year, then two. The next thing I knew it had been five years and I still had no answers. Where was Alice? Was she well and happy? Did she miss me?

Slowly, I stopped hoping for good news of my sister. I stopped planning for the reunion I wanted so desperately. I didn't tell my new family that my hopes had changed. Now all I wanted was an answer: to know what had happened to Alice after that night in Chicago when I failed to save her. I no longer cared whether the news was good or bad. Just knowing that my sister was dead would be better than knowing nothing at all.

The others were clustered around the table when I walked into the kitchen. I knew from the pause in their quiet discussion that I had been the topic of conversation again. My depression. My compulsive behaviors. My inattention to my own needs.

The family worried about me and with good reason; I wondered sometimes if I was losing my mind.

I sat at the table with my siblings as the soft buzz of voices resumed. There was talk of where the family would hunt that night, and where to find the largest number of big game. Emmett also suggested a visit to the beaches on the western side of the peninsula before sunrise if there was time.

I opened my bag and pulled out the black leather journal that had become a talisman of sorts. I had completed my assigned schoolwork before going to the library last night. It was rare that any of us spent much time on coursework or review of any kind; it wasn't in our nature to forget anything, and the work itself was simple. But I checked the assignment list in my notebook anyway. Making lists and checking them gave me a tiny measure of control that I craved. They made me feel better for a few moments of time.

"Edward, you're coming hunting with us tonight." Rosalie's voice was quiet and firm. She smiled when I met her eyes, and playfully tossed a balled up piece of paper in my direction. "I know what
you're going to say, but I don't want to hear it; you need to feed."

Jasper nodded immediately, tapping his knuckles quietly on the tabletop to get my attention. "Rose is right, Edward. It's been more than two weeks. You can't go back to school on Monday without having fed... you're cutting it close as it is."

I didn't respond to Jasper's remarks, but I knew he had a point. My thirst burned with a low, constant heat in the back of my throat, and my human classmates were beginning to smell far too good.

"I'd rather go tomorrow," I told them as I placed my notebook in my bag. "I still have several more volumes in the Interpol missing persons' directory to go through. Once I'm done with them, I'll feel better about stopping to hunt."

Esme's hand fell gently on my shoulder, and my lips turned up in a slow smile of resignation. Any other argument I planned to offer was irrelevant; one simply did not argue with the woman who had become my mother.

"The volumes will still be there tomorrow, Edward. You need to get out of the house for a change," Esme urged in her gently insistent way. "If it will make you feel better, I'll sit out the hunt tonight and stay here to work on the data."

My throat tightened at the sight of her sympathetic smile. I wouldn't let Esme or anyone of the others do that for me. The last thing I wanted was for any of them to sacrifice their own comfort in the name of placating my obsessive behavior. This family already did so much for me.

I said with a smile that I hoped was convincing, and laid my hand over hers. "No, Esme. You and Jasper are right. It's time I hunted and the data isn't going anywhere. I don't want anyone to stay behind this time."

Esme's eyes were pleased and she ran a hand over my hair as she moved to leave the kitchen. The others murmured their approval and the kitchen filled again with the activity and sounds of a large family preparing to leave for the day.

I saw Carlisle from the corner of my eye when I stood to join the others. He was lingering near the kitchen door with concern on his brow and questions in his eyes. Without looking up, I focused my mind and listened to his thoughts for just a moment. The guilt I felt for eavesdropping was brief, however, because Carlisle's thoughts were too difficult for me to listen for very long.

"...can't possibly go on like this for much longer... suspect he is suffering from emotional exhaustion... pushing himself far too hard..."

Carlisle's concern for my well being both touched and shamed me. I knew I should pause and speak with to him on my way out, to try to ease some of the worry I saw in his eyes. But there was so much to apologize for, starting with five years of diverting the family's resources and energies, all for my own needs. In the end, I gave Carlisle a false smile and walked with him to the big garage as if nothing was wrong. It bothered me less that Carlisle's smile was equally false and more that he too was hiding something.

aDc

The class blocks passed like every other school day, slowly and easily, with very little to challenge my ideas or imagination. The human teachers and students swam in and out of my focus, their faces usually bathed in a gentle friendliness that made me think of cattle. In some ways, spending time at school was like moving underwater, deliberate thoughtful and in slow motion. It was easy to get by
in my classes without using my full attention. That left me able to think about the data I had been viewing without losing the threads of conversations.

"You're really coming with us tonight, right, Edward?"

I looked up from my notebook to meet Rosalie's narrow gaze. We were sitting in the school cafeteria waiting for the lunch hour to elapse. Her eyes flicked from my face to the notebook and back again. She tried to hide the mixture of concern and exasperation she felt for my 'record keeping,' but I saw it anyway. She gave a short laugh when I very deliberately closed the notebook and tucked it inside my bag. She folded her arms and pretended to be very angry when I raised my eyebrows at her.

"You haven't answered me, Eduardo," she said.

There was no point in lying to Rose; nothing got past that girl and she'd just give me hell for it later. "Of course I am. I said I would be there. And don't call me that; even the Spanish teacher calls me Edward."

"Then your Spanish teacher is lazier than most of the other teachers in the place. How hard can it be to tack an 'o' on the end of your name?"

"I'm guessing that's a rhetorical question."

"We should all just call you 'O' to keep you on your toes."

"You were dropped on your head as a child, weren't you?"

"Stop changing the subject," she said airily. "You know very well that you've become notorious for bailing on, let's see, everything at the eleventh hour. I'm glad you're finally listening to us for a change; it saves me from the ass kicking I'd have to deliver if you had tried to pull a fast one."

I rolled my eyes at her, but couldn't help laughing as well. I gave Rosalie a hard time when she mothered me, but I knew it was her way of showing her own slightly strange brand of affection. While it was hard for me to admit, I was grateful to Rosalie and my adoptive brothers for caring, even when they pushed me. Perhaps especially when they pushed me. I didn't miss Alice any less, but it was nice to have siblings.

"I wish he could be happy."

I wished that, too. But I hadn't meant to overhear Rosalie's thought. So I smiled at her and ran my hand over the notebook in my bag, and pretended I hadn't heard anything.

We hunted in Olympic Park that night, stalking elk and bear. I drank until my head and nerves buzzed with the blood. When we were finished, I ran with the others into the mountains to watch the sunrise, and I worked hard to join in with their conversations. The blood made my body strong, and cleared some of the weariness from my mind. But it wasn't enough. No matter how hard I tried to forget the task waiting for me at home, I felt hollow with waiting.

I felt Carlisle's approach on my right and smelled his scent mixed with blood before he spoke. "It's been a long time since you played, Edward."

"I know," I replied. I stuck my hands in my pockets at the thought of the piano keys under my fingers. I knew it was best to put the music off yet another day. "It's hard when there's so much to do, I suppose. I've already lost hours tonight."
"We'll finish those volumes for you," Carlisle said kindly. "The work will go faster split amongst us. And you need a break, Edward. You'll be no good to us or Alice if you burn yourself out."

I felt a flicker of irritation at his words and turned to meet his eyes, shining gold in the sun's frail early rays. "Is that what this is all about? Have you all been taking turns to get me out of that library because you're afraid I'm losing it?"

"No, son," he replied quietly. "We don't think that. But we are concerned -"

"I heard your thoughts, Carlisle," I cut in, my voice low. "In the kitchen this morning. I know you think I'm fragile."

Carlisle's face fell slightly at my words, and he ran a hand over his forehead before speaking again. "You're right, Edward. I am worried. Not that you're losing it, but that you are pushing yourself too hard. Our bodies and minds are strong, Edward, but they still need nurturing. You can't let your grief for Alice consume you. It's important that you still find joy."

"But how? How can I do that when I don't know where she is?" I turned gaze back to the sky, with a sigh. The others had fallen silent and were watching my exchange with Carlisle carefully.

"I can't imagine how hard this is for you," Carlisle replied. "None of us expects you to stop, Edward. You're not in this alone. And we'll help you as much as we can until you have your answers."

I felt his hand rest on my shoulder and closed my eyes. "I know you will. And I am grateful for that help, more than you know."

"Show us just how much by taking some time off, Edward, even if it's just a few hours."

Carlisle was right. And, for a change, I listened. When we returned home, I left the others in the library at the terminals, and went to corner of the house where the piano and Rosalie's guitars were kept. I had to steel myself for a moment before I was able to sit down and lift the key cover. But when my fingers hit the ivory, I let myself get lost.

I played whatever came to mind without rhyme or reason. My father's favorites and my mother's. Alice's favorites, of course, even the songs that I knew she thought were too stuffy for a young guy to want to play. I played my own music, pieces I had written years before and little bits that were unfinished but refused to stop rattling around my head.

I always felt closest to my family when I played. To the human parents who had raised me and my black-haired imp of a sister. I remembered happiness with them, and a feeling of being loved and cared for, of being carefree. In some ways, those memories were more painful than the reality. I had lost and then buried my parents. My sister was gone and I had no idea what had happened to her.

"Is that something new?" Esme's voice floated quietly out of the darkness before she stood at my side.

"Just something I've been working on," I told her truthfully. "I haven't written it down yet."

I gave Esme a small smile when she sat beside me on the bench. On the occasions that Rosalie and I played together, I preferred that we focus on published music and Rosalie's compositions. When it came to my own work, however, I most often chose Esme to listen.

"It was beautiful. But a bit sad, sweetheart."

I shrugged and looked down at the keys, knowing she was right. I had been having a hard time
writing anything even remotely cheery for the past several years. "I think I've exhausted all of the sheet music in the house at this point. Even though I don't play nearly as often as I should."

"One of my coworkers at the firm told me there is a store in Forks that stocks rare music folios. It's quite the hidden gem, apparently," Esme said, running her fingers noiselessly over the keys.

I paused for a moment, remembering the information we had gathered about the local area before moving to Port Angeles. "Isn't Forks that little town out by La Push Road?"

"The very one. Apparently the owner of the shop is a retired musician who moved out here to get away from the city life." Esme looked at me and her eyes were warm. "He's built quite a thriving little business for himself using the internet to buy and sell."

"And what you're not saying by telling me all this is that I should get over to Forks and buy myself some new music?"

"Now you're just cheating, Edward; no fair with the mind reading thing."

"Cheek," I said dryly, and Esme laughed. "Maybe you're right. I could go next weekend."

"Or you could go today," Esme cut in. "The others are working on the last of the Interpol volumes. It would be smart for you to make this trip before you start any new searches; we both know you'll be tied up for days, if not longer, once you get going."

"What's going on in this house? I feel like I'm the focus of the world's most passive-aggressive intervention ever." I grinned and nudged her shoulder with mine.

"We all heard your conversation with Carlisle earlier," she said with a shrug. "So I won't lecture you. Get out and find a little joy, Edward. Even if it's something simple, like a day out buying music."

That's how I found myself driving west on Route 101 toward the city of Forks and the so-called hidden gem of rare music. Rosalie and Jasper offered to come with me, but I knew it was best to get out on my own. I needed some time away from the computers and the data. And even if I couldn't bring myself to leave my notebook behind, I would be sure it stayed closed and safe in my bag.

I drove into Forks and told myself I would find some music that I'd never heard before. Rosalie had given me her own list and strict instructions to text her immediately if I found any kind of half-decent guitar. Perhaps I would even find something she and I could play together. I would watch the humans scurry about with their busy lives. I would find a beach and take photos with which to torture Emmett. I would keep my eyes open for signs of joy, though I didn't have a clue what to look for.

If nothing else, I would get a little time away from the guilt I felt at worrying everyone so much. In my own way, I would be giving the rest of the family a break, too: from myself.

A flash of color caught my eye as I parked the car. I glanced up and saw a slim figure in a blue jacket moving across the street. A girl's face peered out from behind a long curtain of brown hair, looking left for oncoming cars, and then it was gone. She was in my sight for fewer than twenty seconds. But that was long enough for me to see the haunted expression burning in the girl's dark eyes.
We're excited to see lots of new readers placing this story on alert and favorites. We'd love to hear what you think of this story, so don't be shy with reviews. Reviews give Edward little bits of joy, you know. ;)

The next chapter will be Bella's. Thank you so much for reading!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We're both looking for something we've been afraid to find.
It's easier to be broken, it's easier to hide.
Looking at you, holding my breath,
For once in my life, I'm scared to death,
I'm taking a chance, letting you inside.

Feeling alive all over again, as deep as the sky under my skin,
Like being in love, she says.

"First Time" - Lifehouse

I wasn't much good at giving Jacob the silent treatment. After a week of ignoring his phone calls, it quickly became clear that his company was far too precious and rare in my life to discard so easily. We went back to hanging out together, but I also spent time chatting with my new online friend.

Ali_pixy and I had been interacting through the support site for a month. We chatted almost every day. As soon I came home from school, I'd check if she was online. If she was, I divided my time between making dinner and sharing thoughts with this strangely cheerful girl from Mississippi.

Ali_pixy said she was still at the group home. I couldn't stop thinking about her situation, even when I was tossing and turning in bed, too afraid to sleep and face another nightmare. It sounded terrible to be a ward of the state, and a name on a file in someone's office. Anyone could do anything to you when you were just a name and not a person. Who knew where Ali_pixy would end up next? What if the people at her next foster home were worse than the woman who had forced her to be a servant? What if they hurt her, or touched her?

Perhaps I was paranoid because of what Jimmy had done to me. On the other hand, Ali_pixy wasn't the only foster kid I'd come across on the support website. There was a boy who had been shifted around since the age of six, and a girl who had been molested at her last two foster homes before aging out at eighteen. I worried that Ali_pixy still had to wait until next February to be free of that horrid system.

aDc

One Sunday morning Angela called to invite me to join her for lunch at the diner. Charlie had gone fishing so I figured I could pick up a take-out dinner at the diner while I was there, and perhaps stop at the music store across the street. Classical music had always calmed me during my restless nights.

Angela was sitting in a booth by the window when I walked into Bessie's Diner. A smile spread across her face when she waved, and I felt awkward but also touched that she seemed genuinely
pleased to see me.

"Hey, have you ordered yet?" I inquired, sitting down across from her.

"No, I was just waiting for you," she said, picking up one of the menus on our table.

I noticed she'd cut her hair in layers. They framed her face quite nicely. "I like your hair."

Angela looked almost startled and I wondered if she thought I wasn't capable of noticing something like that. "Oh, thanks," she said, threading the curving tips through her fingers. "I've been wanting to change it for awhile now."

"Just in time for the spring formal?" I guessed. Posters of the upcoming dance had been put up at school during the last week.

Angela blushed. "Maybe. I'm not sure if I'm really going. I'm hoping this guy will ask me but-"

At that moment, the waitress came over to our table, interrupting what Angela was going to say. After we mumbled our orders, I motioned to Angela to lean over and acted as if there was some big secret about whom she wanted to go to the dance with.

"I don't think Ben's going to ask me," she said very softly.

Her eyebrows furrowed slightly, revealing that this possibility was more upsetting than she let on.

"Then maybe you should ask him."

I couldn't believe I'd actually made a suggestion out loud. Whenever Jessica and Angela talked about boyfriends and dates, I always felt completely withdrawn.

"Do you think I'm that brave?" She seemed dubious but grateful, and I nodded enthusiastically, relieved that she didn't seem to think my advice was stupid.

"I really think so," I exclaimed. "There's nothing wrong with asking him."

Angela smiled and we fell quiet as the waitress brought our food. After a few minutes, she asked hesitantly if I was planning to attend the formal on April 13.

I shook my head and lowered my gaze to the veggie burger on my plate. I heard the scraping of Angela's fork before she spoke again.

"Maybe Mike or Tyler will ask you."

"Isn't Mike going with Jessica?" I asked, taking a sip of iced tea.

A little smile appeared on Angela's face. I was surprised at how mischievous it was. "That's what Jessica's hoping but personally I think he has a crush on you."

I bit my lip, not knowing how to answer. "I seriously doubt that," I mumbled, wiping my mouth with a napkin.

Thankfully, Angela dropped the subject. I could tell that she wanted me to say more, and our conversation became stilted as we finished eating. I knew that someone like Jessica wouldn't have let up, and pushed me until I felt inclined to be rude. That's why I preferred Angela's company; she knew when to mind her own business. But that didn't lessen my feelings of guilt for being so cryptic.
After lunch, Angela went home to look after her brothers while her parents went to visit friends in Seattle, and I crossed the street to the music store. The afternoon rain had subsided into a thin, misty coating and it had grown reasonably warmer.

Garrett's Music had an atmosphere of abandonment to it, despite the many rows of records, CDs and sheet music folios. The interior was dimly lit by light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, and it was as if time had frozen inside that tight little space.

"Can I help you, miss?" A tall man, who I assumed had to be Garrett himself, smiled from behind the front desk as I walked toward the classical music section.

I gave him a short smile over my shoulder. "No, thanks. I'm fine."

I turned back to the shelves and browsed through the disks: Debussy, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky. The door opened behind me and I heard footsteps and the owner's pleasant voice as he greeted the new customer. But the answering voice froze me in my tracks. A soft, low voice, that carried melodies I had never heard before. That voice made my hands tremble, and the blood rush to my face.

"Let me know if there is anything I can show you," the owner was saying.

"Oh, thank you," the voice answered smoothly. "My mother heard you stock rare folios and I'm looking to pick up something I haven't played before."

"I'm sure we can find something to pique your interest." I could hear the eagerness in the owner's voice. "We have an online catalog as well."

"My family is new to the area, and I thought I'd drive over from Port Angeles to take a look in person," the voice replied, and I heard his smile.

The CD cases were slipping through my stiff fingers as I turned around to look at the owner of the voice. And when my eyes met his, the plastic cases crashed to the floor.

I dropped to my knees hastily and scrambled to slide the discs that had slipped out back into the cases.

"Let me help you." Two long, white hands suddenly appeared in my line of sight, picking up some of the cases before holding them out to me. My eyes slowly crept up to meet those of the person helping me in my embarrassment.

But it was a misconception to call him a person. The boy staring down at me looked more like a sculpted angel than an average teenager. I felt myself staring at his strangely golden hazel eyes and the shy smile pulling at the corners of his lips.

Holy... he is beautiful, I managed to think. I rose to my feet slowly, on knees that jiggled nervously. I realized that my movements were lethargic, and I was reacting much more slowly than usual.

"Thank you," I stammered, taking the CD cases from his outstretched hand. His fingers grazed mine and I jerked back without meaning to. His skin was cold and whisper soft, like snow, and I felt a light jolt of static electricity.

What the heck was that? I thought, rubbing my stinging fingers together.

"No problem," I thought I heard him say. But he murmured the words too quickly, before he turned and walked away as suddenly as he had appeared.
The Blacks' old Jetta was parked behind the cruiser in Charlie's driveway when I got home.

I'd driven home in a sort of daze, my mind completely preoccupied with thoughts of the strange boy I'd seen in town that afternoon. His hair had been an outright mess, but the reddish brown strands were gorgeous, like dark copper. He had an amazing profile, too, as if the rest of him weren't beautiful enough. His jaw line was so sharp and defined; you could probably cut glass with it.

_Bella, what the heck,_ the more sane part of me rolled her eyes. Since when was I the type to come up with such phrases? I almost sounded like a girl in a Harlequin novel describing a potential suitor. That wasn't me at all.

Sighing, I got out of my truck and made my way to the house. Laughter drifted from the living room as I hung up my coat in the entryway.

"Hi, Bella!" Jacob greeted me as I passed and made my presence known to Billy and Charlie, who were too engrossed in the football game on TV to notice my arrival.

My answering smile was a bit lighter than usual. "Hey, Jake. Hi, Dad, Billy. I got us some dinner." I held up the bag of food from the diner.

Charlie glanced up from his place in the armchair. "Oh you didn't have to do that, honey. I put some fish in the freezer. Thanks, though."


After putting the food in the fridge, I went up to my room to listen to my new CDs and finish an English paper that was due on Tuesday. There was a knock on my door a few minutes later.

Jacob poked his head inside. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." I lowered the volume on my media player, turning Tchaikovsky's _Swan Lake_ into a background hum.

"Whatcha doing?" Jacob leaned over my desk to peer at the computer screen.

"Writing an English paper."

"Macbeth, huh? I don't believe the La Push teachers think us rez kids are ready for that yet."

I didn't know if he was joking so I said, "Shakespeare isn't as complicated as people think."

Jacob picked up the framed photograph of Renee and me at Six Flags. I was six years old in the photo and Renee was holding me in her arms as I smeared cotton candy all over her face.

"Aww!" Jacob cooed, teasingly, "Weren't you a cute toddler?"

"Stop," I rolled my eyes and took the picture from him, placing it out of reach.

Jacob gave me a mock pout. "You're still cute in an unreachable, princess-locked-in-her-tower sort of way."

I kept my eyes on the Word document on the screen in front of me. "No, I'm not," I muttered, hoping it was too low for him to hear.
My thoughts drifted back to the red-haired boy from the music store. Now there was a face that belonged in a fairy tale. He didn't seem real. In fact, maybe he wasn't real. And that was upsetting in itself. Maybe my mind had conjured up the handsome, nearly-perfect being.

But I knew I hadn't imagined the CD cases falling from my hands. And what about that weird and icy electric current I felt streaking through my skin when the boy's fingers had touched mine? I didn't have enough imagination to make those things up. I just hoped I wasn't losing it now, on top of everything else.

What are you talking about? The rational part of my brain scolded, That's just silly, Bella.

And it really was. It also meant that I truly saw a boy as beautiful as a fairy-tale prince.

"I think I heard this song in a cartoon once."

Jacob's voice interrupted my train of thought and I raised my head to meet his gaze. "Hmm?"

"You like classical?" he asked. He was fingering the CDs I'd left beside the keyboard, drawing invisible circles over the Debussy cover art. He grinned shyly. "This stuff always puts me to sleep."

My lips curved up slightly at the corners. "Well, that's the idea," I answered lightly, "I've been having trouble sleeping."

Jacob draped his arm around the back of my chair. Involuntarily, my body stiffened again. Why couldn't he just...

"Hey, why didn't you tell me? I could've brought my dream catcher." He smiled broadly this time and I couldn't help grinning genuinely in response, shaking my head at the absurd, albeit cute joke.

It was really hard being friends with Jacob sometimes, even more so than it was with Angela. Jacob and I had known each other since we were kids, and we were close. It wasn't easy to drift apart as it would be with my schoolmates who didn't know anything about me but the most rudimentary facts.

Before bed that night, I found Ali_pixy online and sent her a message.

Bells_forever: Do you know that phrase "butterflies in my stomach?" Well, it's an understatement. Trust me. Today I saw someone and it felt like birds, beating their wings loudly in my chest, all the way down my ribcage. It made me nervous but not in a frightening way. More like an "I hope I don't do something stupid" kind of way.

Ali_pixy: Wow. Who is this amazing someone?

Bells_forever: A boy. An unbelievably good-looking boy. But I was a total idiot in front of him.

Ali_pixy: How so?

Bells_forever: I was at the music store when I saw him and I dropped this whole stack of CDs.

Ali_pixy: Maybe he's into klutzy girls. That's not stupid.

Bells_forever: Funny...

Ali_pixy: Seriously, though. You're too hard on yourself. What did he look like?
Bells_forever: Like an Abercrombie model.

Ali_pixy: Oh, come on! Give me something.

Bells_forever: His eyes were golden brown, like honey or gold. They looked sad too, like something was troubling him. But he smiled when he helped me pick up the cds... after I made a complete fool of myself.

Ali_pixy: He helped you? Aww! That's adorable! See? I was right. He does like damsels in distress.

Bells_forever: Oh my gosh! Jumping the gun much? Chances are I'll never see him again. And anyone with manners would've done the same thing.

Ali_pixy: You're killing my buzz, girl.

Bells_forever: LOL you're silly.

Ali_pixy: Maybe he goes to your school.

Bells_forever: I highly doubt that. My school is tiny. I'm pretty sure I've seen all the students by now.

Ali_pixy: Maybe he's new.

Bells_forever: I heard him say he lives in Port Angeles. He only knew about the music store because his mom heard about it from someone else. I mean, we're practically in the middle of nowhere.

Ali_pixy: See? Nothing is set in stone. He knows where the music store is now. You could totally cross paths with him again.

Chapter End Notes

Listen to Ali_pixy, Bella!

So our lovely and rather broken people met. What did you think? What did Edward think? The next chapter is Edward's so we'll know soon enough ;)

We love to hear from you and thank you so much for reading.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

There's an empty space inside my heart
Where the weeds take root
So now I set you free
I set you free

"Lotus Flower" - Radiohead

I fled Garrett's Music like a man on fire. Which, in a way, I was. I wasn't sure what had passed between the girl in the shop and myself, but it startled me. My hand still tingled with the aftereffects of the... charge that had sprung between us when our fingers touched.

What the hell had just happened? My brain demanded answers, but I had none.

I had seen her petite figure while parking my car, but she was gone by the time I locked my door. The sky was overcast, making the afternoon a bit dark, but the girl's face had jumped out at me through the gloom as if lit from within. The fatigue and stress in her expression struck me, and made me wonder why she looked so terribly sad.

I pocketed my keys and crossed the street toward the music shop, frowning as I walked. A strange feeling came over me, as if someone was calling my name.

A flash of blue caught my eye when I entered the shop, and I felt a jolt of excitement. The girl with the dark hair was less than ten feet away, browsing through the CDs.

I made pleasant conversation with the shop's proprietor while I kept an eye on the girl. I hoped she would turn around and let me get a better look at her face. And then I was seized by curiosity; I wanted to know what she was thinking.

I sharpened my attention immediately and listened closely to... nothing. The proprietor's internal monologue was perfectly distinct, if overeager to make a sale. I could hear the thoughts of humans in the surrounding buildings and streets as well. But there was nothing from the girl with the dark hair.

Frowning, I focused my attention more intently, just as she began slowly turning in my direction. I saw a smudge of dark eyes in a white face before I was distracted by the clatter of plastic CD cases hitting the floor.

The girl threw herself to her knees and I moved at once, bending down to help gather the scattered cases. "Let me help you."

Her eyes rose to meet mine and the rest of the shop faded around me. I saw the proprietor hovering nearby, unsure whether to help. I heard the old Dinah Washington recordings playing over the sound
system. But my attention was drawn almost totally to the girl's face. For the first time I really looked at her.

Her heart shaped face was fair and quite pretty, with petite features and a light dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her lips were plump and tempting. Long, brown hair tumbled over her shoulders in rich waves.

But her dark eyes were truly arresting. In them I saw surprise and embarrassment mixing with the haunted expression I had glimpsed earlier outside. That fear and exhaustion surprised me all over again.

The girl's cheeks grew rosy with self-consciousness as she reached to take the CD cases from my outstretched hand. She stammered her thanks, and I felt myself begin to smile. She was lovely. I shifted forward slightly to speak to her and noticed just how very enticing she smelled.

Her scent was heady, like freesia and orange blossoms, and incredibly rich. I inhaled slowly, letting her scent roll over my tongue, and I felt my body respond in ways that I hadn't felt in since my days as a human. My chest tightened and my breath hitched in my throat. I felt myself grow hard. Jesus. I bit back a groan.

A very different smile began to take hold of my lips, my vision changing and sharpening as my pupils dilated. Take her, a voice in my mind whispered. It will be easy to get her outside. Get her in your car and she'll be yours.

But a saner part of me realized something shocking. In spite of the compulsion I felt to take the girl kneeling in front of me, my venom and bloodlust were in check. It was longing I felt, and not hunger. I felt an intense desire for the girl in front of me – my hunter's instinct was already plotting ways to take her.

Our fingers met as she took the CD cases from my hand, and a spark of energy passed between us. Her skin was incredibly warm and soft, the heat leaching into my cool skin. I frowned when she jerked away from the contact, and grieved to think I had hurt her when I saw her rubbing her fingers together.

But the jolt that traveled up my arm did more than surprise me; it snapped me back to reality. I realized that I was stalking my prey in public, in plain view of a witness. Outside of the fevered newborn year, I had never been so reckless in my five years of immortality. I realized that I had to get out of there, as quickly as possible.

Murmuring my apologies to both the girl and the proprietor, I all but ran out of the store, aware that their curious eyes were following me. Once outside, I shook my head as if to clear it, and made my way back to my car. I was so addled, I had to work hard to remember to move at a human pace, opening the door and climbing in slowly. And all along, the yearning for the girl stayed with me, curling deep inside me.

I had passed the Forks city limits when I remembered that I hadn't picked up any new music. Or looked for guitars for Rosalie. I pushed that thought away with a groan; I'd deal with my sister's ire later. Talking to Carlisle was far more important.

aDc

Knowing Carlisle would be at work, I drove to Port Angeles Hospital in hope he had a few free minutes; I was too anxious to wait until his shift ended. I pulled my phone out to call him as soon as I had parked.
The phone rang three times before the call went through, and Carlisle's voice was puzzled when he answered. "Edward? What's going on?"

"Can you take a break right now? Something... unexpected happened when I was in Forks," I began, and blew out a puff of air as I struggled to get my thoughts in order.

"Yes, I can be free in about ten minutes. Is everything all right, Edward?" The note of concern in Carlisle's voice was clear.

I closed my eyes to better focus my thoughts. Bad idea. I was immediately assaulted by images of the petite brunette from the music shop. My desire leaped higher and my body reacted immediately. I felt my eyes snap open and sat up straighter in my seat.

"Everything is fine," I said quickly. "I just really need to... try to understand what happened."

Ten minutes later, Carlisle walked out the ER doors to find me sitting on a bench with my head in my hands. He sat silently next to me for a minute, waiting for me to begin.

"Carlisle," I said quietly, keeping my eyes on my shoes. "Do you ever feel anything like... attraction for humans?"

His stillness betrayed his surprise at my words. He was quiet for a beat longer before answering. "From what I understand, it is common for our kind to feel some degree of arousal when we feed on humans.

"Did something happen with a human, Edward?" Carlisle's tone was careful and I suddenly realized what he suspected me of doing.

"Nothing like that," I said immediately, and raised my head from my hands so he could see the steady gold of my eyes. Carlisle's expression of relief made me wince. "I apologize; I didn't mean to alarm you."

Carlisle waved me off with a dry chuckle. "It's quite all right. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions; you've always been very disciplined. But you certainly surprised me."

"I surprised myself." I shook my head slowly. "I've never felt anything like it."

"Why don't you start at the beginning," Carlisle said. "Tell me what happened in Forks."

So I told him about my strange trip into the little city. I told him about the dark haired girl in the music shop, and the powerful urge I felt to understand the pain in her face. Carlisle's eyes narrowed when I described my visceral reaction to her scent and the resulting physical response. My voice grew quiet when I admitted to nearly losing control of myself in front of a witness.

"I've never felt anything that strong, Carlisle." I heard the bewilderment in my voice and knew it showed on my face. "Not even when I was a human. I dated, sure, and I enjoyed being with girls when it happened. I felt affection for them, though it never went deeper than that. But today... the desire I felt was overwhelming."

"And you felt something when you touched her?"

"Yes, a charge almost. I thought it was my imagination at first, but I noticed that she felt something too."

I ran a hand over my hair. "There was something else. I tried to hear her thoughts... I just couldn't
Carlisle nodded slowly, his face thoughtful. "Yes, I'd imagine you'd be hard pressed not to feel that way."

"But I couldn't hear her. Not a single word."

Carlisle shrugged but looked unconcerned. "That is a bit strange. But you don't use your gift regularly, Edward. Who's to say there aren't other humans or vampires with minds that are locked against gifts like yours? It may be more common than we realize."

"All right," I agreed. "But the other parts. The... arousal I experienced. That I am still experiencing, right now. And, God, the way she smelled."

"That is unusual though not unheard of," he replied, surprising me. "Though that level of attraction is typically not interspecies."

"But you've heard of something like this before?" I sat forward in my eagerness, my elbows perched on my knees.

"Yes, I have. As I said, it typically happens between beings within their own species. It is rare for a vampire to feel the mating urge for a human."

*Mating urge?* I blinked at Carlisle with my mouth ajar. "You can't be serious. We can't *mate* with them. They are far too fragile."

"You misunderstand me," he replied, leaning forward to match my pensive stance. "I am not saying you intend to take this human girl as a mate. You are, however, drawn to her in the way our kind are drawn to their mates. As you already know, the urge is deeply compelling and primarily sexual in nature. It is similar to the way humans are attracted to each other but amplified many times over."

I closed my eyes with a sigh and dropped my head back into my hands. "Is this... urge going to go away?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," Carlisle said regretfully. "Given time and exposure to others of our kind, I would assume the attraction could fade."

Carlisle paused, and I tilted my head enough to open and slide my eyes his way. His expression was troubled, and I could see that he was hesitant to speak further.

The shrill sound of his pager prompted me to press him gently. "What is it, Carlisle?"

His eyes flashed with sympathy as he stood. "Edward, I would hazard a guess that, if this girl were actually a vampire, she would be your mate."

*ADc*

My head was spinning when I climbed back into my car. I drove home mindlessly, preoccupied by my conversation with Carlisle and thoughts of the dark haired girl from the music shop. I sat in my car for a few minutes with the ignition off to gather my scattered thoughts.

It didn't seem possible that instinct was pushing me toward a human girl. That my traitorous body wanted to mate with her. How long would I have to wait before this compulsion faded? Even worse, what if it *didn't* fade?
"Damn it," I cursed softly. I pressed my forehead against the steering wheel.

I needed a distraction. And there was one thing that never failed to distract me from everything else. I got out of the car and went straight to the library, nodding at Jasper when he looked up from his place at the terminals. I sat down to bury myself in data and the search for my sister.

It worked – searching eased my tangled thoughts and relaxed the trembling tension in my body. Hours passed and my family came and went as I continued working. We didn't speak much, or rather I didn't speak other than in greeting; they seemed to read my mood and need for privacy perfectly.

It dawned on me that Carlisle must have called ahead with some kind of warning; nothing else explained my siblings' quiet. No one had asked about my outing or Forks. Rosalie hadn't mentioned music folios or guitars even once. The low hum of conversation in the room was punctuated only by mouse clicks and the scratch of pens moving over paper.

It was dark when I heard Carlisle's tread on the stairs, Esme's close behind, and I knew it was time to talk as a group about the dark haired girl in Forks.

I turned my chair around when they entered the room and tried not to sound petulant. "You told them?"

"No, Edward," Carlisle replied at once, his expression somber. "I asked the others to give you some space today, that's all. You should be the one to tell them happened."

"Spill it, E," Emmett said quietly. His eyes narrowed slightly as he waited for me to speak.

I saw the concern in my brother's face as I returned his gaze, and those feelings were reflected in the expression of every face in the room. I felt ashamed for not telling them as soon as I'd seen them. Instead I had reverted to my favorite escape, and hidden behind websites and forums.

The breath I blew out was a bit shaky, but I found a smile before I began speaking. "Turns out there's a lot more in Forks than logging trucks and flannel shirts."

aDc

"I hate to break it to you, Edward, but I'm fairly sure your urge to be near that girl will not fade with time."

Jasper's words hung in the air for a moment, and my stomach twisted. His were the first words spoken since I'd finished telling them about my experience in the music shop. They were also the very words I'd hoped not to hear.

"Christ, Jas," Rosalie murmured, her brow creased in consternation. "You need to work on your delivery."

Jasper looked at me apologetically. "I'm sorry, Edward-"

"It's okay," I cut in gently, nodding at him to continue. "What makes you say that?"

"I knew someone who had those kinds of feelings for a human," Jasper said quietly. "A young female that I traveled with before I found you all. Her name was Bree."

Jasper's dark expression told me Bree's story was not a happy one, but I didn't stop him. I needed to know what I was dealing with. "What happened to her, Jas?"
"Bree and I had been running together for a while. We were passing through Kansas City one summer, and we decided to take in a baseball game before moving on."

Jasper sighed and rubbed his left hand over his eyebrows. "I don't even know when it happened. We were on our way to the seats, moving through this huge crowd... and Bree just kind of froze. She turned her head and stared off into the crowd, almost as if someone had called her name."

I felt the hairs on back of my neck rise as Jasper said those words. *As if someone had called her.*

"That's how I felt," I said, my voice raspy. "It was like a voice was leading me, regardless of where I wanted to be."

Jasper nodded, his eyes solemn. "I'm pretty sure that if I hadn't been there, Bree would have just plucked the human out of the crowd in front of everyone. I had to force her to leave the stadium."

"Jesus," Rosalie muttered. She shook her head before she spoke again. "What happened between them? Bree and the human, I mean."

"I got her far enough away from the stadium to talk some sense into her," Jasper said quietly. "And she agreed to wait until after dark, at least. I helped her stay calm while we waited for the game to end-"

"You didn't stop her?" I stared at Jasper after cutting him off, and watched regret filter over his face. "It wasn't our way, Edward," he replied. "Bree and I hunted humans. Just like nearly everyone else in this room has at one time or another."

I closed my eyes and nodded, knowing he was right. Of the members of the family, only Carlisle and I had succeeded in hunting solely animals. My own success was thanks only to the timely intervention of the Cullens during my first newborn days.

"She picked him out in the crowd, if you can believe it," Jasper said. "He was like a homing beacon for her, even in the middle of thousands of people."

I could well believe it.

"We followed him to his home and Bree went upstairs after him. Luckily, he lived alone. I don't know what happened to set her off... whether he denied her, or if she just lost control."

"My guess would be the latter," I murmured and looked up in time to see Jasper nod sadly.

"I went up to the apartment when I heard Bree crying. She had tried to change him... but she went too far."

A soft, collective breath seemed to sweep the room as Jasper's words sunk in. I glanced up, taking in the anxious faces around me. *Damn it. I couldn't face them. I turned back to the terminals and hid my face in my hands."

"Edward, don't be like this," Rosalie said. She came to stand by my side, rubbing my shoulder to soothe me. "What happened to Bree won't happen to you."

I groaned quietly and shook my head. "How can you say something like that, Rose? You heard Jasper's story, my story; there's nowhere to hide from this. I'm sitting here right now with all of my body and most of my brain focused on that girl."
"But that's not entirely true, is it?"

Puzzled, I lifted my face to meet Rosalie's bright gaze. "I don't understand what you mean."

Her smile was brilliant and hopeful. "You sat here all afternoon, Edward, and you did what you always do. You looked at the data. You didn't go back to Forks, you didn't go hunting for that human. Hell, you hardly noticed we were here until you stopped searching."

"She's right," Emmett chimed in, a grin spreading over his face. "You didn't tell us what had happened for hours. You may want that girl, but you were damned good at distracting yourself from it."

I turned around and looked at the apprehensive expressions slowly brightening. "I can do this," I whispered.

"I think you can, Edward," Carlisle said immediately. "You'll need our help when you're hunting and at school, but if you can keep yourself preoccupied, the girl will be safe."

"Yes, but for how long," I murmured with a frown. "You can't monitor me all the time for eternity; that's hardly fair to you."

"We can move again," Esme said and held up her hand when I began to protest. "I think putting space between you and the girl will ease your compulsion. We'll wait six months or so and then find another city, maybe on the East Coast this time.

"Or the girl may do our work herself. You said she was a teenager; if she's in high school she may be researching universities to attend. She could be gone before we even need to make a move."

I felt the spark of excitement catch. Turning back to the terminals, I started pulling Forks's public records at once, my fingers flashing over the keyboard. "Well I guess I'd better find out who this mystery girl is. If I know what she is and where she goes, I can keep myself moving in the opposite direction."

aDc

"Isabella Marie Swan," I said, handing Emmett the pages I'd printed. The others had gone to other parts of the house, but I knew they could hear me. "Only child of Charles and Renee Swan, born September 13, 1987, in the city of Forks."

"So she is in high school," Emmett said, flipping through the pages. "And on track to graduate soon. Esme was right; Miss Swan will remove herself from the area in time to prevent us having to move."

The sound of Rosalie and Jasper high-fiving each other from somewhere in the house made us both chuckle.

"As long as you behave yourself," Emmett continued and fixed me with a stare. "No pressure, right?"

I snorted in response and watched Emmett read through the data I had collected. It took me a moment to ask the question that had nagged me since the family meeting an hour before.

"Em. Did you ever feel anything like a... mating urge with anyone before Rose?"

"No," he said, handing the pages back to me. "I'd sometimes see females I thought were attractive. But I didn't feel anything remotely like a mating urge until Rose. And I'm not just saying that because
I'm afraid she'll tear my arms off."

"Liar," Rose mocked him as she passed by the door, and Emmett grinned.

I ran my finger over the letters spelling Isabella's name. "Carlisle has said the same about Esme; as soon as he saw her, something clicked. Well... what if I never feel the mating urge again? Is it possible for our kind to have more than one mate?"

"Sorry, E, I have no idea." Emmett's voice was surprisingly gentle. "Have you considered that... maybe you're supposed to change the girl? To claim her?"

"That hardly seems right," I said with a grimace. "She has her whole life in front of her; I can't be responsible for taking that away."

I turned back to the screens and looked at the arrangement of windows displaying the details and the photos I had unearthed. It had been Isabella's yearbook photo that had led me to unlock her identity.

Now I knew where Isabella Swan lived and went to school, and how well or poorly she performed in her classwork. I knew that her parents had divorced, and mother lived in California with her second husband. I knew too that Isabella hadn't returned to her mother's house in several years.

It was clear, as I scanned the data, that Isabella led a quiet life. She did not participate in school clubs or sports. She had few after school activities. But her online activity showed a spike in usage during the last several weeks. I looked through the different websites and communities she had been visiting and felt my stomach sink.

Isabella Swan was accessing sites centering around trauma and recovery. Now I had a different question burning in my consciousness: what had happened to her?
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter authors: transitory07 and karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Monster, how should I feel?*
  *Creatures lie here,*
  *Looking through the window.*
  *That night he caged her,*
  *Bruised and broke her,*
  *He struggled closer*
  *Then he stole her.*

"Monster" - Meg and Dia

"Can anyone tell me what Shakespeare's source of inspiration for Macbeth was?" Mr. Mason's voice carried over the sea of mostly disinterested, bored students.

Even a straight-A, literature-loving geek like me was staring out the window at the cascading silver rain, chin cupped in one hand. Thoughts of the strange, beautiful boy from the music store had drifted in and out of my mind constantly since Sunday.

"Bella?" My head snapped when Mr. Mason turned in my direction, "Do you have the answer?"

"Oh... umm," I peered down at my notes, "Holinshed's Chronicles."

Mr. Mason nodded, satisfied with my answer, and I went back to daydreaming.

The week had been uneventful, with no sign of the strange boy anywhere in town. Not that I'd checked every single place but Forks was so tiny, it wouldn't have been hard to cross paths with him if he drove over from Port Angeles again. Unfortunately, I didn't even have a name to start searching.

I sighed internally, and watched the drops of rain accumulating on the window glass. The image of the boy's face was etched in my brain. Those high cheekbones, the prominent jaw line... I imagined myself tracing the outline with my fingers.

It surprised me how many of his features I could remember, given that I'd mostly kept my eyes on the floor the entire time he'd been standing in front of me. However, I had felt safe watching him once he'd turned around and walked away. I remembered he had a lean and tall frame. His backside was nice too...

*Oh, my gosh. Did I really just think that? My cheeks flushed with sudden, unexpected heat.*

The day continued to crawl by, but I caught a break during an achingly slow calculus lecture on U-substitution. Mr. Varner sent me to the front office with a note for Ms. Cope, and I almost sighed...
with relief as I walked out into the mostly silent hallway.

A stack of college brochures lay on a table by the office with a sign that read, "Juniors, make plans now!" Schools like Seattle University, Antioch, University of Washington, and University of Puget Sound were featured, as well as Bellevue and Tacoma Community College. I picked up a SU brochure on my way out.

It had been two weeks since I'd spoken to Renee over the phone. I'd been trying to save money on the cell phone Phil had given me for my last birthday. Because she didn't hear from me often enough, my flustered mother sent me emails nearly every day of the week. Renee even suggested we try Skype on our computers, but the Internet connection at Charlie's was unreliable.

And truthfully, I felt self-conscious about letting my mom see me at the moment. I wasn't sure she'd appreciate the visual of me without makeup, sitting in my tiny, somewhat faded bedroom, with rain pattering against the window. She might've thought I was depressed and then I'd have to convince her not to send me a plane ticket back to Sacramento.

I called Renee that night after dinner and looked over the SU brochure while she chattered on about the seaside restaurant where Phil had taken her.

"It's in Santa Cruz," she was saying, "When you come over this summer, we should take a little trip by boat, what do you think? We could sail around South Beach and Half Moon Bay. Oh, they have the best lobster in Capitola, Bella. It's a good thing I don't have cholesterol problems like your father because I've been eating as much as I can get past Phil!"

I smiled at her bubbly giggle. "Don't overdo it, Mom. You might not have high cholesterol but too much rich food does make you nauseous," I reminded her, flipping through pictures of the lush green campus.

"Oh don't worry, honey. So what's new with you?"

"I might go visit some colleges this Saturday," I replied, staring at the Arts and Sciences section of the pamphlet.

"That's really nice, Bella," Renee said, in a tone that meant she didn't think it was nice at all. "But are you really thinking about staying in Forks after high school? I mean, you hate the weather there."

I shifted uncomfortably on my checkered quilt. "Well, maybe I'll just stay a bit longer for Charlie. I could always transfer somewhere else."

My mom's tone turned serious then, and I could hear a hint of indignation as well. "Bella, you are not responsible for your father. He's a grown man. You don't have to stay in a place you hate just so Charlie can eat a healthy dinner once in awhile."

I sighed, not wanting to make her even more flustered and angry with Charlie. It was hardly fair to blame him for being a terrible cook.

"Mom, that's not the only reason I want to stay in Forks. It's just... not that bad here, really. And anyway, it's too early to make any real decisions. I'm just going to visit the campus, to look around, okay?"

She murmured "okay" and the conversation wound down a bit. We hung up around 9:30 pm, and I turned on my collection of Chopin's Nocturnes to prepare myself for another moonless night in my
It was mercifully dry on Saturday, with just a thin layer of cloud cover, and I couldn't help smiling at my luck. Charlie suggested I take Jacob or Angela with me on the trip to Seattle, but I assured him I'd driven long distances before and would be all right. When he commented on the size of the city, I reminded him that I'd lived in larger ones.

I set out just before noon, preferring to travel a bit earlier in case the dry weather changed. Driving in the rain was inevitable in Washington. Getting caught in a thunderstorm on a winding highway with huge logging trucks, however, was still an unpleasant experience for me.

I rolled the windows down as I drove, and let the cool breeze air out the truck's musty interior. The MapQuest map I had printed was lying on the passenger seat, but it wasn't hard to find the campus once I entered downtown Seattle. An elegant fountain set in a medium-sized pond was the first detail of the campus that I really noticed.

I had trouble finding a parking space, but finally found a spot near the library on Cherry Street. I left the truck in front of a cute coffee house with Parisian style cafe chairs out front, and saw other boutiques and cafes lining the sidewalk. There was violin music coming from the coffee house, and the charming sound helped soothe some of my feelings of intimidation. It felt like a friendly place, and I thought about stopping for coffee after I got the tour out of the way.

The first place I stopped was the fountain I had seen on my way in. The pond was on the smaller side, but it was lovely with rocks and lush-looking plants surrounding the area. There were stairs and benches leading down to the pond, and tall Western Hemlocks provided shady spots.

Next, I turned towards the enormous Lemieux Library, making my way across the commons. According to the brochure, there were 216,677 books behind that glass structure. Just the mere thought made my eyes glaze over.

Students wearing wrinkle-free cotton sweaters and fringed scarves rushed by me, leaving traces of some crisp perfume or other. They looked like advertisements for the images of intelligence and academic excellence boasted about on the school's website. Though I'd grown up in a California suburb, I was sure I looked like a sort of country bumpkin in my ratty jeans and eyelet lace blouse.

Besides the library, I also visited the Casey Building. More than anything, I realized that I wasn't ready to declare a major yet. The College of Arts and Sciences was something that interested me, but I didn't feel the need to see the law school or the nursing college. I didn't have the fearless attributes of a lawyer or the physical endurance needed to be a nurse.

There was still a chapel and business school somewhere, but the campus was too large; I wouldn't be able to see it all in one afternoon. I doubted the students had seen it all themselves.

Even as I continued my tour, I knew it was unlikely I'd be going to SU. I'd need financial aid and loans to pay the whopping annual tuition of $32,400 and I wasn't keen on falling into that kind of debt at my age. If I wanted to stay in Washington for Charlie's sake, I'd have to look for a less demanding, more affordable school. Fortunately, I still had Evergreen, Northeast, and Puget Sound to look at.

Around 2:00 pm, my stomach started growling and I began walking back towards Cherry Street where I'd left the truck in search of somewhere to eat. My mind was distracted by thoughts of all the things I'd seen that afternoon, and I paid little attention to my surroundings.
I didn't see or hear the big man that stepped out of the alley until I nearly ran into him. I stumbled backward with a gasp and flinched when a pair of large hands grasped my elbows as if to steady me.

"Oh, excuse me," I squeaked.

"Do you need help, miss?" the man asked, leaning closer and casting a shadow over my form.

I took a step sideways, not wanting to make the movement look too obvious.

"No, thank you," I murmured, glancing over at the street sign ahead. Apparently, I was on Post Alley. *Crap.* I'd taken the wrong exit off the campus.

*Cherry Street should be just around the corner,* I told myself, and continued down the street lined with restaurants and shops.

The crowds seemed to be thinning as I moved along. It looked as though people were heading back to work after their lunch break. I saw two pedestrians crossing over to Pike Market and I wondered if I should follow them and ask directions.

Then I saw a familiar silhouette crossing the intersection coming towards me. It was the same hulking man from before. I told myself it could have been a coincidence, but I turned back in the direction of the market anyway, seeing it as a more practical route.

I sucked in a breath sharply, frustrated with my terrible sense of direction. This was just like me; getting lost when I had promised Charlie I wouldn't. There was a tea shop and some kind of book store-bar a bit further ahead, but no other shops until the next street. The buildings on the far side of the intersection looked older, and the alleys appeared narrower as I squinted in an effort to see further.

"Hey, I like your perfume."

I ground to a stop when I heard the rough masculine voice echoing on my left. Now I knew it wasn't a coincidence; it was the same man. He was following me.

For the first time, I noticed he was dressed rather shabbily compared to other people I'd seen in that area. He was wearing ripped denim shorts, sandals and a soiled button-down shirt. He didn't look to be much older than I was, and could have been a college student, though I doubted he attended the pristine campus I'd just left.

"Thanks," I murmured in a small voice that was barely audible. I knew he was inching closer from the noise his sandals were making on the pavement and I turned right on a whim, heading further into the alley.

The alley was occupied mostly by warehouses but I could see another intersection at the end. Keeping my gaze focused straight ahead, I walked faster, feeling my chest tighten with nerves. That voice came from behind me again, though I couldn't hear his footsteps this time.

"Hey, come on, sweetie. Don't walk away. Let's sit and talk somewhere."

A nauseous feeling spread through my stomach, erasing any hunger that I had felt just minutes before. Now all I could concentrate on was the next intersection ahead. But, the intersection seemed too far away and there were no other paths out of the alley to take.

I could hear the man behind me, only a couple of feet away now. His string of inquiries continued but my mind was racing, and I couldn't make out what he was saying through his babble of words.
The dominant emotion I could wrap my head around was panic.

_He's going to touch me. He's going to grab me. He's going to touch me!_

"Don't be like that, baby. You're too pretty. Give me a smile. I'll take you somewhere nice."

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried my best to inhale and exhale normally, but my body was reacting to the fear. My only instinct was to run away, even with my eyes closed, even though I tripped over my own feet most of the time.

And then my memories rose up and nearly choked me.

_I was shivering. He'd just pulled me out of the pool. I stared at the little drops of water cascading down my navy blue bathing suit as his large hands wrapped a towel around my shoulders. He wound it tight as he steered me towards the awning above the water fountains. The ground was hot under my feet but for some reason, the heat didn't warm me. I felt ice cold as Jimmy's hands slipped under the towel. His rough, hard knuckles scraped against my collarbone and my stomach lurched._

My stomach was turning over in a familiar way but I didn't want to throw up the way I'd wanted when I was younger. Now I just wanted to get as far away from this alley as possible. _Oh, God._

"No," I whispered. I slid to a halt and stared at the long sidewalk stretching before me. The intersection still felt too far away but I was in clear view of the street, so cars would be able to spot me.

Spinning around, I faced the man, planting the soles of my shoes firmly on the ground to keep from losing my balance.

"Get away from me!" I exclaimed as loudly as I could. Much to my distress, I realized my voice was raspy rather than strong.

The man stood frozen but his expression didn't change. It was... obstinate. And smug. He saw the fear in my face. Suddenly, rage replaced some of my panic. I didn't want to be afraid of this man or anyone anymore. I was tired of being afraid.

"Stay away from me," I said again, taking a step back without turning.

The man held his hands up as if in surrender, though he was obviously not giving up. He was just trying to pacify a frightened girl into thinking he wouldn't reach out to grab her.

"Honey, I just want to get to know you better. Come on, beautiful," he said slyly.

The ear-splitting sound of tires straining on the pavement made us both jump. A dark sports car was speeding across the intersection in our direction. I gasped as it blew through a red light and other drivers honked their horns furiously.

The car came to a screeching halt against the curb and nearly knocked over the man that had followed me. I watched, wide-eyed as, he turned and vanished back into the alley.

The dark car's passenger door swung open and a beautiful but frighteningly angry voice said, "Get in."

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Jasper was right: the mating urge I felt for Isabella Swan wasn't going to fade. I was like an addict in withdrawal and I'd only been around the girl _once_.

Five days passed following my encounter with her in Forks. Five very long days spent fighting an overwhelming desire to see her, hear her voice, and breathe in her luscious scent. There was a feeling in my chest like being led or called, just like the moment in Forks when I'd first seen her. I occupied myself with data mining as a means of distraction, but thoughts of Isabella were never far from my mind.

School, once safe and boring, became a dangerous time of day. With so little in my classes to distract me from my anxiety, I was constantly on the edge of my seat. I managed to keep myself from walking out of school by re-examining memorized search data as the hours droned by slowly.

Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper kept close tabs on me in and out of school. They met me in between classes and during free periods, making sure I didn't wander off the school grounds. I couldn't bring myself to feel irritation at their constant, hovering presence. Their babysitting efforts kept me away from Forks and Isabella Swan.

Things were easier to manage at home, where I could close myself in the library with the tools that most calmed my agitation. I redoubled my search efforts and occupied myself by weeded through huge volumes of information. Even so, Isabella's face and voice crept into my thoughts, often side by side with Alice's. Both girls were with me no matter what I was doing.

The file of information I had gathered about Isabella was always at hand, both on paper and online. I listed details from the girl's personal history in my notebook, more for comfort than anything else. When I felt most anxious, I pulled up the few photos I had found of her, and remembered how much prettier she was in person. Looking at the images was a poor substitute for being near her, but they were better than nothing.

After some initial hesitation, I looked into the trauma support sites Isabella had been frequenting. One site with chat and journal functions caught my eye in particular and I look closely at the security architecture. Cracking the site's database would give me access to user chats and messages, and perhaps lead me to the reasons behind Isabella's interest. But the site's security was excellent and my efforts to get past it failed.

I considered posing as a human teenager by creating a phony user account. While that plan would certainly allow me to facilitate contact with Isabella, I was reluctant to go down that path. I felt a strange sense of guilt at the thought of approaching the girl under false pretenses, particularly given the topic of the website.

If I had to guess, something in Isabella's life had scarred her rather badly. I wanted to understand her, and know what had happened that make her look so sad. But I was already creeping around the periphery of her life trying to get closer. I didn't want to add to her trauma by pretending to be something more than I was.

I spent enough time hiding behind a human disguise every day.

aDc

By Friday evening, I could no longer bear not knowing what had happened to Isabella. I had decided to create a phony user account on the trauma support site when Rosalie's grousing caught my attention.

"Edwaar!"

With extreme reluctance, I turned away from the screens and raised an eyebrow at her irritated expression. "You've really got that human whining thing down, Rose. Nicely done."
"Oh, shut it," she said with a snort and crossed her arms over her chest. "Dusk fell over an hour ago, buddy. It's time to go hunting and you're holding us up."

"I hunted last weekend," I said with a shrug. "I don't really need to right now."

Rose pursed her lips before leaning over to pull me from my seat by one arm. "That may be true. However, the rest of us would like to go tonight; we don't hold with the same ideas about self-deprivation that you do."

"Fine, fine, that doesn't explain why I have to go along... oh." I caught a knowing glint in Rose's eye and realized that she and the others were only doing what I had been asked of them.

"You know very well that you're not allowed to be on your own right now," Rose reminded me unnecessarily. "So when we hunt, you hunt."

"Emmett's going to be your stalking buddy tonight," she continued with a chuckle, and gave my arm a squeeze. "He's in the mood for some rough housing, so I'd prepare myself for a little big game hunting, if I were you."

"It's a good thing I'm not very fond of this shirt," I replied. Any time Emmett's playful side came out during a hunt, we could count on losing some clothes to damage. It wasn't enough that he pursue wrestling with the biggest animals we could find; the rest of us had to participate as well. We batted around bears, cougars, and even moose, acting like the world's largest house cats.

"That is why you are hunting with Emmett tonight," Rose said. "I would like to stay clean, unlike you two oafs."

I gave Rose a smirk before turning to pick up my notebook. It was almost in my back pocket when Rose's hand closed over my wrist. My voice was tight when I met her eyes. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Edward, you can't take that thing with you on a hunt," Rosalie said with a frown. "The last thing you'll have time to do is check over those ridiculous lists-"

"I'm not going to check them," I cut in angrily. "I just feel better having it with me."

"I'm not going to check them," I cut in angrily. "I just feel better having it with me."

Rosalie shook her head adamantly before taking the notebook out of my hand and placing it back on the workspace. "Absolutely not! I know you've got it bad for the Swan girl, but you have to step away from it for a couple of hours."

"I am stepping away from it!" My voice grew louder than I expected it to and Rosalie frowned deeply. "This isn't just about Isabella Swan. It's about Alice, too. Every time I walk out of this room, I'm stepping away from it, from them, and it's the hardest part of every day. Christ, can't you cut me some slack, Rose?"

I tried to push past Rosalie and let out a frustrated huff when she blocked me.

"I'm trying to help you, Edward." The emotion in her low voice surprised me and the plea I saw in her eyes melted my anger. "I know that book makes you feel... calmer, somehow. That you feel as though you need it to keep yourself together when you're having a bad moment.

"So what happens when you take it out into the woods and it gets destroyed? Or the photos you have tailed in there are ruined?"
I groaned as her words hit home; losing any part of the notebook would be difficult for me.

"What if a bear ate it?" Rose's voice grew suddenly impish as she continued. "Or it got caught in Emmett's mouth while he was wrestling with a bear?"

I couldn't help laughing then, and Rosalie snickered when Emmett cursed us both from downstairs. I nodded and tossed the book back on the workspace. "You're right. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"No need to apologize," Rose replied as we walked out of the library. "Hearing you admit that I'm right is apology enough."

It was dawn when we returning from hunting and, as predicted, most of my and Emmett's clothes were destroyed. After changing, I spent the next several hours investigating the trauma support site Isabella had been accessing. Using a phony account, I looked at journal entries and user profiles, as well as checking into groups, meeting rooms, and articles.

The more I looked around, the more concerned and saddened I became. There were so many posts from users sharing heartbreaking experiences. There were stories of foster care gone terribly wrong, rape, substance abuse, and mental illness, all happening to young people like Isabella.

Were some of these things happening to her? My mind raced and my stomach curled at the thought. Is that why she looks so haunted?

I put my head in my hands and tried to calm myself. The idea that something as awful as the stories I had read had happened to Isabella was horrifying. What if things like this is happening to her right now?

Then another thought struck me dumb.

Oh, God. Alice. What if these kinds of things are happening to Alice? I felt ill. And angry, so incredibly angry at the monster who had taken my sister. But I was most angry with myself. It was my fault Alice was gone, my fault that I hadn't been able to get her away from that sick bastard before it was too late.

Then a realization dawned on me. It was too late to help Alice. I could only hope that she wasn't enduring the terrible things I had been reading about, and that I would find her someday. I couldn't do anything for my sister... but I could do something to help Isabella Swan. I could help her get away from whatever was putting that look in her eye.

Stuffing my notebook in my pocket, I was downstairs and out the door before anyone else in the house had even realized I had moved. The others were streaming out of the house as my car hit the street, my tires squealing on the pavement as I accelerated down the street.

My phone rang almost immediately. I ignored the calls for several minutes before admitting to myself that not answering was sure to bring the entire family after me. I had to convince them that I had myself under control and was no danger to Isabella. I wasn't sure if that was actually true, but I knew I couldn't stay away any longer. Not until I knew that the girl was safe in her own home.

I picked up the next call with a grunt of impatience. "Yeah."

"Edward, where the hell do you think you are going?" Emmett barked into the phone. I could hear the rest of the family talking excitedly in the background.
"Look, I know I should have said something, but I'm okay," I said tersely, trying to control my temper. "I'm not going to do anything; I just need to make sure Isabella is okay."

"Turn the car around and get back here, now," my brother retorted. "It's not too late to make this okay, Edward! We'll meet you half-way."

"Emmett," I said as quietly as I could. "I give you my word that I have everything under control. All I'm going to do is make sure the girl is safe. I won't speak to her; I won't even get out of my car. I can't explain right now, but I need to know she is all right, Emmett. Please understand that."

A short but heavy silence met my words, and I wondered if the family was already piling into their cars to chase me down. Then I heard Emmett exhale a long breath and almost sighed with relief myself.

"Okay, E. We're trusting you with this because your crazy brain works in ways that ours don't. We're going to call you every hour to check in. If you don't pick up, we're coming for you."

"Got it," I murmured gratefully. "Thanks, Emmett."

"And Edward? If anything changes, you need to call us. I am not playing with you here, man; we're all putting ourselves on the line for you."

"I'll call if I need to," I promised before ending the call.

A flash of color caught my eye as I pocketed my phone, and I glanced up to see a weathered red Chevy pickup headed east in the opposite lane. My eyes widened in surprise as the truck passed and I realized that Isabella Swan was the driver.

"This ought to be interesting," I muttered as I drove on the shoulder and swung the car around. Where Isabella was headed at just after noon on a Saturday remained to be seen.

aDc

I kept a careful distance as I followed Isabella, passing Olympia and Tacoma as the miles passed and approaching downtown Seattle before long. Once in the city, traffic forced me back even further, but her behemoth truck was easy to keep in sight. The pull in my chest was stronger than it had been all week, and filled me with a jittery sort of energy. I doubted that Isabella had seen or recognized me when our vehicles had passed. But I pulled on a baseball cap that I kept in the car, just to be safe, making sure the bill rode low over my face to obscure my features.

My phone rang during the trip as scheduled, and I answered dutifully, amused and unsettled at the relief in the voices on the other end. I neglected to mention that I had followed Isabella to Seattle, but I determined to confess everything later.

Following Isabella down a narrow street, I passed her truck as she pulled into a parking space. I found a spot on the next street and quickly doubled back. She had reached the end of the street when I turned the corner and was walking briskly toward what appeared to be a college campus. I took a moment to savor the delicious smell of her fresh scent trail before following her onto the grounds of Seattle University.

I quickly realized Isabella was touring the school, perhaps with the intent of applying. She spent a couple of hours wandering around the campus, looking at the library and some of the larger buildings with interest. She also seemed to be feeling the place out, as if determining whether the school's personality matched with her own.
I kept out of the way, keeping my distance as I followed Isabella so that her scent did not overwhelm me. Despite my care, however, my desire grew increasingly intense as I watched her. She was so lovely, easily outshining the average-looking students that moved around her. Not for the first time, I wished I could hear what was going on behind those troubled, dark eyes. I focused my attention to hear the thoughts of those around me, and listened without surprise to the appreciative thoughts of many who passed her. Isabella, however, seemed not to notice the glances and smiles aimed her way as she moved with easy grace in her jeans and delicate blouse.

I answered the faithful phone calls from my family without hesitation, grateful for their grounding effect on me. I held my notebook and phone as I shadowed Isabella, using the small objects as touchstones to stay focused and calm.

Isabella left the campus at 2:00 pm, walking back toward the streets where our cars were parked. I walked ahead of her this time, reaching my car first so I could be ready to follow where she drove next. I pulled my car out and idled at the corner, waiting for her to catch up.

Five minutes passed, and then ten without sight of Isabella. Worry began to bubble up in my chest, but I willed myself to be calm. She could have stopped for coffee or even something to eat, I told myself. Then I rolled my eyes at my own poor judgment for having gone ahead rather than following her.

After fifteen minutes, I was unable to keep calm, no matter what I told myself. I drove back toward the campus, watching for Isabella as I went. I couldn't see her but continued to feel the pulling sensation in my chest. It drew me like a magnet toward where I knew she must be, but she did not appear. It was as if she had vanished into the overcast sky.

Where are you, Isabella?

My unease grew as the blocks passed with no sign of her, becoming something like panic that flooded my chest and head. I heard my teeth grinding as my body reacted to the anxiety, and I had to concentrate very hard not to crush the steering wheel in my hands.

I listened to the thoughts of the humans around me, hoping that she had stopped somewhere and I would find her through someone else's mind. A babble of loose words and thoughts swirled in my head, moving and shifting like vapor: exam questions, grocery lists, recipes, I love you's. And then a string of words that flooded me with anger.

"Mmm, so pretty. No one can see us back here. Don't run, baby. Let me take care of you."

It was Isabella, I was certain of it. Understanding blazed in my brain: the alleys. Isabella was there, behind the buildings. My body reacted immediately, my hands spinning the steering wheel back toward Cherry Street where Isabella had left her truck. A growl grew in my chest as I drove, filling the car with sounds of my rage.

And then I saw them, at the mouth of an alley on the other side of the next intersection. Isabella was facing a grimy looking man, her body rigid with emotion. The man's face, God help me, was smug as he looked at her; I knew I would kill him if I got my hands on him.

Isabella took a step back just as the man held up his hands, his face twisting in an ugly smile.

"Stay away from me," I heard Bella say, her voice thin with fear.

"Honey, I just want to get to know you better," the man replied, and my growling drowned out his
next words.

I stomped on the gas, sending my car roaring through the intersection and toward the alley. Isabella whipped around at the sound of my tires screeching over the pavement, her eyes wide with shock. The man with her stepped forward in surprise, standing almost at Isabella's side. He stood close enough to touch her. I ground my teeth as I blew through a red light and heard the sound of horns blaring after me.

With a twist of the wheel, I pulled the car to a screeching halt against the curb, causing the man at Isabella's side to jump back. His face was blank with terror as he turned and fled into the alley.

"Get in!" I pushed open the passenger door for the frightened girl, realizing too late that in my heightened state of emotion, I was nearly shouting.

Isabella's already pale face drained completely of color; even her lips were white. She wavered on her feet, her eyelids fluttering, and I knew she was going to fall. In a flash, I was at her side, catching hold of her arms as her knees started to wobble.

The energy leapt between us again when our skins made contact, surprising us both. The girl gave a strained gasp and I cringed as I led her toward the open door of the car. Her delicious scent flooded my nose, rolling over me as I stiffened, but I shook it off when Isabella stumbled against me. I cursed myself inwardly for further frightening her, unsure if it was my angry tone, my preternatural movements, or the man that had been threatening her. Perhaps it was everything combined.

When we reached the car, I gently helped her to sit, guiding her head down in between her knees as I crouched down on the curb by her legs.

"Breathe deeply, Isabella," I said quietly, rubbing her back in what I hoped were soothing circles. "You're okay. He's gone and I'm not going to hurt you."

"How...?" I heard her whisper before she trailed off.

I bent down until our heads were nearly pressed together, leaning forward on my left arm for a balance. "Say again," I urged softly, gritting my teeth against the intensity of her scent.

"How do you know my name," she murmured, and turned her head enough to meet my gaze.

I looked into those deep brown eyes, and saw the fear and fatigue I had glimpsed before. I frowned and made to get to my feet but stopped when five slender fingers curled around my left elbow; Isabella was touching me, holding me in place beside her. Her touch burned through my shirt and into my skin like a brand.

"How?" she whispered again.

"I looked you up," I said calmly, watching the color slowly return to her face. "Forks public records are easily obtained if one knows where to look. I found your Forks High yearbook photo and went from there."

Isabella nodded slowly, continuing to breathe steadily as she looked at me. "That's a little creepy, don't you think?"

I felt a stab of distress and guilt until I saw the corner of her mouth quiver. She was teasing me. "Yeah, well, I didn't have a name after I saw you at the music shop and a guy's gotta start somewhere. But I'm sorry to be a creeper."
Isabella nodded again, the small grin spreading over her mouth. As she recovered herself, a range of expressions filtered into her face and eyes: curiosity, shyness, embarrassment. Not wanting her to feel badly about nearly fainting, I gently helped her sit up again, rubbing her back until she was upright.

"Do you think you can stand to ride in the car for a few blocks?" I asked. She had broken out in a light sweat and I carefully smoothed some strands of damp hair back from her face. "I can give you a ride back to your car when you're ready."

"I'm okay," she said, heaving a big sigh. "Thank you for helping me."

"I'm sorry I frightened you." I frowned again. "I lost my temper when I saw that guy hassling you. I didn't mean to be so abrupt with you."

She shook her head vehemently for a moment, but then seemed to think better of it. Her eyes grew wide and she pressed her fingers to her temples as if to steady her brain. "Oh, crap, that wasn't a good idea."

A startled laugh burst out of me and she grinned in response when I put my hand back on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," she said in a stronger voice. "You did startle me, but it was more adrenaline from that guy freaking me out. And the fact that I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

I straightened up at once and used my hands to turn her and tuck her legs into the car.

"What are you doing?" She stared at my hands as they briefly met knees before lifting her eyes to meet mine.

I stood and gave her a smile, my hand on the open door. "I'm taking you to lunch, Isabella."

"You don't have to do that," she protested weakly, just before her stomach growled loudly. Her cheeks turned pink as she huffed out a laugh.

"Uh-huh. You and your stomach have a good time discussing that while I find someplace to eat," I said smugly. "You can't drive back to Forks on an empty stomach, Isabella."

"It's Bella," she said then, and smiled shyly when I looked at her. "Only my grandmother called me Isabella."

"Bella, then," I said softly, my chest tightening with emotion as I watched the smile transform her face. "I'm Edward."

Chapter End Notes

At last, they really meet! But Bella's right, Edward... you are a bit of a creeper. You have some explaining to do.

The next chapter will be Edward's.

We love to hear from you and thank you so much for reading.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Your lonely voice*
*Calls across the starlit coast*
*Reaching out to be seen*
"She Cries Your Name" – Beth Orton

Watching a shy smile work its way over Bella Swan's face was like glimpsing the sun coming out from behind rain clouds; her whole face lit up. The pained expression in her eyes receded slightly, replaced by soft warmth that made me smile in return. I decided in that moment to make Bella smile every chance I got.

Closing the passenger side door, I walked around the car and slid in behind the wheel. That was when I realized I had made a grave error. Distracted by my concern for Bella's welfare, I hadn't thought through my physical reaction to her presence in an enclosed space. Now she sat two feet away, looking disheveled and lovely, and running her eyes over my face curiously. The thump of her heart and the rush of her blood beneath her skin were loud in my ears. Her luscious scent filled my nose with freesia and orange blossom mixed with the salty tang of sweat. I bit my lip when I felt myself grow hard.

*Oh, hell.* My hands trembled as I started the car, and I struggled to get a hold of myself as I pulled the car back into the stream of traffic.

"Um." The sound of her soft voice snapped me out of my lust fog, and I took in the puzzled expression on her face. "Is that your phone? That's the second time I've heard it since you started the car."

"Right, thanks." I reached into my pocket for the chirping phone and saw Jasper's number flash across the screen. "Excuse me, that's my brother calling. I need to take this."

Bella nodded, turning to look out the passenger window while I picked up the call. I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder and thumbed the sunroof control, breathing deeply when fresh air poured into the car.

"Yeah," I spoke into the phone, grimacing at the roughness of my voice.

Jasper's voice was urgent on the other end. "Edward? Why didn't you pick up when I called? Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, it's okay," I said, taking care not to alert Bella that she was the topic of the phone call. "Sorry I missed you; I was distracted for a minute and didn't hear the phone."
He paused for a beat before speaking. "You're all right? And the girl is all right, too?"

"Yes, to both. I'm, ah, making sure of the second part right now, actually," I said, glancing at Bella's profile at the same moment that she coughed into her hand. The noise was soft but perfectly audible to vampire hearing, even over a phone.

There was another pause where I could almost hear Jasper putting the pieces together before he swore softly. "Was that her? She's with you right now, Edward? And you're okay with that?"

"I'm working on being okay with it," I murmured, steering my car past a honking taxi.

"Are you... where are you? Are you driving?"

"I'm parking actually," I replied dryly. I eased the car into a parking spot close to where she had parked her truck before turning off the ignition. "Just grabbing some lunch before the ride back. I'll be back a bit later this afternoon."

"Jesus, Edward, you're way crazier than I gave you credit for. But you sound... surprisingly okay. Call you again in a couple of hours?"

"Yeah, Jas." I ended the call and got out of the car, pocketing my phone as I walked around to open Bella's door.

"Thank you," she muttered as she stepped out. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes were trained on the ground as if she was reluctant to meet my eye.

Wondering if she was still embarrassed at nearly fainting or feeling ill, I bent forward slightly to catch her eye. "Are you all right, Bella?"

Her head snapped up and she blinked at me in surprise. "Yes! Sorry, I'm just not used to anyone holding doors for me or taking me out to lunch. Or, ha, scaring off creepy guys in back alleys."

"Okay," I replied, feeling confused by the shift in her mood. I slid my hands in my pockets as we walked along the sidewalk.

Bella surprised me by groaning abruptly. "Oh, gosh, I haven't even thanked you properly for your help. I don't even know your last name. Wow, I am so sorry-"

I shook my head and interrupted her swiftly. "My last name is Cullen. And please don't thank me. Anyone would have done the same in my place."

"Maybe not." Bella's voice was quiet but firm, as were her eyes when she met my gaze. "Thank you for your help, Edward Cullen."

I nearly stopped walking at the sound of her sweet, slightly husky voice saying my name. Edward. An almost painful wave of longing broke over me. Shaking myself inwardly, I gave her a small smile, not entirely trusting the steadiness of my voice.

"Where are we going, anyway?" she asked, turning her head to look at our surroundings. "This street looks kind of familiar."

"It should," I replied. We had reached the end of the block and I gestured to the Cherry Street sign on the corner. "I saw a coffee house just across from where you parked your truck and thought that would be a good place to grab a bite."
Bella's steps slowed and then stopped, drawing my glance, but the frown on her face really caught my attention. My stomach sank when I saw the wariness returning to her eyes.

"How did you know where I parked my truck?" she asked slowly.

Damn it.

Bella's voice was low and her expression troubled as she faced me. "Why are you in Seattle, Edward, and why this street out of the whole city? Did you follow me today? Because, you know, I'm having trouble believing that this is some kind of coincidence."

"Look, Bella, I know I owe you an explanation," I murmured, watching her distress and confusion grow. "But for right now, can we just get you something to eat? I would rather you didn't faint again."

"I didn't faint ever," she grumbled, and I almost smiled at the stubborn scowl on her pretty face. "Don't be so dramatic."

"Nearly fainted then," I amended, gesturing again toward the coffee house further down the block. "Please, let's find someplace to sit, and then we can talk."

I was relieved when Bella resumed walking, and followed her the remaining half-block and into the coffee house. She did not speak other than to order a sandwich and coffee at the counter, though she raised an eyebrow when I ordered only hot tea.

The silence grew increasingly heavy when we sat in a booth by the front window. Bella kept her eyes lowered while she ate her lunch, and a feeling of gloom overtook me as I sat beside her. I curled my fingers around the cup of tea, letting the heat warm my cool skin, and wondered how to bridge this sudden breach.

"Hey. Come on, Edward," Bella murmured. I glanced up to find her eying me with regret. "Don't look so sad. I shouldn't have been so sharp with you."

"You have nothing to apologize for," I replied somberly. "I wouldn't blame you for never speaking to me again, Bella."

"First I'd have to know what terrible thing you've done," she said pointedly, and wiped her mouth with a paper napkin.

I took a steadying breath and, after a moment, pulled my notebook from my back pocket. The feeling of the smooth leather cover under my fingertips calmed me enough to speak. "I did follow you here to Seattle. That's how I knew where you'd parked your truck."

"I figured as much," Bella replied, her eyes and mouth tightening slightly. "Did you follow me from my house? Do you know where I live, Edward?" Her mouth turned down in a frown and she stared at the uneaten portion of her sandwich. She looked pale and ill again.

"Bella, look at me please," I said, waiting until she raised her dark eyes to mine. "I know where you live because your address is public record. But I've never actually been to your house. I've been to Forks only once; on the day I met you in Garrett's Music last week."
Bella's eyes burned into mine, filled with apprehension and challenge as she stared at me. I simply sat and watched her, hoping she could see the truth in my face. At last, she heaved a shaky breath and raked her dark hair back with one hand. I relaxed minutely and used one finger to nudge her coffee cup toward her, smiling when she picked it up.

"You still haven't told me why you're in Seattle, Edward," she pointed out in between sips of coffee. "Or how you came to be following me at all."

"I followed you, but it was an unplanned trip," I replied. "I was driving to Forks to see you this morning and passed you on the 101 about ten miles from Port Angeles. When I realized it was your truck, I decided to follow you."

"But why were you coming to see me? And why follow me around all day instead of saying something to me?"

"I wanted to make sure you were safe."

"Safe from what?"

"Well, from creeps like that guy in the alley for one, Bella," I said dryly.

"Oh, come on, Edward. You can't honestly believe I'd believe something like that," she exclaimed. "You had no way of knowing that some guy would turn up in a random alley when I just happened to take a wrong turn."

I blew out a breath and shifted my gaze to the untouched cup of tea in front of me. Bella continued in a softer tone, but I could hear the steel behind it; she wasn't going to let it go.

"You said you were on your way to Forks this morning to see me, so you must have had something specific in mind before we even reached Seattle."

I sat silent, my brain racing to figure out a way to continue without confessing that I had pulled much more information than Bella's name and address. I didn't want to tell her I had accessed her school and medical record, her banking statements, and her online browsing histories. I was especially wary of telling her that I knew what websites she had been accessing. And that I was determined to discover the reasons behind her interest.

Bella pushed back her chair abruptly to stand, her movements jerky and unsettled.

"Wait, what are you doing?" The emotion blazing in her face startled me.

"I'm leaving," she fired back in a tight voice. "I agreed to come in here with you because you promised to explain yourself, Edward, and you haven't done that at all."

I moved to lay my hand on Bella's forearm and winced when she gasped and cringed from me. I stood quickly, bending forward so that my mouth was near her ear but making sure not to touch her.

"You're right, Bella," I said in a low voice. "And I'm sorry that I'm going about this so badly. Just give me a chance to explain, please. This isn't easy for me either."

Bella let out a long, shaky breath. I realized she was trembling, and took a careful step back.

"Okay," she croaked out. "But you have to tell me the truth, Edward."

The look in her eyes when she met my gaze was heartbreaking, both anxious and pleading. Though
she did not say the words, I knew that she was trying very hard to trust me. I knew too that it cost her a great deal to do so.

"I don't have very many close friends, Edward," she continued more calmly. "And I have a hard time opening up to people. The one thing I need to know is that you're being honest with me."

My hands ached to touch her warm skin again. I held her gaze as I spoke, making my voice gentle. "You can trust me, Bella."

After a long moment, she nodded and I felt like I could breathe again.

aDc

The hardest part of confessing anything is getting the first few words out. And that's how I found myself at the wheel of Bella's musty-smelling truck: tongue-tied and squirming as I tried to find the words to begin. My anxiety increased when I realized that the ancient Chevy could barely travel at the speed limit, but at least the windows worked. I cranked them down, thankful for the fresh air that diluted Bella's scent in the cab.

Convincing Bella to let me drive her back to Forks had been easy when I offered to continue our conversation on the way. But I found myself flailing when the time came to speak the words. The weight of Bella's gaze on the side of my face made it even more difficult to gather my thoughts, and I rubbed my hand through my hair in frustration.

"Edward, stop," she said gently. "You're going to think yourself into an aneurysm at this rate."

I huffed out a laugh before I could stop myself and glanced over to see one side of her mouth pull up in a small grin. "I'm nervous, Bella."

"I can see that. Just say whatever it is you need to say. Rip it off, like a band-aid."

"Ugh, why does everyone always go with that gross bandage metaphor?"

"Still waiting over here, Captain Evasive."

"Bella, I'm asking you nicely to please, never call me that in front of anyone."

Bella rolled her eyes at me and ran her thumb over her forehead in exasperation. "Still waiting, Edward."

I nodded and frowned. Stalling wasn't going to make the conversation any easier. "I told you that I looked you up after we met at Garrett's because I wanted to know your name. But I didn't tell you that I looked up a lot more information while I was at it."

"Information like my birth certificate or my social security number?" Bella's brows drew together over her eyes as she took in my words. "Personal identity stuff like that?"

"Yes," I said evenly. "Information like that... and then more. Your parents' names. Your dad's record of service with the Forks PD. Your mom's address in California, and her husband's place of business. Birth records, medical records, school records."

"But why?" Bella's voice was a bit higher, signaling confusion and some distress. "You had my name already... you said you that got that out of the Forks High School yearbook."

"Knowing your name was just the start," I replied quietly. "I'm really good at data mining, Bella."
When I'm interested in something, I dig up as much information as I can. I'm interested in you, and I dug up your information."

She was silent for a long moment as she processed how far I had gone with my snooping. I heard her swallow loudly before she spoke again. "What does your... hacking have to do with wanting to keep me safe or following me to Seattle? You keep saying that you want to keep an eye on me, but I don't understand what that means."

I had spent enough time around Bella in the past few hours to know that she was intensely guarded. So I had no doubt that my next words were going to embarrass her deeply. I also knew that I could not lie to her. Right or wrong, I needed to be around Bella in any capacity she would allow. If I had any choice of gaining her trust, I had to be truthful.

Licking my lips nervously, I fixed my stare on the road. "I told you that I looked up everything I could find. That includes your online activities, Bella. I accessed your browsing habits. Your shopping history, bank information, search histories... website visits."

A soft gasp told me she understood what I was driving at. I plowed ahead, desperate to get everything out before she ordered me to pull the truck over and kicked me out.

"I didn't read your email or instant messages, though I could have. I did look at the websites you've been frequenting, and their content. When I realized that so many of the sites you've been browsing had to do with trauma and recovery, I became concerned."

I blew out a breath before confessing the most difficult detail. "This morning I created an account on the support site you've been visiting every day—"

"Damn it, Edward!" Bella exclaimed in a tight voice.

My eyes flew across the cab to find her she was scowling, her dark eyes. Her knees were pulled against her chest protectively, and her hands were balled into fists. The sight of her distress pierced me immediately, I pulled the truck onto the shoulder and turned off the ignition. For a moment, Bella's expression was edged with panic and I realized that she was becoming frightened of me.

"I'm so sorry, Bella," I murmured miserably. "I know that what I did is all kinds of messed up, but please understand that I did it out of concern for you."

"I swear to you that I didn't read anything you authored on that website. In fact, I didn't even look for your user information. I just... I needed to understand what kind of support the site was offering."

Bella made no reply as she listened to me. She no longer looked fearful, but I felt sick as I watched anger and humiliation cross her face at my words. She was hurting and it was my fault.

"I knew something was wrong the first time I saw you; I could see it in your eyes. The things I read on that site... when I realized what kind of things the kids on the website were dealing with, I just felt even worse knowing I was right. That something awful had happened to you." I swallowed hard against the tightness that filled my throat at the thought of what Bella might have endured. What Alice might have endured.

"The more I thought about it, the more worried I became. This morning I realized that something bad could be happening to you right now, in Forks. The next thing I knew, I was on my way to find you. I'm not sure what I would have said to you if I'd found you at your house, but I wanted to help. I just needed to act."
"And that's when you saw me driving to Seattle," Bella murmured in a low voice.

I nodded sadly. "I was so keyed up already when I saw you; I thought it just made sense to keep an eye on you. I followed you around the campus and when you headed back to your truck, I walked ahead. That's why you didn't see me. When you didn't turn up on Cherry Street, I knew something was up, so I went looking for you."

"And you just got lucky, spotting me in an alley off a side street. From your car." Bella's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

I nodded silently, and sighed when Bella's mouth twisted in response to my obvious lie.

She turned her attention out the window, shutting me out. I thought of the things I could say to her, words of reassurance or pleas for forgiveness. I longed to brush my knuckles against the top of her hand. But I knew I could not touch her. The longer I stared at her rigid form, the weaker my words seemed. After several minutes of icy silence, I was thoroughly dejected.

"Do you want me to take you home, Bella?" I asked quietly and turned back to the steering wheel.

"Yes, please," she replied, and her flat tone made my chest ache.

The only conversation held during the remainder of the ride to Forks was between Jasper and me when he called. We were about twenty minutes from Forks when Bella's quiet voice caught my ear again.

"How did you find me?"

"I followed you," I said slowly, confused by her question.

"No, I mean when I got turned around in the alley with that guy." Bella turned to look at me for the first time since we had resumed driving. She appeared exhausted by the emotional roller-coaster ride she had endured that afternoon, but her eyes sparked with curiosity. "How did you find me?"

"You said it yourself. I got lucky," I said lamely.

"I drove around looking for you and you were standing on the sidewalk by the time I found that intersection. I recognized you."

"Edward, I'm not a fool," Bella said, her voice biting. "How did you know where I was? And how did you get out of your car so quickly when I was feeling sick? I saw you; you were in your car one second and then holding my arms the next. It was... impossible."

"I don't know what you mean," I said stiffly. I glanced at her and pursed my lips when I realized Bella was glaring at me.

"Uh-uh, no. You have no right to say something like that to me after you admitted to snooping into every corner of my life. Call it whatever you want, but you were stalking me, Edward, and you know it. You owe me an explanation," she insisted.

"Hell, Bella," I groaned. "I know you're right, but it's not that simple. I just can't tell you some of the things you want to know. You have to trust me on this."

Bella let out a disbelieving laugh. "Trust you! You're really asking me to trust you when you won't do the same for me?"
"I suppose I am." My entire body was tense with frustration at both myself and the situation I had created.

"Well I can't do that, Edward." Sorrow replaced the anger in Bella's face before she turned away from me again. "You say you're concerned for me, you hack your way into my private life, and you ask for my trust. But you're hiding something from me. I don't know the first thing about you, other than your name. If that's even your real name. How on earth can I trust you?"

Bella's quiet words stunned me into silence and filled me with shame. She was right. I had insinuated myself into her secrets for purely selfish reasons. Compelled by instincts I hardly understood, I pushed myself on her. Knowing how deeply she valued trust, I promised to be candid. But when she held me to the promise, I withdrew. I had proven myself completely unworthy of her trust.

"You'll need to take a left up here on Calawah Way," she said, interrupting my thoughts.

I followed Bella's soft-spoken directions, feeling more and more despondent as we neared her house. I was sure she would not allow me to contact her again after today, especially knowing that I was capable of monitoring her from afar.

But my time with Bella for those few hours had changed me. Seeing her threatened, talking with her, and witnessing her intense emotions had left me raw. My desire for her was no less intense, racing under my skin like cold fire. But my deep-seated need to ensure her safety had grown exponentially. Bella had not explained why she visited the trauma support sites, yet she had not denied my assertions. What's more, her heated response to my earlier comments hinted at something deeper. Keeping the secret of whatever had happened was tearing her apart.

There was no way I could completely stay away from Bella Swan, even if she refused to see me.

The silence between us was thick when I pulled into the driveway and switched off the ignition. As we climbed out of the truck, I realized that I still had no idea if Bella was safe in her father's house.

Trailing behind her as she walked toward the house, I waited until she had climbed the porch steps before speaking. "Bella, I know I have no right to ask anything of you. But, please, just tell me that you are safe in that house. That whatever happened to you isn't happening under that roof right now."

Our gazes met for a long moment, and I hoped Bella recognized my sincerity. Her eyes, however, were shuttered and hardened, and revealed nothing. It pained me to see how changed she was from earlier in the day, when a soft smile had lit her eyes and face. I had planned to bring lightness to Bella's life when I could, and instead had caused her more pain.

"I'm safe with my dad," she said at last, turning to open the door. "Charlie always does his best to take care of me."

Bella stepped inside, her soft voice reaching my ears just before the door closed quietly. "Goodbye, Edward."

aDc

It was dark and well past the human dinner hour when I knocked on the Swan's door again. Her father's car was not in the drive, but lights were still burning in the house, leading me to believe Bella was awake. I only hoped she would speak to me.

The porch light flicked on and the curtain in the window twitched before Bella opened the door. Her eyes were wide as she took in my appearance. A light rain had been falling for the past couple of
hours, and had soaked my clothes and hair as I walked through the woods with my thoughts.

"Edward, you're soaked! What are you doing?"

I waved her off, unmindful of the water streaming off me. "It's nothing, Bella, really."

"Nothing? What happened, couldn't you get a ride?" She stepped back and opened the door, gesturing with her hand for me to come in.

"Oh, well... I went for a walk. I can call for a ride later; my family knows I'm still here in Forks." I shrugged and pushed my wet hair off my face with both hands.

"Who goes for a walk in the rain at night?" She frowned and gestured for me to come in again. "Come on, I'll get you a towel; you must be half frozen."

I shook my head slowly, my eyes never leaving hers. "I'm fine, Bella. It doesn't bother me."

Bella stared at me, her mouth slightly open in surprise, and I saw that keen look in her eyes again. She knew something about me wasn't normal; she just wasn't sure what it was yet.

I swallowed nervously. "Look, I know it's getting late, but do you have a minute to talk, Bella? We can just do it on the porch here, so I don't track rain and mud into your house."

She watched me for a long moment before nodding. "I'll be right out. Go on and have a seat."

I was sitting on the porch swing watching the rain when Bella came back out, closing the screen door quietly behind her. She handed me a bundle of soft cloth before sitting beside me on the bench, and pulled the jacket she had donned around herself.

Looking down at the blue towel in my hands, I felt absurdly touched by her thoughtfulness. My damp hair and clothes did not bother me, but I draped the towel over my head and shoulders, knowing Bella would be pleased. The corner of her mouth twitched when our eyes met, and I felt some of the sadness that weighed me down lift.

"Where's your father tonight, Bella?"

"He's working a double-shift at the station. He'll be off around midnight."

I frowned at the idea of her being alone in the house. "You'll be by yourself all night?"

"Sure," she shrugged easily. "I'm seventeen years old, Edward, I don't need a babysitter. We have neighbors and they keep an eye on the street. Plus, this is Forks; nothing much happens here, for better and for worse."

We watched the rain for a little while, neither of us speaking. For the first time today, the silence was softer and more companionable; the earlier tension between us had dissipated.

"I hardly know where to start," I admitted quietly. "But I want to tell you as much as I am able. I hope you can trust me to be your friend."

"I think I can, Edward. I'd like to be your friend." She looked down for a moment before meeting my eyes again. "And I want you to help me with something."

"Anything," I said at once, meaning the word completely.

Bella looked at me, her eyes burning through in the dark. "I want you to help me find someone.
Someone who hurt me."

Chapter End Notes

That's right, Bella - put that creeper's skills to work. He won't know what to with himself otherwise.

The next chapter will be Bella's.

We love to hear from you and thank you so much for reading.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm misused, I don't wanna do,
Be not your slave.
Misguided, I mind it,
I'm missing the train.

"Miss Nothing" - The Pretty Reckless

Raindrops glistened in Edward's hair like tiny glass beads, darkening it to a burnt auburn under the porch light. Even half covered with a blue bath towel, he was flawlessly beautiful like a painting with his bright caramel irises and marble skin. My eyes roamed over his features, then fell to my hands resting on my knees as I tried to regain my focus. Edward's looks were very distracting, to say the least. Especially his lips...

"Someone who hurt you?" he prompted.

The rain started falling more heavily and I shifted closer on the swing to hear his muffled voice. Edward didn't move an inch. I kept my gaze lowered.

"When I lived in California with my mom, we had a neighbor called Jimmy." I paused as a wave of pure hatred swept over me. It made me physically sick even remembering his face but I forced myself to continue; Edward was finally being honest, and I didn't want to appear weak after snapping at him earlier for hiding the truth. That was hardly fair.

"Jimmy and Renee, my mom, dated briefly. They broke up but remained friends," my voice lowered into an almost whisper, "He used to give me rides from school whenever she worked late. Back then, she was still studying to be a teacher so she took night classes at a college in San Jacinto."

A gust of icy humid air blew past and I folded my arms across my chest. "Renee would drop me off at Jimmy's house sometimes. He'd sit with me on the couch and pretend to watch TV but..."

I shook my head, unwilling to dwell on the memory. Edward was sitting so still, I wasn't sure if he was even breathing. My heart started hammering in my chest and shamefully, my voice trembled.

"The first time, I remember he took off my sweater because he said it was too hot inside the house but all I remember is feeling like someone had dumped ice water over me. I just felt frozen while he moved his hands over me..."

I struggled to remember if he had gone past my stomach that day or just my chest. I knew he had done both at some point, but whether they had happened at the same time that day was unclear to me.
"Bella."

The swing creaked suddenly as Edward shifted his weight on it and the sound interrupted my memories. I realized that I had been staring off into space and hurried to reassemble my thoughts.

When I was eleven, Renee and I moved to Sacramento," I continued, clearing my throat. "And then she met Phil, her new husband."

There was a beat of silence before Edward asked in a level tone, "Do you like Phil?"

I exhaled, relieved by his unthreatening question. Edward's hesitation the moment before had felt like an almost physical presence in the air between us.

"Yes," I responded right away, staring at the silver curtain of rain enveloping Charlie's yard. "He's really nice." My lips turned up in a small grin as I added, "He's a bit young for Renee but he makes her happy and he's fun to be around. Phil's a baseball player. Minor league."

That's great," Edward replied simply and I glanced up to see that the liquid gold of his irises seemed to have hardened. His jaw was tight, and it looked like he was holding something back, possibly anger.

"Phil's not like Jimmy," I said quickly, suddenly wanting to reassure him.

Edward had gone through a lot of trouble to make sure I wasn't harmed. Regardless of how strange his actions seemed, I was very grateful. I could tell that he worried about me, without a doubt. I just couldn't understand why.

Edward spoke in a voice that was like steel coated in honey, gritty and melodic all at once. "Bella, how can I help?"

I sucked in a slow breath, turning my torso to face him.

"I've never told anyone about Jimmy; not even Charlie knows. I've come close to telling Renee but fear always consumed me in the end. But I don't want to be afraid anymore."

Of all the bizarre things that had happened that day, blurtting out my wretched secret was the most unexpected for me. Edward's intense gaze was swallowing me up and to my amazement, I wanted to dive right in and forget every reason I'd ever had for hiding all these years.

"I want to find Jimmy. If you're really as good at finding things as you say you are, then I need your help, Edward."

"Bella." Edward raised his hand to my face, as if to brush the loose strands falling out of my ponytail but pulled away abruptly. For a second, I wondered what it would be like to feel his fingers running through my hair and against my scalp. His hand had been cold when our fingers had touched in the music store; would they be soothing like a sudden rainstorm in the middle of an Indian summer?

Edward's voice snapped my mind back into focus. "Why do you want to find him? He caused you harm, so why would you want to go back to that? Even if you confront the bastard, wouldn't you rather spare yourself that much pain? And what if he tries to hurt you again?"

I slid back a few inches as Edward's tone became more demanding. Standing up, I noticed my knees were trembling, but I didn't flinch under his intense stare. I had a feeling that without his polite manners and apologies, Edward Cullen could be downright frightening.
"Edward, there some things I would like to keep to myself, if you don't mind," I answered in the most level voice I could muster.

His head bowed in response to my words, and his beautiful lips formed a sort of grimace.

"Touché," he murmured, "I am really sorry for invading your privacy." He peeked up at me from beneath his long eyelashes, as if trying to figure out whether I believed him or not.

My chest tightened in a way that truly scared me. He had gone from gruff and intimidating to sweetly ashamed in just a few moments, I had to wonder at his dramatic mood shifts. Maybe he was just a really good actor.

I knew too, that Edward was still harboring secrets, and I was determined to find them out soon enough. After digging so deeply into my life, he owed me that much.

"You can make it up to me by helping me," I said as the rain beat heavily on the porch steps. "If you want to help me, that is," I added, turning towards the front door.

The swing rocked with a clanking noise as Edward got up. I glanced over my shoulder to see him already standing two feet away. If I hadn't expected it, his impossibly fast movement would have made me jump. But by now, I was pretty sure Edward wasn't an average person at all.

"Believe me, there's nothing I want more," he said, his smooth voice suddenly passionate. A million questions jumped to my mind, screaming to be answered, and I could only nod.

Edward's lips curved up in a sweet little smile. He handed me the wet towel, seeming to take care to avoid touching my hand. "We should continue this conversation tomorrow then?"

I nodded again, still baffled by the sight of him standing wet and beautiful under the pouring rain.

Edward backed away, stepping blindly but not stumbling on the porch steps. "Why don't I pick you up sometime before noon? We could go somewhere in Port Angeles to talk."

"All right," I managed as a clap of thunder sounded above us, "Say 10:30?"

"I'll see you soon, Miss Swan." He nodded and flashed wicked smile at me.

"Wait!" I called, stepping forward when he turned around to look at me. "Shouldn't you call for a ride first?"

Edward just shook his head and waved before turning and darting across the street into the narrow opening of trees that led to the mossy woods.

I let out a slow breath, ducking into the warm interior of Charlie's house. I hadn't realized how utterly frozen my skin was until the heat inside the house alerted me to my shivering and the dampness of my clothes. I rushed upstairs to take a warm shower.

aDc

The storm continued throughout the night but I felt strangely calm. Well, maybe not calm, but decided. My encounters with Edward had made me realize that realize that I didn't have to be a pawn in someone else's game anymore. That strange man in the Seattle alley had acted as if I were an inanimate object without a voice. He had treated me like I was incapable of feeling anything, and that gave him power to do whatever he wanted. That was exactly how Jimmy had treated me all those
years before.

Then there was Edward and his snooping. Perhaps his interest in my life had gone too far, but if he hadn't been on that street earlier in the afternoon, who knows what would have happened. Perhaps I wouldn't be standing in my bedroom, safe and alive.

Still, I couldn't tell Edward everything he wanted to hear; I was entitled to my privacy. In my mind, keeping some things to myself wasn't the same thing as silence. When threatened, I said nothing. Feeling threatened was the reason I had never told Renee that Jimmy had hurt me. But now, I was choosing to withhold certain things from Edward, and that was my decision.

I was so preoccupied with these thoughts as I dressed for bed, that I didn't notice when my Yahoo Messenger popped up with a new message from Ali_pixy.

Sliding on my pajama shorts, I walked over to the computer to see what she had written.

Ali_pixy: Hey, u there?

Ali_pixy: Had a crappy day... Wanna talk?

I hurriedly sat down and hoped the storm didn't make the internet connection any worse.

Bells_forever: Hi... I'm here.

Ali_pixy: Yay! I'm so glad. I really don't feel like being alone tonight.

Bells_forever: What's going on?

Ali_pixy: Bad day at school. Well, and out of school too. This girl at my new foster home totally hates my guts. I wouldn't mind except she and another girl totally wrecked my things.

Bells_forever: What? How?

Ali_pixy: They spray painted my new Coach backpack and dumped my makeup out all over my notebook and school stuff.

My eyes widened at the screen.

Bells_forever: Isn't there anyone you can tell?

Ali_pixy: Yeah right. Our foster mom, Betty, is too busy with the little kids and besides, people don't listen to you when you're in the foster system. You just have to put up with it until an adult decides the situation is bad enough for them to do something about it.

Bells_forever: You're right. I'm really sorry. I wish I could help you in some way.

Ali_pixy: You are helping me, just by answering. I'm sorry for ranting, though. I'm just really upset and I miss my brother. If we hadn't been split up, I'd at least have someone sticking up for me. I know it sounds weak and pathetic but…

Bells_forever: No, it doesn't. We're only human, right? It's okay to want wish someone would listen to you.

At that moment, I felt like a hypocrite typing those words. What did I know about what it's needing someone? My thoughts went back to the afternoon I had spent with Edward. I had never let Charlie or Jacob help me with anything. Edward hadn't given me much choice, showing up the way he had,
but I was only grateful.

Ali_pixy: Yeah, if my brother were with me, I wouldn't even be here. We'd probably run away. We always talked about going to Niagara Falls. Edward was crazy about outdoors stuff like camping and hiking. He used to tease me about ruining my shoes but I'd love to take pictures near the waterfall. It must be gorgeous there...

Bells_forever: Edward?

Ali_pixy: Yeah. I thought I mentioned his name in my earlier posts. I used to call him Eddie cause he hated it haha.

I sat back in my chair. The rain was pounding on the roof and thunder was rolling in the background, yet the sounds barely registered.

It had to be a strange coincidence. Right... just like Edward showing up in the Seattle alley was a coincidence. And that name kept chiming in my head like a bell.

Edward... Edward.

Chapter End Notes

'Atta girl, Bella - make Edward work a little bit before you let him off the hook.

The next chapter will be a split POV between Edward and Bella.

We love to hear from you and thank you so much for reading. If you're interested in teasers and other fun bits, we've started posting them on tumblr:
http://karenec.tumblr.com
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter authors: karenec and transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I need a superhero 'cause I'm just a girl.
I have no one who will go
And save me from this world.
"Superhero" - The Pretty Reckless

My notebook was ruined. Well, if not ruined then very, very wet. Certainly, the printed photos I had tucked in the pages were irretrievably damaged. I tossed them in the library trashcan with a sigh, knowing I could print more, and set about spreading the book out on the workstation surface to dry. I pulled my phone from my pocket and swore softly to find it similarly waterlogged.

"What on earth did you do, Edward," Esme murmured as she walked in behind me. She leaned to brush her slim fingers against the wet pages before she touched my shirtsleeve. "You're a mess, sweetheart. Would you please change before you drip any more water on the floors?"

I shrugged in apology and hesitated, eager to deal with my notebook and phone. "I'll clean it up, Esme, I just want to-"

"Get changed, please," Esme interrupted kindly, her hand going back to the notebook. "I'll get started on these things while you clean up."

I moved through the house swiftly, redressing in dry clothes and depositing the sodden pile in the laundry. In that short time, Esme had recruited Rosalie to help her. I found them bent over the pieces of my dismantled phone with a hair dryer, blowing cool air over the SIM card.

"I am aware that this can damage the equipment," Rosalie said before I could even draw breath to protest. "But we're being very careful. All you want is the SIM anyway; there are some spare phones you can use."

Esme pointed to the notebook, which she had moved onto a tea towel. "I think it's best to just let that get as much air as possible. I blotted the pages, but I'm afraid they will tear if we try to use anything else.

"As I'm sure you've guessed, a lot of the writing on the pages is smudged," she continued, stepping forward to link her arm around my waist comfortably. "There's not much that can be done about that. The thing may not be salvageable."

I nodded and pushed my wet hair away from my face with one hand. "Thank you. It's not so much what's on the pages that I need."
"It's the book itself he needs. He can write new notes and lists," Rosalie added, giving me a sympathetic smile before she winked. "Secrets of the universe, offshore bank account numbers... dirty limericks."

"I don't write dirty limericks, thank you very much," I said with a fond smile. "I write filthy limericks."

"I'm just glad you thought to call Jasper after dropping the Swan girl off," Rosalie said, her expression turning somber. "We'd all have been out there in the rain looking for you after your phone conked out. What the hell have you been doing all this time?"

"Let's do this downstairs," I suggested, sliding my hands into my pockets. "With everyone, so it's all out in the open."

The family gathered in the living area, where the storm pelted rain against the enormous windows. It was quiet while I spoke, and the faces around me showed curiosity and trepidation. I explained the discoveries I had made in Bella's internet activities and the reason for my sudden need to leave the house that morning. I told them about following Bella to Seattle, as well as the dramatic incidents and conversations that had taken place over the course of the afternoon.

The expressions on my family's faces grew dark when I described the conversation that had taken place on the Swan's porch swing just a short time before. I gave them only the scantiest details of what Bella had endured at Jimmy's hands, and their disgust for him was clear. There was a low murmur when I told them about Bella's proposal to help her find the man that had traumatized her.

All the while, the slow and steady ache of compulsion to be with Bella pulsed inside me. Beneath it lay a deep, seething anger for the man who had stolen her childhood and peace of mind. It had taken enormous effort to control myself when Bella had spoken of her experiences, to sit quietly until she had finished. My hands itched to tear, my mouth ached to bite... I wanted, for the first time, to hunt and kill a man. Now, separated from Bella for the night, I was tortured by my own agitation, and left counting the hours until we could meet again.

"The girl really trusts you, Edward," Carlisle said softly when I had finished speaking. "To tell you such a thing when you hardly know each other is remarkable."

"Especially after keeping it secret for so long," Jasper agreed. "Are you going to help her find the creature that hurt her?"

I blew out a long breath, relieved to have finally unburdened myself; I loathed lying to my family. "Yes, I'll help her find him; I would never deny Bella that. She seemed surprised by her own confession, to be honest; I'm sure she never intended to tell me."

"I think she is beginning to trust me. And I believe she wants to, it's just that-"

"Bella suspects you are hiding something about yourself," Esme said.

"She doesn't suspect, Esme; she knows. I am certain she understands that I am hiding something from her."

"What are you going to tell her?" I heard an edge in Rosalie's voice when she spoke, and saw that same sharpness in her eyes when I met them. "Will you tell her... what we are?"

I shook my head and swallowed, unable to speak for a moment. I knew what my answer should be: no. Revealing my true nature to Bella would put the entire family at risk of discovery. If I went through with it against their wishes, would the Cullens disown me in an effort to keep themselves
safe? I felt ill at the idea of losing them. They had become a vital part of my world; walking away from the family would be incredibly difficult.

Unfortunately, I could not imagine keeping my true nature from Bella for much longer. She had confessed her darkest secret to me; the idea that I couldn't do the same was impossible.

I caught Jasper's sympathetic gaze before I turned looked at my sister. "I wish I could answer you, Rose," I said slowly.

Rosalie's face fell before she tried to smile, her lips stiff and wrong. "I think you have, Edward. At the very least, you're considering telling the Swan girl the truth."

My nerves were strung tight when I drove to Forks the next day to pick up Bella. It didn't help that my notebook was still too damp to handle, and I missed the soothing sensation of the leather cover beneath my fingers. Instead, I wrapped my fingers around my car's steering wheel and tried to pay attention to the playlist I had put on.

I wondered if Bella was equally nervous, and if she had been spent too many hours last night replaying the events of the day. I frowned to think how tired she might be if her sleep had been restless. Spying a cafe before the turn on to Calawah Way, I took a quick detour to buy two cups of coffee.

Bella was sitting on the porch swing when I pulled up to her house. She stood when I got out of the car with the hot cups, and waited for me to climb the stairs before she stepped forward. She had dressed for the cool weather in a thick purple sweater and jeans, and was wearing a blue down vest. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a long plait that fell over one shoulder and for the first time, I could really see the lines of her face. There were circles under her eyes and her smile was a bit tired, but Bella was radiant.

I drank her in, trying hard not to stare but knew I had failed miserably when the tips of her ears turned pink, followed by her cheeks. She glanced down, embarrassed, and I took that opportunity to hand her one of the coffee cups. A thrill of pleasure rushed through me when she glanced back up and smiled beautifully.

"Good morning, Bella," I said, smiling when she replied the same.

"Thank you for this." She lifted the cup to her lips and hummed appreciatively.

"I wasn't sure how you take it," I said, nodding at the cup. "But I thought you'd be able to doctor it here, if I'd gotten it wrong."

"Honestly, black coffee right now works just fine," she said before turning a serious look on me. "You know, I feel bad that you're doing all this driving. Maybe I should take my truck so you don't have to make the extra trips."

I waved her off with the hand holding the untouched coffee. "Don't worry about it; I don't mind doing the driving. Plus I can stop at Garrett's before I head back to PA tonight; I never did get around to buying anything last week."

She grimaced comically and nodded. "No, I suppose you didn't. Would you... should we get going?"

"Sure." I turned to lead the way down the stairs before glancing at the driveway. "Is your father working again?"
"No, he went fishing with his friend, Billy." Bella smiled shyly when I opened the door for her, and continued speaking as she got in. "They're taking advantage of the dry weather."

I frowned as I walked around the car to open my door, thinking that Bella was often left on her own. She spoke as soon as I slid behind the wheel, however, and her words saddened me.

"Charlie - um, that's my dad - knew I had plans today; we would have had breakfast together, otherwise. But I don't mind spending time by myself… it's easier than being around people."

We rode in silence for a little while, and I noticed that the awkwardness between us had lessened. I also saw Bella's eyes widen when she checked the car's speedometer, and forced myself not to smirk.

"I guess I understand why you don't mind making the drive," Bella said after a moment and turned narrowed eyes on me. "What with trying to break the sound barrier with your car and all."

Laughter rolled out of me before I could stop it. Instead of looking affronted, Bella's eyes opened wide before she bit her lip and smiled, shaking her head as if to scold me.

"I'm a very safe driver," I reassured her once I had gotten control of myself. "I've never even had a ticket."

We crossed into the city limits and made our way toward downtown and the waterfront. Bella silently questioned me with her eyes when I pulled into the parking lot of a hotel overlooking the water.

"The Olympic Discovery Trail is right over there," I said, pointing through the windscreen toward the right end of the parking lot. "I thought we could do as your father and his friend are, and take advantage of the dry weather. It's not sunny, but there are trees on the trail if it gets too windy."

"Cool," Bella agreed, just as her eyes landed on the untouched cup of now cold coffee in my hand. She gave me an appraising look that I met with a perfectly straight face. "Cutting back on the caffeine, Edward?"

"Something like that," I agreed and popped my door.

My phone chirped as I climbed out of the car, and I saw a text from Emmett on the screen asking how things were going. I tossed the coffee cups in a trashcan before returning a simple OK text and left it at that. My family knew I had planned to bring Bella to Port Angeles for the day, and I wondered if they were hanging about nearby, watching us.

Bella and I walked the trail quietly, enjoying the slight breeze coming off the harbor until I felt ready to begin.

"I've thought about how to make this easier, and I think it's best if you just ask me questions. I'll answer each one, until you're done." I licked my lips and shrugged. "Or until you run away screaming for help."

Bella shook her head at me and played with the plait over her shoulder. "You do that a lot, you know; crack jokes to diffuse tension."

"You're right," I replied with a sad smile. "It's something I learned from my father. He used humor whenever he felt stressed out. He said he learned it from his Irish grandmother."

Bella nodded and I saw a keen look in her eye. "Well, you don't need to be so stressed. I'm still here after yesterday, Edward."
"Yes, and we'll see how long that lasts," I said dryly.

She dropped her gaze then, and I heard her heartbeat increase slightly as she struggled to find her words. "What I mean is that you're still here after yesterday. After I told you... what happened to me."

My chest ached when Bella lifted her gaze to meet mine and I fought the impulse to take her hand in mine. The pain was still there in her eyes, but I also saw something that left me feeling breathless. Acceptance. And what I thought might be trust.

"I promised I would tell you everything I could," I said seriously. "There are some things I may not be able to answer, and not because I don't want to. But for your safety... and mine."

Bella's lips pressed together nervously. Whatever she thought of my cautionary words, she kept it to herself, and drew a long breath before speaking. "I understand. I'll try to be patient with you when you can't answer."

"Thank you. I'll try to be patient with my answers." I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my thumb and gave Bella an encouraging smile. "I suppose now I should ask what you would like to know?"

The words out of Bella's mouth were nothing like what I expected.

"What are your siblings' names, Edward?"

"My... siblings?" I blinked and then recovered. "I have a sister, Rosalie, and two brothers, Emmett and Jasper."

"Oh," Bella replied, looking disappointed.

For a moment, I hesitated, and then reminded myself of the depth of pain behind Bella's confession the day before. "Rose and my brothers aren't really my siblings; we were all adopted into the Cullen family. I do have a biological sister as well."

"What's her name?" Bella's dark eyes blinked rapidly before she backtracked a bit. "If you don't mind me asking, I mean."

"No, no, I don't mind." I frowned as I considered my response. "My sister's name is Mary, after my grandmother. But when she was growing up, she was really fond of Lewis Carroll's stories, and she insisted we call her by her middle name, Alice."

"Alice... and doesn't your sister live with you and the Cullens?"

"Unfortunately, she does not. I haven't seen my sister for many years. She was abducted."

"Oh, Edward," Bella said, stopping on the trail to look at me. I was alarmed to note that her face was pale. "I am so sorry. I shouldn't have asked you that-"

I took a half step closer, almost reaching to touch her arm before I remembered myself. "It's okay. I told you I would answer your questions, Bella. I want to, when I can."

"I'm not ashamed of Alice or what happened to her; not at all. It's painful to remember her now, because I don't know where she is."

"The police have never found her?"

"No," I said quietly, aware that I was again omitting parts of the truth. I was relieved to be able to
continue truthfully. "No one has been able to turn up any trace of her."

We resumed walking for a few moments before Bella spoke again.

"Where are you from originally?"

"Chicago. Alice and I were born there and that's where my parents are buried."

"So your parents died? Is that why you used the past tense when talking about your dad?"

"Yes, my parents died in a car accident five years ago and the Cullens took me in."

"And you've been with them since leaving Chicago?"

"Even in Chicago, actually. I was, ah, pretty sick right after my parents died. I couldn't leave Chicago for a couple of months until I had recovered, so I stayed with the Cullens until we could travel again."

"Have you and the Cullens ever lived in Boston?"

I furrowed my brows at the strange specificity of Bella's questions, and wished again that I could hear her thoughts. I couldn't help feeling that there was more on her agenda than getting to know me and spill my secrets.

"No. But we did live near Amherst, which is in western Massachusetts, as well as in Mystic, Connecticut."

Bella was silent for a longer stretch of time and I watched her closely, still puzzled by her inquiries. She seemed to be deep in thought, as if working out a problem, so I let her carry on without interrupting.

"Do you ever eat or drink anything?"

_Damn it._

Bella's sudden words caught me off guard, and I swallowed nervously. "Not the way that you do, no."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I do take in, ah, nourishment. But not from the food groups that you do."

Bella's glance was sharp. "This is one of those can't-answer questions, huh?"

I nodded and was relieved when Bella's reaction was confined to a short huff.

"Special diet, huh?" she muttered before clearing her throat to continue. "Are the rest of the Cullens like you?"

"Like me how?" I asked cautiously. No matter how badly I wanted to be candid, I was unwilling to say too much, especially about the family.

"No food or drink... moving too fast when you're not paying attention... immunity to being cold and wet in the middle of a nighttime storm... have I forgotten anything?" There was a hint of challenge in Bella's eyes as she looked at me before she shrugged apologetically. "You did say I could ask you anything, Edward."
Bella has been watching me very closely indeed.

I swallowed and pushed my hands into my pockets. "Yes, I did say that. And yes, the others are like me, in all those ways."

She nodded and I saw the gratitude in her eyes at my honest answer. Another period of silence passed as we walked on the trail. I was beginning to wonder if we should turn back toward town when Bella began again.

"How did you find me in Seattle? In the alley, I mean, after you lost sight of me."

"Well, I really did know where you were supposed to be because I had followed you on to the campus."

"Sure. But..." Bella trailed off, clearly expecting me to continue.

"But, I... I can hear what other people are thinking. I could hear the guy who followed you and what he was thinking."

"Um. You mean like mind reading?"

"No. More like mind hearing. I can hear people's thoughts in my head if I concentrate," I said, smiling awkwardly and hoping she didn't think me certifiably insane. "God, you have no idea how much I want to crack a joke right now."

"You hear people's thoughts? You're kidding, right?"

"Unfortunately, no, I'm not."

"That's... wow; I don't even know what to say..." Bella's face abruptly filled with horror. "You mean you can hear what I'm thinking?"

"No!" I shook my head quickly. "I can't hear every person's thoughts; some minds are closed to me. And your mind is like that: I can't hear you at all."

"Oh thank goodness," she said. Her shoulders slumped in relief before she turned a knowing look on me again. "And you have tried, haven't you."

This time, I couldn't hold back the smirk. "Of course I have."

"Greeeat. Serves you right then."

Bella wrapped her arms around herself, and I noticed that her steps seemed slower. A quick check of the clock on my phone told me we had been walking for over sixty minutes and it was nearing the human lunch hour.

"We should probably turn back, Bella," I said gently, chuckling at her expression of surprise. "You should eat something before we have a repeat of."

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you?" she murmured, and I felt my chest swell at the soft look in her eye. "I'm not going to pass out or fall down, Edward; you can relax a little."

We were quiet for about five minutes before my curiosity got the better of me. "Do you have any more questions for me?"

"Yes. I'm not sure I can ask every question I have in one afternoon, to be honest," she said, fiddling
with her hair again.

I nodded in understanding. "Of course. We can certainly go on past today if you need to, Bella. I'd like that very much."

Bella's lips turned up in a shy smile that seemed to warm me over every inch, just before the sun peeped out through a break in the clouds. I had been so intent on my conversation with Bella that I hadn't noticed the clouds over the harbor had begun to break up.

Several things happened very quickly.

The sunlight hit my face and neck and broke into millions of tiny rainbows when my vampire skin refracted the light like prisms.

Bella blinked rapidly, her smile dropping off her face as she watched the sunlight shatter against my face. Her mouth opened and she uttered a soft, startled, "Oh," before she took a step backward. Away from me.

I felt a searing disappointment at her retreat. Without thought, I darted away and toward the cover of the trees, much too quickly and carelessly. My sole intent was to get out of the light, to look normal again, to forget for a few damned moments that I was not a human like Bella.

I froze in the shade of the hemlocks when a soft gasp reached my ears. Turning in a blur, I saw Bella standing on the trail where I had left her. Her face was blank with surprise and her hands were open and raised, as if she had tried to touch the space where I had been only a moment before.

An overwhelming desire to keep running rushed over me, mixed with shame and regret for frightening the young girl I wanted so badly to know. Before I could act on the impulse, Bella's hands dropped to her sides and she took another tentative step. Toward me.

"Edward," she whispered, her face filling with a terrible sadness.

"It's all right, Bella," I called, keeping my voice soft. "I... ah, I need to keep in the shade for the moment. Would you mind coming over here?"

Bella hesitated for the barest moment, and I felt my cold heart being crushed.

"I won't hurt you," I said gently, and hoped my face reflected the earnestness I felt. "I promise, Bella."

Then she was practically charging over the grass toward me. Her mouth was set and her face was ablaze with color. She stopped just in front of me and fixed her brown eyes on me.

"You don't have to make that promise to me, Edward," she said, breathing deeply as if to calm her nerves. "I know you would never intentionally hurt me. I trust you."

I had to swallow against the lump in my throat. "I'm sorry for tearing off like that. For frightening you."

"I wasn't frightened," Bella said, shaking her head in disagreement. "I was just completely shocked. You... your skin? In the sun? What the heck was that?"

Both of my hands went into my hair at her question, and I thought my head would burst with anxiety. What the hell could I say, except the truth? How would I even start an explanation for why I had suddenly come to resemble a manga character more than a boy?
As she had before, Bella decided the direction of the conversation with just a few words.

"Edward, what... what are you?" She licked her lips before she continued. "Because... well, honestly, your average human just doesn't reflect sunlight like that."

"You're right," I said with a sad smile. "I'm not the average human, Bella. There are many names for what I am. But the name isn't as important in the end as the truth. I'm not alive, Bella. I'm a vampire."

Vampire...

"Vampire?"

My face felt frozen in an expression of permanent shock. I struggled to get the muscles in my mouth working to form words. Without even realizing it, I fell back a few steps until the bark of one of the hemlocks was digging into the fabric of my sweater.

Edward stood very still, only his eyes showing a change in temperament. There was a softness beneath the blazing gold, and for a second, I thought they looked hurt as well, as if I had offended him somehow.

I dropped my gaze and breathed in slowly, feeling deeply embarrassed. Perhaps my gawking had offended him.

"I always assumed you were different, Edward," I whispered hurriedly. "I mean, it's pretty obvious you're not like the average person one meets every day. You're faster than any athlete I've ever seen, and I've seen quite a few, what with Charlie, Billy, and Jacob being sports fanatics and Phil being a baseball player..."

I stopped abruptly, realizing with another wave of embarrassment that I was babbling. I took another deep breath, still not looking up to see his reaction.

"But I thought you were something like a human with ESP or levitation abilities, kind of like Daniel Dunglas Home or something. You know... unusual but logical..." I trailed off lamely. The silence stretched out uncomfortably until I hesitantly raised my eyes to his. "I wasn't expecting anything, um, supernatural."

"Right," Edward said quietly, and looked away. His voice was emotionless when he spoke again. "Why don't we go on back to the car and I'll give you a ride back to Forks."

"Wait, what?" I said. My heart lurched when I realized Edward still hadn't met my eyes.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and chewed his lip for a moment. "Or... if you'd rather not ride with me, we can get you a taxi downtown. My treat."

"Edward, I don't understand," I said breathlessly, stepping forward to try to catch his eye.

"Well, it's the least I can do, Bella," he murmured. "Especially since you haven't had lunch. The clouds are back, so it should be safe to walk on the trail again-"

The next thing I knew, Edward was walking toward the path, his shoulders hunched and his hands still jammed deeply in his pockets. *He's leaving? Now?*

"Wait!" I called and jogged to catch up with him. He slowed his steps, but didn't seem any less stiff as we walked. "I don't understand. Why would I go home after you drop that kind of bombshell on
Finally, Edward's eyes met mine, and the confusion in them struck me. "Don't you want to go home? Now that you know what I am?"

"No," I said honestly and blinked at the surprise that washed over his face. "Do you want me to go home, Edward?"

"Well, no, I don't. It's just that I can't imagine why you'd want to be around me now that you know the truth."

I stopped walking and held my hand out in Edward's direction to force him to pause as well. "I'm not going to lie, Edward. You really threw me for a loop just then. And I'm sorry if you thought my surprise was something else. But I'm not done talking yet. Or asking questions."

He just stood there, frozen for a second, his eyes assessing me. Then a corner of his mouth turned up, forming a crooked smile so tempting, I dropped my gaze to the little purple flowers peeking between the blades of tender grass. How could anyone look so delicious? It wasn't fair.

"What are these questions, exactly?" Edward asked, moving back towards the cover of trees in a slower, more natural pace this time.

I followed, feeling suddenly shy. My heart began to pick up speed as the first question formed in my head and I pressed my back against the tree across from him. "How did it happen?"

My cheeks flushed and I hastened to explain myself before he thought I was an absolute idiot. "I mean, I know that you're supposed to be... umm... bitten. Or at least, that's what all the books and movies say but what I want to know is how did you cross paths with a...?"

I trailed off on the last word and he grinned, probably guessing how ridiculous it would sound when said aloud. I still wondered why I was acting so blasé about this unnatural revelation. Was my imagination wilder than I'd thought, enabling me to believe just about anything? No... Edward was something more than human, which was clear. But vampire sounded too mythical!

"I didn't exactly 'cross paths' with an immortal," Edward began in a wry tone. "I was twenty years old and my parents had died a month or two before. I'm not really certain on the time between the two... occurrences."

I didn't miss the hesitation at the end. He was editing things. My eyes narrowed and my voice was tight when I spoke. "Edward, you don't have to beat about the bush with me,"

He ducked his head, nodding once, and kicked at the ground with the toe of his shoe. "The last thing I remember was sitting on the porch of my parents' house. One minute I was thinking about my father and his horrible singing abilities, the next I'm on the ground with this excruciating headache."

My eyes widened as he spoke, his words tumbling out rapidly.

"The one who changed me was there, at my parents' home. He had probably been watching me for a while. He must have knocked me out and he... he bit me and the only thing I remember after that was feeling a pain so deep, it literally incapacitated me."

Edward's pale face became improbably paler, going a shocking bone white. I felt a sudden urge to step closer and comfort him. However, I resisted, instead twisting my hands behind my back.

"What was it like?" I asked quietly. "The pain?"
Edward prodded the ground with his shoe, unearthing a tiny yellow flower. "My whole body was on fire as if someone had just lit a match on me."

I shuddered slightly.

"My back hurt like hell and the skin on my neck and chest was scorching. I wanted to die at that moment, Bella. I didn't care as long as the burning stopped."

I nodded wordlessly, knowing all too well how it felt to desire instant death to escape a terrifying physical pain.

Edward raised his eyes to mine. "The pain lasted three days, which is how long the transformation lasts. When I opened my eyes, my throat was the only thing still burning due to thirst."

I frowned. "What about the vampire that changed you? Where was he?"

Edward raked a hand through his hair. "I have no idea. He just left me there."

I drew in a shallow breath. Edward had been abandoned, not knowing what had been done to him. I pushed on ahead with my next question before I felt inclined to comfort him again. "And your sister? You told me she'd been abducted."

"She disappeared when I was seven. She was six," Edward said, his face clouding over with a new emotion. Guilt perhaps. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on. "I was supposed to be watching her."

Alice... was it as close to Ali as I imagined? Growing up in Chicago and the death of his parents five years ago both fit, but Edward had just said his sister had been kidnapped many years before. I needed to think some more. And I needed to get some more information from Ali_pixy, too.

"Edward, it wasn't your fault," I found myself saying then, hoping he would see the sincerity in my eyes. "I'm really sorry about Alice."

He gave me the faintest hint of a smile in return. "Thanks."

I pushed away from the tree and started walking down the trail towards the waterfront. Edward was at my side in two seconds exactly. Instead of jumping with surprise, I grinned at him.

Edward kicked some pine needles out of the way. We were walking side by side, only inches apart, yet at no moment did our bodies make contact. As always, Edward seemed careful to avoid touching me. And once again, I didn't know whether to feel thankful for his consideration of my private space or embarrassed that he seemed to understand how much being touched bothered me.

"Can the other Cullens read minds too?" I asked.

"No, it's just me. Some vampires have special abilities besides the typical attributes that come with this new... existence," he answered a bit reluctantly. "Carlisle, my adoptive father, thinks that this is due to some qualities we might have had in our human lives that were intensified during the transformation. Jasper, one of my brothers, is what we call an empath."

I glanced up at him, confused.

"Jasper can feel other people's emotions as if they were his own and, depending on the situation, he can alter them."
I frowned. "Alter them how?"

"He can calm an angry person down, that type of thing."

I nodded, trying to understand. "He can do this without touching you?"

"Yes, but physical contact intensifies it. He doesn't do it very often with the family."

We walked in silence until the trail ended and the pier was visible. I could see the sails of a few boats docked in front by the rocks. In spite of the partial cloud cover, the sky was a deep azure that almost matched the sea. I kept my eyes on that blue while Edward asked the question that I had been least willing to ask. A tiny part of me was actually afraid of its answer.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I eat, Bella? Or is that unimportant compared to the fact that I lied to you by omission?" He gave me a strangely cheeky grin.

I folded my arms defiantly over my chest. "Are you making fun of me for trying to understand you?"

He raised his eyebrows, pretending to be alarmed. "Not at all, I'm teasing you because you haven't run away screaming yet."

I looked away, self-consciously rubbing at my arms. "You're not the scariest thing out there for me."

There was an uncomfortable beat of silence and when I glanced up again, he was standing a bit closer with his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jeans, looking unsure and incredibly sweet.

"So go ahead and explain away," I encouraged softly.

He turned towards the pier again and continued in a voice devoid of emotion.

"Well, the Cullens live differently than most other vampires. They found me while I was still changing and taught me from the very beginning. The Cullens don't drink from humans. And neither do I."

Edward pivoted slowly to face me, meeting my stare. "They taught me how to hunt animals. That's why our eyes are gold. Vampires who live on human blood have red irises."

My heart drummed an uneven pattern through my undershirt. I didn't want to imagine what he was describing. It sounded frightening. Red eyes... red with human blood. I felt an icy shiver creep down my spine.

"But you said you've never..." I sucked in a slow breath, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Edward shook his head. "I've never even tasted it. Once the change was over and the burning had stopped, Carlisle took me hunting in the woods outside the city. He showed me how to take down my first deer. I was crazy with thirst; if he and the others hadn't been there, I don't know what I would've done."

I bit my lip, struggling against the sudden wave of compassion I felt for him. The vampire who had created Edward left him writhing in pain, the way Jimmy had left me writhing on the inside. We weren't that different, after all. This realization prompted me to proceed with my decision; I knew that I could hold Edward to his end of the bargain.

Edward began walking again and I hurried to match his long strides.

"That pain in your throat," I began in a hesitant tone.
He glanced at me and almost smiled. "Yes?"

"Isn't it unbearable... now? With me?" After all, I was very warm and human. For some reason, it bothered me to think that I could be making him uncomfortable, even after he had stalked me and made me incredibly uncomfortable. I shook my head at the warring thoughts in my mind.

Fortunately, Edward had turned to stare straight ahead or else he might have thought I was having an aneurysm.

"The thirst is certainly not as unbearable as it was five years ago," Edward said, chuckling quietly, "I do feel some sort of irritation in my throat but it's manageable."

I wrung my hands awkwardly. "You'll tell me if I get too close and make you uncomfortable?"

Edward stopped, turning to gaze at me with an unreadable expression on his handsome face.

"What?" I squeaked, feeling my face heat as I flushed.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

We walked along the pebbled path towards the pier. The sight was so beautiful and soothing that I almost didn't notice my stomach gurgling. To my embarrassment however, Edward did notice.

"Okay, we're going back so you don't starve," he declared, turning back the way we'd come.

"Wait!" I said, laying a hand on his arm without thinking.

Edward's eyes went to my fingers gripping his arm and then to my face. Trapped in his jewel-bright gaze, I rushed to explain myself. "There's one more thing I need to talk to you about. It's about... him."

His nodded and I dropped my hand. We started walking across the pier. There were sea gulls pecking at a torn fishing net left behind on the rocks. I paused to lean over the wooden railing and watched them search for fish still caught in the strings. I felt Edward's gaze on the side of my face and knew he was waiting for me to speak. But I couldn't find the words to tell him what I really wanted.

"Bella." Edward's voice and his eyes filled with the patience I had seen in them so many times over the last few days. "That man...Jimmy. Why do you want to find him? To know why he hurt you?"

My harsh laughter sounded ugly in my ears. "I couldn't care less about how I must've been so irresistible at eight years old that he couldn't keep his hands off me."

Edward's expression darkened. "But you're sure this is what you want? To find and face him after all these years?"

"Edward, please don't give me that Sunday school forgiveness crap, all right?" Bitterness rose in my throat, almost choking me. "I was eight years old. I didn't care about the psychological reasons why pedophiles molest children. The only thing I knew was that he was touching my private parts and it hurt and I wanted to die."

I heard a thin cracking noise and realized that the wooden railing was buckling under Edward's grip. The rage that filled his face frightened and thrilled me at the same time. His voice was low and dangerous when he spoke. "Then tell me why you are willing to risk your safety for this piece of wretched scum?"
"I want him dead," I said tightly. "And I want you to help me kill him."

Chapter End Notes

Note to Bella: You are a force to be reckoned with. We like it.
Note to Edward: We see you telling strange stories about your sister. What gives?

The next chapter will be Edward's.

Thank you so much for reading.
I said nothing while my rage against the man, Jimmy, bloomed inside me. Instead, I watched Bella's reactions as she waited for my answer. She looked pale and ill for a moment before a riot of color flooded her face.

"Did you hear me?" She pushed her words out past clenched teeth. "Say something, Edward."

I was quiet a moment longer, listening to the pounding of her heart before nodding back in the direction we had come. "I heard you. Walk back into town with me and we'll talk some more."

I could sense Bella's impatience as we moved along the trail, in the way she rubbed her fingers together and in her quick breaths. But I could not speak until I felt ready.

The parking lot where we had parked was visible when Bella gave in to her impatience. Her voice was low and only slightly unsteady when she spoke. "Edward, I really need to know; will you help me?"

"Help you what, Bella?" I asked, turning my eyes on her again. "Help you find Jimmy? Or help you kill him?"

"Help me make sure that what happened to me doesn't happen to anyone else," she said, her eyes hard with bitterness. "Help me forget about what that monster did to me."

"She can't be serious."

I faced her, wanting so much to take her hand in mine. To make her understand that I was there for her, even when I said things that she did not like. "Bella, recruiting me to kill Jimmy isn't going to
make you forget what happened. Whatever happens to him, those memories are in your head."

"You're right," she murmured, taking a step closer. Her scent swirled around me in the breeze and I held my breath to control my body's response. "I can't forget. But I can try to feel better."

"And a dead Jimmy will make you feel better?"

"Hell, yes."

I didn't need to hear Bella's thoughts to know her emotions were especially volatile in that moment. Her anger and bitterness simmered just beneath the surface, needing very little to make them boil over.

Very carefully, I let the tip of my finger brush the hem of Bella's sleeve, making sure to avoid touching her skin. "I'll help you find him, Bella. And we'll make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else."

Bella's eyes narrowed slightly before she nodded slowly and stepped back. Neither of us acknowledged that I hadn't agreed to her terms in full yet. Instead, we watched each other for another silent minute before I turned and continued walking. A moment later, Bella fell into step beside me.

aDc

Bella was quiet the rest of the way into Port Angeles, saying little as we found a café where she ordered lunch. I welcomed the lull in conversation, and used it to consider the extraordinary change I had seen in the girl sitting across from me.

She had not planned to tell me about the abuse she had experienced as a child; the shock on her face as she spoke the words told me as much. But once out, the words seemed to unlock a great store of emotion that crashed through her with the force of a hurricane.

I had not given Bella an answer to her request, but in truth I was already decided. I would help her locate the man, Jimmy, and even assist her in the confrontation she seemed hell-bent on having. The idea of letting her anywhere near him disturbed me deeply, but I would do everything in my power to keep her safe.

When it came to killing Jimmy, however… I could not allow Bella to take part in that act, no matter how strongly she felt that it was her right. Whatever Bella thought of herself, I knew she was a pure soul. She did not deserve to suffer any more than she already had, nor to carry the weight of such a serious crime. I had to find a way to shoulder that burden. Whether I could control myself when we met him was another problem altogether.

"Am I still allowed to ask questions?" Bella asked. I glanced up to find her bright gaze leveled over the top of the burger she was holding.

"Of course you are," I said, giving her a small smile before I felt it slide from my face. "I need to ask you something first, please, Bella."

She nodded, her brow furrowing at my serious expression. "Of course."

"I'm sure this goes without saying, but I must ask that you keep our conversations about my... condition to yourself. Please."

"Well, yeah, obviously. It didn't occur to me not to keep it on the down-low, Edward."

"I appreciate that," I said solemnly. I trained my gaze on Bella's big eyes, silently pleading with her
to understand the seriousness of my request. "All the same, you should know that I have violated some rules today in telling you about myself. Not to mention putting the safety of my family and myself at some risk."

"Edward, I understand what you're saying," Bella said soberly. She put her sandwich down and wiped her hands on her napkin. "I won't say anything. And not only out of respect for you. Frankly, enough people think I'm strange without adding a vampire friend twist to the gossip."

We exchanged smiles before Bella leaned forward slightly to speak in a very low voice. "I trusted you with my secret, Edward. You can do the same with me."

I nodded then, feeling my chest constrict at the earnestness of her words. "Thank you. And feel free to ask whatever."

"Okay, then," she said before taking another bite of her sandwich and chewing. Her eyes were bright with curiosity when she was ready to speak again. "How did your family come together? Because I'm guessing that vampires don't have babies. And you said yourself that the Cullens took you in five years ago when you were in, what, college?"

"You're right on both counts. Vampires don't reproduce. I was twenty-one when I was changed. The answer to your question is that the Cullen family formed itself over the years."

"Carlisle, my father, is nearly four-hundred years old. He spent most of his immortal life searching for a mate or a companion. He met Esme in 1921, when she was his patient in the hospital where he worked. They met Rosalie and Emmett ten years later, and then Jasper in 1972. I'm the latest addition to the family. I couldn't tell you what it is that holds us together… but somehow it works."

"Did Carlisle change all of them?" Bella's wide eyes were rapt as I spoke, her sandwich forgotten. She rolled her eyes when I nudged her plate toward her, but quickly set about eating again.

"Carlisle changed Esme," I said, running a hand over my hair. "She was very ill and would have died otherwise. But the rest of us were changed by others. Rosalie and Emmett were already traveling together, while Jasper was alone. He moved around with different vampires over the years, but didn't find a coven that clicked for him until he met the Cullens."

"And you were alone," Bella piped in.

"Well, I was only half transformed when they found me," I replied. "I was too busy burning to even begin to feel alone."

Bella chewed her food thoughtfully as she took in my explanation. "Not every vampire belongs to a family, is that right?"

"Very much so," I replied. "Some of our kind prefer to travel alone or with only one other. They might go years without interacting closely with another vampire."

"What makes your family different?"

"I can't speak for the others. But for me… I need the connection, to belong somewhere. Maybe it's because I was changed so soon after losing my parents and my–" I stopped, catching myself before I said anything more about Alice. "Well, you get the idea."

Bella nodded and took a long sip from her glass of lemonade. "Is that what it's like for the others?"

"I think so, at least for most of us. Jasper is the wild card in the bunch because he was a nomad for
the longest time after Carlisle." I rubbed my fingers thoughtfully against the back of my neck. "I sometimes wonder if he feels any urge to wander and explore – or if he gets bored. But he fits in with the rest of us. And I've certainly never heard any thoughts from him that would indicate that he'd rather be on his own."

"You love them." Bella stated gently.

I nodded humbly. "Very much so. My family... they mean a great deal to me."

"Do you miss your parents very much?" she pressed, her eyes growing sad when I winced at her words. "I'm sorry-"

"It's all right," I murmured, my hand reaching to my pocket for the notebook before I remembered I had left it at home to dry. "I do miss them. Very deeply."

Needing some occupation, my hands fell on top of the placemat covering my side of the table. My fingers moved, silently playing the notes the song I had been composing for the last week. Bella's gaze flickered between my hands and my face several times before she swallowed and cleared her throat.

"And your sister... Mary Alice. Do you miss her terribly?"

"Yes, I do, Bella." I heard my voice waver, and closed my eyes. My hands stilled as I drew a long breath to calm myself. "I miss Alice every day."

The touch of warm fingers on the back of my hand thrilled and shocked me. My eyes snapped open to find Bella's right hand resting over my left, her touch both gentle and fleeting. I blinked and the fingers withdrew, leaving the ghost of heated skin on mine.

Bella's expression was conflicted when I raised my gaze to hers. I read in her eyes a clear desire to comfort me, as well as confusion.

"Edward, about your sister," she began, but paused when the waitress stopped by to collect the now emptied plates.

"You were asking about Alice," I prompted once the waitress had gone off to fill Bella's dessert order.

Bella directed her gaze at the tabletop, her hand coming up to fiddle with her hair. "It wasn't important."

I recognized her tells well enough by then to know Bella was keeping something from me. I wasn't, however, comfortable pressing her for the information.

"I did wonder, though, about some of the other things we've been talking about today." She was quiet again when the waitress returned with a plate of apple pie and two coffees. I smiled when she nudged a cup toward me with a cheeky twinkle in her eye.

"Clever girl," I murmured, wrapping my hands around the warm mug. And then I shook my head in wonder as the melancholy I'd been feeling over Alice softened. "What is it you want to know?"

"Why does your family feed on animals? Is it a... moral thing?" She cocked her head curiously at me.

"Well, it turns out that Carlisle is allergic to human blood," I said in a low voice, making my expression as somber as possible.
My lips twitched when Bella's mouth dropped open in surprise. She rolled her eyes at me when I smiled, and stuck some pie in her mouth before muttering something about my reflex joking.

"I'm sorry; it was just too perfect an opportunity." I smiled in apology. "But it is Carlisle who guides the family in that direction.

"You are correct; the decision is a moral one. You see, Carlisle is a doctor and he has practiced healing since before he was changed. He feels we should not hunt humans when there is a viable alternative in animals."

"And you all agree with him?"

"More or less, yes. Some of us find it easier than the others. Rosalie, for instance, is very much at ease with abstinence, while Esme and Jasper have a harder time."

"And you?" Bella eyed me carefully. "How do you feel about hunting animals?"

I shrugged. "I've never known anything else. So for me, it's easy. If I knew what I was missing, I might feel differently."

"But what's more... I don't want to kill people, Bella." My voice was serious, and Bella's expression reflected that tone. "I don't want to be this monstrous thing. I can't turn back time and be something better than what I have become. But I can try to do the right things and be good, for lack of a better word."

Bella sat silent, blinking furiously as she gathered her thoughts. I heard her swallow before she spoke again in a low murmur. "And where does that leave me as far as Jimmy is concerned, Edward? Does that mean you won't help me?"

"No." My eyes widened when Bella pushed back from the table. "Where are you – stop, Bella."

"You said you wouldn't help me," she retorted in a tight, breathless voice as she began to get to her feet.

I shook my head, holding up my hand to keep her from bolting. "You misunderstand me. I will help you, Bella. We'll find him together."

"And you'll help me kill him?"

"I told you before that I would help you make sure that animal doesn't hurt anyone ever again." I heard the snarl in my voice; I could well imagine the frightening expression on my face. "And I'll do whatever it takes to protect you."

Bella bent forward to prop her elbows on the tabletop, burying her face in her hands. My rage dropped away, replaced by concern as I watched her heave shaky breaths. Unable to touch her, I could only wait without knowing if she was relieved or angry.

Several long minutes later, Bella dropped her hands and cleared her throat, seeming to be in control of herself once again. Her dark eyes were fierce when they met mine. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I replied quietly.

aDc

The ride back to Forks was quiet. Bella sat wrapped in her thoughts, gazing out the window at the
passing shoreline. I, of course, was wrapped in thoughts of Bella.

I felt a sense of wonder when I considered the enormous changes our burgeoning friendship had already brought to my life. I had promised to help her exact revenge on a human, even pledging to go against my own dark moral compass if it came to that. And I had told her so many of my secrets, perhaps permanently damaging my relationship with my family in the process.

Still, I held me back from telling her the truth about Alice. Something in the way Bella had questioned me about my sister earlier tagged at the edges of my brain; I just couldn't understand why. And when Bella had asked me how long it had been since Alice's disappearance, I had lied, my mouth glibly forming the words. I had no reason to distrust this human girl, but I was not ready to give her my last secret. I wasn't sure how long it would take me to get to that point.

"What do we do next?" Bella asked in a soft voice.

I glanced to my right, taking in her somber expression, and the nervousness evidenced in her tightly clasped hands. "I'll start searching for him. Once I have some of his personal identity, I can begin narrowing down his location. Do you remember his last name?"

"Chase," Bella replied. She blanched before laying her head against the seat back. "James Chase. I can give you his address in Sacramento. He may not live there now, of course."

I took my phone from my pocket and handed it to her. "Write a note with the address so I don't have to bother you."

She snorted as she tapped on the screen. "I'm the one that asked for your help, Edward."

"If he's still alive, I should be able to find something fairly easily. Given his age, he's probably not drawing Social Security yet, but he should have a number; that's always a good place to start."

"Do you think you can find something this week?"

"Sure. As I said, if he's alive, there will be some trace to find. Most humans leave digital footprints that are easy to discern."

She handed my phone back with a nod. "The address is in there, along with my phone number in case you need to text me. What do you mean, 'most' humans leave data footprints? Don't we all?"

"Well, no," I replied. "A person has to interact in the digital environment to create the footprint. Online banking, email, website usage, purchases – that kind of thing. Very young humans typically use an adult's accounts when they are online. And very old humans rarely go online. Any humans can minimize their print just by staying offline."

Bella frowned, her brows furrowing as she looked at me. "What if Jimmy's like that? I mean, how do we know he gets online at all?"

I answered slowly. "Well, given his, ah, predilections, it's very likely that he uses the web to pursue his interests. There is a vast store of information and material for people like him."

My jaw clenched hard as the sick expression on Bella's face told me she understood my meaning perfectly.

"He's almost certainly employing one or more aliases for those activities. But it's equally likely he's using his real identity for mundane things like buying his groceries."
Bella lapsed into another pensive silence. We were parked behind her old, red Ford and I had turned off the ignition before she turned to look at me again.

"You asked me if I could track him down this week, Bella." I quirked an eyebrow at her. "What are you thinking?"

"Spring break starts a week from tomorrow," she replied. "I thought that, if you can find him before the break week starts, we could take a trip and... drop in on him."

"Yeah. That'll work," I nodded

I let myself out of the car and walked around to open Bella's door. Together, we climbed the steps of the house and walked to the porch swing, our bodies obeying a wordless agreement to spend a bit more time together.

"Edward," she began before drawing a deep breath. "Why are you helping me? Don't get me wrong, I really am grateful. For yesterday in Seattle, for being honest with me, for agreeing to help me... even for listening to me last night."

I swallowed at the raw emotion I saw in Bella's eyes, humbled by her gratitude. I was ashamed for not being entirely honest about Alice. And I was fearful, too, unsure how to explain to Bella the depth to which she affected me. How could I explain the instinct that pushed me toward her? Could I really say the words 'mating urge' to a young, human girl I had known for less than a week? Ugh.

"Bella, when I saw you in the music store last week, something happened to me... something that I still don't fully understand."

"Can you try to explain it to me? I'd like to know."

I looked down at my hands, drawing comfort from the feel of the soft denim under my fingers. "My kind have certain urges... instincts, that cause us to act in certain ways. Meeting you spurred an impulse in me. To protect you. To take care of you, I guess, and watch over you."

"An impulse?"

"I know, weird. Just one more attraction in the freak show," I laughed weakly, and rubbed my thumb over the bridge of my nose. "But you have to know that the drive is very powerful. I... I have a terrible time focusing on anything else unless I am around you."

"You're not a freak, Edward." She frowned, appearing both disappointed and discomfited. "So you're, what, obeying instinct when you're around me?"

"Yes. But it's more than that. I-" I broke off, shaking my head at my own agitation. "Damn it, why is this so difficult? I like you Bella. Outside of the impulse. I just like you. You know; boy meets girl and all that."

Her eyebrows climbed her forehead in surprise. "You like me? That... that is unexpected."

Unsure of how to take Bella's reply, I said nothing. A part of me was bursting to ask if there was a chance that she might return those feelings; if she could somehow feel affection for me. I knew, however, that her answer could not be anything but 'no.' And I knew that I had no right to feel anything for this girl. She deserved to live a life outside the shadows of my world.

"I should let you go," I murmured as I stood, giving Bella a small smile when she jumped to her feet too. Walking toward the stairs, I turned to reassure her about our mutual plans for the next several
days. "I'll start a search tonight and text you as soon as I find anything."

"Oh, right," she exclaimed, her eyes widening. "I'll start talking to Charlie and Renee about taking a trip to see her during break."

"Good girl," I said, giving her a warm smile. "I'm going to Garrett's. It's 3:00 now; maybe I can catch him for an hour or so before the store closes."

I was down the stairs and nearly to my car when Bella called after me. "What are you going to buy at Garrett's anyway? From what I heard of your playlists in the car today, you like all kinds of music."

"Oh, I need to buy some sheet music," I said as I opened my door. "I play the piano and guitar."


The Port Angeles house was silent when I let myself in. Normally, there was a buzz of activity, no matter what the hour. With no need for sleep, any one or more of us could be working on projects at any time of night or day. Jasper and Emmett might be watching news programs, while Rosalie tinkered with the computers and Esme scribbled notes on blueprints. Carlisle liked to read in his downtime, and I usually sat at the terminals in the library. To be met with such quiet was rare.

Dread settled over me as I walked into the kitchen and found Jasper sitting alone at the table. His expression was neutral, but I saw sympathy lurking in his eyes when I took the seat across from him.

Jasper spoke before I needed to sharpen my focus to hear his thoughts. "They're all in the park, hunting."

"And why are you here?" I dropped the bag of music folios from Garrett's on the table.

"Didn't think a note was the best way to tell you what was going on. Rose is... not very happy with you at the moment."

"She's pissed," I said dryly.

"As a cat in the bathtub," Jasper agreed with a grin.

I swore softly as I rubbed my hands through my hair. "Do I even want to know how you all became aware of the need to be pissed at me?"

"Emmett convinced us to let you and the Swan girl walk the trail alone," Jasper replied. "But Rose insisted we park outside the cafe you took her into after your walk."

"And you overheard her asking me questions."

"As well as asking you to help kill another human, Edward."

I nodded, pushing my irritation and nervousness aside. "And which is Rose more pissed about?"

"That's hard to say," Jasper shrugged. "If I had to guess, she's more ticked off about giving away the family secret. But Carlisle-"

"Carlisle was there?" I was aghast.
"We all were," he said quietly. "I think I understand why you did it. I can feel everything coming off of you. Anger for what happened to Bella, grief and guilt for Alice... and affection for them both."

Damn it. I closed my eyes, fighting the waves of emotion that welled up inside me. Jasper shifted in his seat just before a feeling of calmness dropped over me like a cloak. I breathed deeply, more grateful for Jasper's quiet sympathy than his ability to affect my mood.

"Thanks for that," I murmured, opening my eyes to meet his.

Jasper just smiled softly before he rose to his feet. "We should get out there and find them. It's time everyone talked."

We drove my car out of town, taking Hurricane Ridge Road into the park. The car climbed higher into the mountains until we were far enough away from human dwellings to pull onto a nearly forgotten Park Service road. Leaving the car parked behind Emmett's Jeep, Jasper and I continued on foot, racing between the trees as we followed the others' fresh scent trails.

I listened as my feet flashed over the ground, trying hear my family's thoughts so that I knew what I was walking into. But my own thoughts were too jumbled, and they broke what little I picked up into pieces that didn't make sense.

We found them gathered by the icy water at Upper Royal Lake. My heart sank when I took in Rosalie and Carlisle's stiff body language; it was clear that they had been arguing. Rosalie's face twisted in anger before she turned away, her arms wrapped around herself protectively. Carlisle shook his head and rubbed his hands over the back of his neck.

I was surprised when Esme's eyes flashed with quiet support. She walked to my side and took my hand in hers. As always, Emmett wore his emotions on his sleeve. His face reflected frustration before he managed a strained smile and he too came stand at my side. I felt Jasper step a bit closer behind us, his presence steady and strong.

We stood then, four facing two, and my dead heart creased to think that I had caused a rift in my family with just a few words to a dark-haired human girl. No. This isn't right.

"I'm sorry," I managed to get out before I stepped forward. "I never meant for any of this to happen, you have to believe me."

"We know that, Edward." Carlisle's voice was low, reflecting the worry in his eyes. "I'm sure you can understand why we would be concerned. But none of us thinks that this is what you wanted."

Rosalie grunted and pushed out a harsh breath before turning to face me. I winced at the injury lurking under her anger.

"How could you, Edward," she rushed out in a tight voice. "You've put us all at risk and for what? For a human girl who can hardly be expected to understand you or return your attentions in even the smallest capacity."

I nodded, stung by her words. I was too overcome with guilt and anxiety to defend my actions or Bella herself. "I really am sorry, Rosalie. I know you don't understand... Christ, I don't really understand half of what's been going on myself.

"But what's done is done. Bella knows and, as absurd as it sounds, I trust her not to tell anyone about us."

"You can't guarantee that, Edward," Rosalie hissed before her arms dropped against her sides. Her
hands curled into fists as she glared at me. "She's a child. She can't even begin to understand the implications of what you've told her."

"That's enough Rosalie," Carlisle cut in quietly, his brows knitting with emotion. "However we all feel about what Edward has done, he is right; the Swan girl knows and nothing can be done to change that."

Emmett stiffened beside me as Rosalie snorted derisively. "That's not good enough, Carlisle-"

"Please." I took another step forward and felt keenly the loss of Esme's hand in mine. "I don't expect you to understand or forgive me. The very last thing I wasn't to do is set you against each other; that is something that I cannot allow to happen. I'll pack my things and leave tonight."

More than one gasp sounded around me as both Rosalie and Carlisle's heads snapped up, wearing matching expressions of shock.

"You... what are you talking about, Edward?" Carlisle's voice was much louder than I'd ever heard it before. "You can't leave, son. No one wants that."

My hands rose up to tangle in my hair and I let out a low groan. "Let me fix this Carlisle. You all can move to another city to get away from Bella and stay safe."

"Absolutely not," Esme said firmly, stepping forward to lay a hand on my shoulder. "Edward, whatever happens with the Swan girl, your place is here, with us."

I shook my head slowly, trying but failing to gather my thoughts to protest.

"Don't, Edward," Rosalie said, her flattened tone catching my attention. Her eyes were wary when I met them, but softer. They sparkled with anger again for a moment before she inhaled deeply. "Don't even think that. I am so mad at you... I could rip your arms right off. But you can't go."

I stood looking at my shoes as Carlisle crossed the distance between us. I felt his hand on my shoulder, his touch reassuring me. When I looked up to meet his eyes, I saw only the steady and supportive warmth I knew so well.

"We'll figure it out, Edward," he said quietly, his lips curling into a smile. "Just hang in there. And be prepared for a week or two of silent treatment from Rose."

I managed a nod as the others chuckled around me and began to move back toward the trees. But my eyes sought out my sister's as she followed slowly behind Carlisle.

Rosalie shot a hard smile my way, one that did not quite meet her eyes. She reached out to grasp my elbow as she passed, drawing me with her as we followed the others. I counted myself lucky to find my arm still attached and hid my smile.

Chapter End Notes

You know what this means... road trip! Were you surprised by Edward's decision?Thanks for bearing with us for a couple of dialogue-heavy chapters - there were a lot of things that needed to be said ;)

The next chapter will be Bella's.
Thank you so much for reading.
Edward said he liked me.

As improbable as the words sounded, especially after he left and I was once again alone in the house, I couldn't deny that they sent a thrill through me. Even if Edward had said them to be polite or to explain the unusual way we'd met, I was grateful for the illusion of what could have been if I were more deserving.

My head was still spinning from my conversation with Edward when Charlie got home. I rushed about the kitchen, gathering ingredients for vegetable soup while my heart raced. Charlie made a face at the soup pot, but I dropped pieces of beef in the broth and got him to finish off two bowls.

It was when Charlie was rubbing his belly and thanking me for dinner that I decided to talk to him about my plans for Spring Break.

"Umm… Dad?" I began, carrying the dirty dishes over to the sink, "I was thinking about going to visit Mom next week."

I peeked over my shoulder to catch his reaction. His brow furrowed in confusion. "What about school?"

"Spring Break starts next Monday, Dad."

"Oh that's right." He seemed embarrassed to have forgotten. "I think it's a great idea, Bells. You should call your mother tonight and have her help you out with finding the best airline deals."

"Actually, I'm thinking of driving there." I turned back to the sink and picked up a dishrag. "The drive's not that long."

I didn't have to look over my shoulder this time. Charlie's disapproving tone said it all. "That truck doesn't get much gas mileage, Bella. You'll have to stop in practically every town on the way."
"I'll be fine, Dad," I muttered. Charlie was right and I didn't want to argue.

"Maybe you could borrow Jacob's Volkswagen. It's not exactly brand new either but I have to admit the kid's done a great job rebuilding the engine."

I rolled my eyes but nodded; whatever I said wouldn't matter anyway. "Okay, fine."

My attention was on the bowl I was rinsing and I didn't notice Charlie come to stand at my side until he spoke. His voice was softer and apologetic. "I'm just looking out for you, Bells."

"I know, Dad," I replied, smiling awkwardly as my chest tightened. "And I'm just trying to show you that I can take care of myself."

His answering smile reached his brown eyes. "I know that too, Bells."

A steady patter of rain on the roof woke me the next morning. I'd been tired after dinner the night before and had gone straight to bed, but the first thing I did was turn on the computer. By the time I'd brushed my teeth, the computer had booted up enough to let me check my email for any new messages from Ali_pixy. To my disappointment, there were none, and so I hurried to get dressed for school.

Edward called my cell while I was driving and it took double my concentration to answer and maneuver through the early morning mist.

"H-hello? Edward?" I fumbled as the high school came into view. His musical voice set me at ease as I pulled into the parking lot. "Bella, how are you? I called last night but you didn't pick up."

I chose a parking space next to Tyler's van and pulled in. "I'm sorry about that. I was just so tired last night. I crashed right after dinner."

"No problem, Bella. I was just worried."

Warmth immediately crept up my neck. "Oh, umm... You don't have to worry," I said lamely. "Did you find anything?"

Edward sounded reluctant when he answered. "Yes, actually. I found five men named James Chase in northern California. Two live in Sacramento."

My heartbeat sped as raindrops splattered the windshield. "Are any of them in Yuba County?"

"No. Two more are in San Jose and the last lives in Vallejo."

"Oh." I let out a slow sigh, not sure how to feel: relieved, excited or scared. Thankfully, Edward's next question snapped me back into focus.

"Did you ask Charlie about visiting your mother?"

"Yeah. He said its fine. He's worried about my truck making it that far, though." I rolled my eyes again, remembering our little spat. "Charlie wants me to borrow a friend's car instead."

"Well, I guess it won't matter since we'll be in my car," Edward replied in a playful tone that made
"Are you implying that my truck is lacking in some way, Edward?" I teased back while unbuckling my seatbelt and grabbing my bag from the passenger side.

"Oh, do you mean am I implying that paint dries faster than your ancient four-wheeler moves? Or that it makes horrendous noises and is covered in rust? Not at all, Bella."

I stepped down from the "ancient four-wheeler" and slammed the door hard enough so that he could hear the banging sound. "Don't hate the truck, rich boy. We can't all drive sports cars at 100 mph."

Edward's answering laugh was both beautiful and fascinating. "As I told you yesterday, I've never gotten a ticket or been in an accident. You'll be safe with me, Miss Swan."

We made plans to start the trip on Sunday morning before we hung up and I trudged across the wet pavement towards the school.

"Hey, Bella, wait up!"

I turned to see Mike and Tyler approaching. I bit back a laugh at how stereotypically jock Tyler looked with a basketball tucked under his arm. "Hi Mike, Tyler."

"Hey, yourself. Do you have any plans for Spring Break?" Mike asked as we made our way into the chaos of the main school hallway.

"I'm going to Sacramento to visit my mom," I answered, sliding my cell phone in the front pocket of my bag.

"That's cool. Did I tell you I used to live in San Francisco?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Tyler sidled between us then, his shoulder almost bumping mine. "A bunch of us are going down to First Beach this Friday, Bella. You should come. Lauren's bringing some samples from her mom's liquor cabinet and we're going to have a keg too. Compliments of my big brother who's home from college."

I quickened my pace but continued talking so they wouldn't think me rude. This kind of conversation made the vein in Charlie's forehead pop. "Really? First Beach?"

"Yeah and there's going to be a bonfire too. I remember how much you liked those." Mike stepped forward to open the door to our English class for me. He winked and I thought back to the trip Mike and I had taken to La Push when I'd first moved to Forks. My friendship with Jacob had begun that same afternoon on the beach.

"Sure, I'm in," I said, giving them both a smile.

After Spanish, I ducked into the library to use a computer and check for messages from my mysterious online buddy. After my conversations with Edward, it was hard not to believe that his vanished sister "Alice" and Ali_pixy weren't somehow connected. I was eager to ask her more questions about her brother and parents, even if I wasn't quite sure what to say.

But Ali_pixy hadn't updated her status or posted new journal entries in two weeks, which was really unusual, and hadn't responded to my message. There wasn't any news that day or for the next two days. By Wednesday, I gave up waiting for a response and sent her another new message. My inbox
stayed quiet and my anxiety kept building.

Edward called as I was finishing breakfast on Thursday morning. Charlie glanced up from his plate of scrambled eggs with a quizzical look in his eye. It was then that I realized how flushed I had become at the sound of Edward's quiet hello.

"Oh hi!" I exclaimed, clumsily rising from the table.

"Is it too early for me to call?" Edward asked, sounding worried.

"Oh no, Ed-Edward. It's not too early." I swallowed at my shaking voice and hurriedly gathered the dishes with the cell phone tucked between my ear and left shoulder. Charlie was openly gawking at me.

"Well, I just wanted to check up on you and let you know I have profile pictures to match the five James Chases I found."

Without meaning to, I dumped the dishes in the sink with a loud clatter.

"Bella? Is everything all right?"

I wiped my hands on a dishrag so I could better hold the phone. "Yeah, I just... I dropped something."

"Okay. Look, I get that this is fast but I know the occupations and addresses of all five men. The search is pretty much done at this point. All you need to do is identify the right one from his photo and we're set to make the trip." Edward's voice was low and soothing.

"Uh-huh... okay." My breathing was shallow and I wasn't capable of saying much more.

"I can call each of them to check for any recent changes, like a move or job change, but the information looks good," Edward continued.

We were getting close. He said the search was almost done

"Okay, so when do you want to see me?" I asked between uneven breaths. My back was still turned to Charlie, but I heard the scraping of his chair as he pushed back from the table.

"I could meet you after school if you want or this weekend?"

There was no way I was strong enough to handle actual images of Jimmy just then. I needed a day or two. And suddenly the party Mike and his friends were going at La Push sounded strangely comforting.

I swallowed hard. "Umm... Not today. I have a test and laundry to do. How about Sunday?"

"No problem, Bella. We can talk about it Sunday morning, before we get started driving. Can you be here by 7:00?"

"Sure, no problem, Edward. Thanks... for everything. I'll see you soon."

I snapped the phone shut and glanced in Charlie's direction with a wan smile. "Just a friend."

He didn't seem convinced by my attempts to be blasé. "A friend, huh? From school?"
"No. I met him at this music store in Forks. He lives in Port Angeles. We've been chatting on the phone and the computer and stuff." I stopped abruptly, wincing on the word "stuff" and wondering just what Charlie would think that meant.

The frown on his face told me it wasn't good. "Bella, you have to be careful. This kind of thing can get dangerous pretty quickly, especially if you're communicating with someone you don't really know through the Internet-"

"Dad!" I raised a hand to stop him. "It's not like that, I swear. Edward is not an Internet predator."

_The boy is a pretty skillful cyber stalker when he puts his mind to it, however._

Charlie's tone grew skeptical. "How do you know?"

"I just do. We've met in person, okay? Twice, actually, and he didn't try to kidnap me. He's never even cursed in front of me. There's nothing to worry about, Dad. We're friends, that's all."

Charlie sighed, glancing down at his shoes. "Bella, I don't want to tell you what to do, but it's my job to make sure you're safe."

"I know, Dad. But just trust me. I do know how to choose the right kind of friends."

He nodded but still looked concerned. "All right then. But next time you go see this person, I want you to tell me and I'll drive you."

I rolled my eyes and he added, "Or just ask Jacob to go with you."

Knowing I wouldn't be able to convince him to trust me any further today, I excused myself and pecked his cheek on my way out the door.

aDc

The school day passed in a haze. I heard Jessica yapping away about the upcoming party and Angela asking about last night's homework, but most of my mind was preoccupied with the details of Edward's phone call.

I tried not to think about it, because those thoughts made my heart race and my breathing quicken, but it was very difficult. Still, I waited until school let out and I was safely home before breaking down.

There was no way I could let my guard down in the parking lot at school where so many people would see. But my neighborhood was relatively quiet, and the overhanging spruce branches provided a sort of barrier against prying eyes.

I pulled into Charlie's driveway and left the engine running so I'd be warm as my vision clouded. I leaned my head back against the seat, staring up at the truck's ceiling while tears cascaded down my face. I concentrated on breathing deeply but when that didn't help, I pulled out my phone and dialed Jacob's home number.

Billy's voice was warm when he heard my voice. "Hey, Bella. It's been awhile. Are you coming to visit us soon?"

It was as if he'd read my mind. I let out a half-hearted chuckle and wiped the wetness from my lower lashes. "Yeah, Billy, I'm thinking about going to the beach with some friends this weekend. I'm calling to ask if Jacob wants to hang out."
"Oh that sounds fun, Bella." Billy's voice sounded enthusiastic. "I think he'll like that. Jake's over at Embry's place right now but I'll tell him to call you when he gets back."

I smiled weakly. "Okay, Billy. That'd be great. Thanks."

It was easier to control myself after hanging up.

aDc

Jake called after dinner and our phone conversation lasted well into the night. We talked about the bonfire and joked about what Charlie would do if he found out how much booze Mike and Tyler were bragging about taking with them.

"Maybe you'd want to sleep over at Emily's?" Jacob suggested. Emily was Leah Clearwater's cousin and good friends with Jacob.

"I guess, but why?" I was confused by the offer. It was another chilly night, but Charlie had already turned the heat on high and I was reluctant to complain. Instead, I twisted the quilt around my shoulders and slid further beneath the lilac sheets on my bed.

Jacob's throaty laugh echoed through the phone. "'Cause when you're passed out drunk, it's going to be a bit awkward taking you back to Charlie's house, him being a cop and all."

I snorted at that assumption. "Me? Drunk? Jake, Charlie's beer is the grossest thing I've ever tasted and I'm pretty sure anything Mike and Tyler bring will be just as unappealing."

Jacob didn't relent. "Hey, you did say that Lauren girl's got the key to her mom's mini bar. And Jared scored some whiskey off his cousin at the Makah rez."

I giggled at Jacob's enthusiasm. "Jake, you sound like a badass, though I doubt that's the case. Since when do you drink?"

"Bells, I had my first beer when I was 10."

"Nice, Jake."

"But don't worry, I'll make sure nobody messes with you," he added in a semi-serious tone that made me smile.

"I know, Jake. See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Bells."

aDc

I blinked and the first thing I saw was a pair of topaz-colored eyes staring back at me. I was startled and couldn't help jumping a bit, but the jolt of fear disappeared when I noticed Edward looked just as surprised at the sight of me.

"Edward," I said with a breathless chuckle. "You scared me to death! What are you doing here?"

His lips spread in a wide smile. "Me? Bella, this is my room."

I glanced around at the tidy room that definitely wasn't mine. The wallpaper was moss green with gold stripes. There was a three-legged table by the window, and dark green curtains on the windows to match the wallpaper. A beige carpet covered floor.
I felt my cheeks flush. "Sorry... I fell asleep and lost track of time," I mumbled, and self-consciously pulled my favorite purple cardigan around my shoulders. I looked down and noticed I was wearing only a lacy tank top underneath the sweater.

Edward moved across the room and sat at the edge of the bed before I could shift my position. My eyes flew to his face, and widened slightly at his expression. It was a mixture of amusement and intense concentration. He reached one hand to brush two cool fingers along my cheek and jaw.

"I love it when you blush."

Despite feeling embarrassed, I twisted to inch closer to him, searching his face for signs of discomfort.

"But isn't it harder, seeing... that color in my skin?" My voice faltered over the word "blood" and I finally deciding against saying it.

Edward's lips pressed firmly together and his hand dropped from my cheek. I missed the contact immediately and a shiver ran down my spine. "Yes, it's definitely harder to control myself when you do that."

"But, please," I whispered, unable to bear the absence of his cool touch on my heated flesh. "Don't stop."

The words were out before I could stop them and suddenly Edward's hands wrapped around my waist. He pulled me onto his lap, and brushed his lips against mine. They tasted like berries and snow, pure and sweet.

My fingers slid through his unbelievably soft hair, and I pulled him closer. I was sure I would find relief only by pressing my body against his.

I felt myself falling backwards, but Edward's hands were locked firmly around my waist, guiding me down on to the bed. His kisses were more urgent and I found myself forgetting to breathe. My hands slid from his hair down his shoulders and over his chest. I clutched the front of his t-shirt with my fingers, wanting to pull it down so I could see the white expanse of his throat and feel the smooth muscles underneath. After what seemed hours, Edward broke the kiss. I sighed when he cradled my head with one hand, his other climbing slowly up my ribcage, making me shiver.

"Sweetheart, are you sure?" His voice was shaky.

All I could do was nod, caught in his bright gaze.

Then his mouth pressed against my throat, leaving rough kisses and sucking at my skin in a way that made my limbs grow slack. A low moan slipped from between my lips as Edward's icy tongue flicked over my collarbone.

"Unh."

I woke up in my chilly room, my body completely flushed beneath my quilt and tiny beads of sweat on the nape of my neck. I couldn't believe it. Not only did I not have a nightmare for the first time in what felt like forever, but the dream I did have was... a really good dream. About Edward. He might've been about to bite me but it felt so.... What is wrong with me?

The shrill ringing of my alarm clock pierced my dream bubble. I groaned, rolling over and slamming my palm over the offensive noise coming from the nightstand.
Outside, Friday had arrived with the thinnest cloud cover and points of sunlight peeking through. But I wanted to roll over and reenter the dream I'd just left; getting out for some Vitamin D just didn't hold its normal appeal.

Nothing about that day was typical. Mike talked so much about the party during school hours that I came close to bailing out on more than one occasion. And then Edward sent a text message during lunch that made me both smile and tremble with anxiety.

Edward - Hi, just checking to see how you're doing. Is Sunday at 7 still okay? I'm going out with my family tonight and won't have phone on but I'll check in tomorrow. Stay safe and relatively dry. JK, kinda ;)

"Who's that from, Bella?" Jessica asked, suddenly leaning away from Lauren and peering down at the screen of my cell phone. My smile must have been very wide to catch her interest, and curiosity was stamped all over her face.

"Just a friend," I replied cryptically, pressing a button to block the message from view.

"Edward?" Jessica mused. "Fancy name. Is he your boyfriend?"

I coughed, feeling my cheeks heat up. "No, just someone I met recently."

Lauren looked over at me then and I suppressed a sigh. There was little chance she wouldn't jump at the chance to pick on me to win back Jess's attention.

"Bella, is your friend Jacob coming to the bonfire tonight?" Lauren's voice dripped with phony sweetness.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Mike staring at me now too. "Oh, awesome. "Yeah, he's coming. Why?"

Lauren shrugged. "Just wondering. He's super cute. Are you two dating?"

I shook my head instantly. "No, we're just friends."

"Jacob likes lots of people. He's a really friendly guy."

She raised a thin, shaped eyebrow. "Do you know if he likes anyone?"

A teasing smile crept over my lips. "Jacob likes lots of people. He's a really friendly guy."

Lauren frowned, clearly not amused and I bit back a smirk. "That's not what I-"

Angela interrupted then with a question about wardrobe and I gratefully dropped my gaze back to my turkey sandwich. Jessica probably would have enjoyed watching Lauren attack me with prying questions about my best friend but Angela didn't play their mean girl games.

aDc

Charlie called out from the living room as I was heading down the stairs that evening. "Bella? Come here a minute."

I hastily pulled my hair back with a butterfly clip and went to see what he wanted. "Yeah, Dad?"

Charlie pressed the mute button on the remote control and turned away from the football game on TV with appraising eyes. "You look really nice, Bells."
I pushed my hands deep in the pockets of the trendy leather jacket I was wearing. It and the wine colored silk blouse were both compliments of Renee's home shopping addiction. "Thanks."

"Did you call your mom about Spring Break?"

"Yeah, I talked to her Wednesday night. Sorry I forgot to tell you."

Charlie's expression grew cautious. "And what did she say about you driving down there? Does she agree with me about a plane trip being more convenient, and more importantly, safer?"

I fought not to roll my eyes at that last bit. Safer? Me? There was an impossible feat, almost as ridiculous as the idea of Lauren Mallory dating my best friend. "No, Dad. Actually, Renee doesn't see anything risky about a road trip to Sacramento. Only you think I can't handle it."

Charlie sighed. "Bella, it's not that I don't think you can make it all the way there. It's just that I'm worried."

"Yeah, but you don't have to. I'm going to drive out early on Sunday morning to give myself time to get there. Anyway, I'm going out now. Is it still all right if I stay over Emily's house?"

"Yeah, Bells, it's fine. Have a good night."

"Thanks, you too, Dad."

I grabbed my keys and headed out as the phone in my pocket buzzed with a message from Jacob.

We met in front of the Blacks' house and walked down to the beach together. It was just getting dark and the clouds were a mixture of lavender and gray in the sky between the treetops.

I remembered standing on the pier with Edward during our afternoon in Port Angeles and wondered what he was thinking about and doing tonight. I'd answered his earlier text to confirm our scheduled meeting for Sunday, and the thought of seeing him again filled me with both pleasure and nervousness. My dream from the night before had left me very confused.

"So Charlie said you're going to visit your mom next week," Jacob said as we stepped over pebbles on our way down to the shore. "He called to ask if I could lend you the Rabbit."

I shook my head, peering down at my feet to keep from tripping over hidden twigs in the sand. "I told him that wasn't necessary."

"Maybe it is. I mean, it's not like your truck can make it anywhere on just one gas tank."

I let out an irritated sigh. "Not you, too! I thought the truck was your birthright or something."

Jacob made to bump my shoulder but I skidded away and his eyes traveled from my face to my neckline subtly. I pulled my jacket closed to cover my exposed skin. I had worn the silk blouse when Charlie and I had gone to dinner at The Lodge a few weeks ago. It had a heart-shaped neckline that I hadn't noticed was so… open. I didn't have much to hide compared to Jessica and Lauren, but still.

"Hey, Jake! Bella!" Seth Clearwater's youthful voice echoed from the small group gathered around a makeshift lean-to.

"Hi Seth," I greeted the lanky boy with the bright smile.

His older sister, Leah, was standing nearby, turned towards the surf and looking detached. Out of respect for Jake and Seth, I made an effort to be polite. "Hi Leah, how's it going?"
Leah crossed her arms over her chest and turned a cold gaze on my face. For the hundredth time since I'd met her, I wondered why she disliked me so much. Jacob always said it wasn't personal, and that Leah disliked everyone, but I didn't buy it entirely. I couldn't help thinking there was something complicated behind her stony stare. Somehow, I had offended her. I just had no idea what, and she was so intimidating that I'd never had the courage to ask outright.

"Just fine," Leah said. She turned her back to Jacob and me and walking over to another russet-skinned girl who glanced at us with quiet curiosity.

Jacob rolled his eyes when I turned back to him and began muttering. "Don't even bother figuring Leah out. She's just a bitter hag."

Tyler arrived with a van full of my classmates and sure enough, Mike was carrying a cooler full of cans of Rainier, Bud Lite, and various other beers. Jacob got a kick out of seeing the disgust on my face when he waved a plastic cup in front of my face that reeked of stale lager.

Angela hadn't come, but I found that some of the local Quileute girls were friendly enough, as were the girls from the neighboring Makah reservation. And Emily was there so I didn't feel completely out of my element. She sat next to me on a long piece of driftwood while we watched the boys build a fire. The salt on the driftwood turned the flames blue and cast a warm glow around the circle.

Lauren also made good on her plan to bring "samples" from her mother's wine cabinet, except the samples turned out to be full-sized bottles of brandy, wine, and even whiskey. Jessica poured some grocery store merlot into the plastic cups that were being passed around. Someone brought a portable sound system and a few people got up to dance. I stayed seated between Jacob and Emily, but soon Emily's fiancé, Sam, came to ask her to dance.

"Don't even think about it," I warned Jacob when he gestured towards the swaying couples. He knew very well that I was a klutz, even on a sandy beach.

"Come on, Bells. I won't let you fall," Jacob said, half teasing, but was interrupted when Mike's shadow suddenly fell over us. We both looked up, confused and slightly irritated at the interruption.

"Yo, Bella. Wanna dance?" Mike asked, reaching his hand toward me and clearly already hammered. Jacob scoffed at my side.

"No, thanks, Mike," I said awkwardly, "I'm going to sit this one out."

To my annoyance, Mike plopped down on my other side. His breath smelled like a brewery but I resisted the urge to lean away, knowing I would be falling against Jacob if I did.

"You look really pretty tonight," Mike whispered, inching closer as if telling me a secret. It didn't go unnoticed that his eyes were scoping the front of my blouse.

"Thanks, Mike. I'm going to go for a walk." I glanced at Jacob and we both rose to our feet. Unfortunately, so did Mike.

"Come with me, Bella. I want to show you something in the water," Mike insisted, locking his free hand around my arm. The other was still holding a plastic cup full of beer.

"Mike, not now!" I said, wrenching my arm away. My breathing hitched and I was actually grateful when Jacob stepped in front of Mike, blocking him from view.

"Okay, dude. She said no, like, twice now."
"Jake-" I began, peering over his broad shoulder. A few people on the other side of the bonfire looked our way.

Tyler, was standing near the fire with an arm around Lauren's waist, pulled away from her and hurried over to Mike's side. "Hey, guys. What's shakin'?"

"Bella is!" Mike exclaimed, making me blush as I stood behind Jacob. "She's so hot, I could just-

He reached past Jacob, making to grab my arm again. It was the most perfectly stupid thing he could've done.

"You could just back off," Jacob said through his teeth, knocking Mike's hand aside. I couldn't see his expression but it must've been something because Seth and Jake's friend Embry left their places near the stereo and started towards us.

Sighing, I went to stand at Jacob's side and lightly laid my fingers on his arm. This was getting far too dramatic for my liking.

"Jacob, just forget it, okay?" I held my breath as his eyes shifted from Mike to me. "Come on."

I tugged on his arm until he finally turned away from Mike and Tyler and we moved to the other side of the bonfire. Behind us, I heard Mike's slurred protests and Seth's quiet reply, and cringed to think they might be hard on him.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Jacob heaved a big sigh before he began muttering, "Don't worry. Seth and Embry will get that asshole home."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "And will he be in one piece?"

"More or less," Jake replied with a shrug. But I saw the smile lurking under his scowl and felt myself relax. "They won't hurt him, Bella. I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

I sighed. "Yeah, me too, actually. But please nothing that my dad or a truck driver would swallow."

Jake chuckled and led the way to where Jessica and Lauren were standing. I hung back as he asked Jessica for some of the "chick drinks" she was carrying. Lauren was openly gawking at Jake, though he didn't seem to notice and I swallowed my giggles. I smiled as Jacob turned around with three bottles. Two of them were open and all three were half empty.

"What, you couldn't just bring them all?" I teased, taking one of the bottles and examining the label. I raised an eyebrow when I saw that it was chardonnay. "My mom cooks with this. I'm going to get some cups."

"Uh–uh, no need," Jacob said with a winning smile. "Your friends said we could finish them off."

I smirked. "You mean Lauren said you could finish them off. What did you do, flex your biceps?"

Jacob shrugged. "Hey, if you got 'em, use 'em."

"Well, I still need a cup," I said before grabbing two from the cooler. I poured some wine in one and nodded toward the beach. "Okay, Romeo. Let's go down by the water?"

"Sure thing. Let's see if we can find whatever it was that Mike wanted to show you."

I took a sip of the wine as we walked away from the bright orange flames and pounding music. We trekked along the shoreline to a spot near the cliffs that was littered with pieces of bleached white
driftwood that resembled giant bones. Jacob and I sat down on a particularly long piece that stretched out like an arm.

"Jake, please let that go. Mike's harmless."

"Already forgotten, Bells," he said, setting a dark glass bottle down on the sand and opening the other, smaller bottle of clear liquor. "I just think it's funny how you don't even notice the way guys have been staring at you all night."

He took a drink before he continued with an intent look in his eyes. "You don't even know how attractive you are."

I scoffed, trying not to choke as I took another sip of wine. I propped the chardonnay bottle against the side of the driftwood log. "I look less hideous tonight, that's all it is."

"You don't get it," he said before shaking his head and chugging a couple of gulps of what I thought was vodka.

I laughed abruptly. "We would be in so much trouble if Charlie could see us now."

Jacob chuckled and the mood lightened between us. "My guess is you'd be grounded for a month."

I shook my head, reaching for dark bottle by Jacob's foot. "Longer. We're talking graduation."

Jacob took my cup of wine while I sipped directly from the dark bottle. I tasted champagne mixed with strawberries, and swallowed greedily before coming up for air.

"Damn, girl!" Jacob exclaimed, taking the bottle from me and peering into it. "You practically drank half of this."

"Of what was left, you mean. And no, I didn't," I muttered, savoring the sweet taste on my tongue. I was enjoying my newfound appreciation for alcohol.

"This one's definitely my favorite," I added, taking the bottle back and tilting my head back to gulp some more down.

"Easy there, Bells. Save some for the walk back."

For once, I didn't mind being touched. I leaned back against the sloping part of the wood. "I still can't believe Jess just handed these over. Man, Lauren wasn't kidding."

"Kidding about what?" Jacob asked, clearly confused.

I heaved a soft sigh, balancing the bottle on my stomach with both hands. "She told me she thinks you're 'super cute' and asked if you're dating anyone."

Strands of my hair fell out of my clip and Jacob reached up to tuck them back into place. His shy touches didn't bother me. In fact, my previous outbursts about being touched seemed almost silly. Maybe it was the easy-going atmosphere around us that made everything feel effortless all at once. And the wine sure didn't hurt.

"And what did you tell Lauren?"

"Just that I didn't know." I replied, taking another sip.
"She's not really my type."

I chuckled, passing Jacob the champagne as he passed me the vodka.

"That's what I thought. She's too mean to be your type of girl. At least I would hope so," I added, narrowing my eyes when he smirked up at me.

He pinched my arm lightly. "Aww! No need to feel jealous, honey."

I sniffed at the vodka and shoved the bottle back toward him right away. "Oh, yuck!"

I picked up the chardonnay bottle and drank the dregs before taking the champagne bottle back from Jacob. "I'm not jealous, Jake. Just 'cause Lauren has bigger boobs? I don't care… she's a bitch, after all."

Jacob choked on the vodka he was drinking and started coughing while I continued indignantly, "I'd rather be kind than pretty, anyway."

Jacob exhaled loudly and I reached over to smack his back with my palm. I slammed my hand between his shoulder blades as he coughed again. Finally, he stopped and I laughed with relief. "You scared me, Jake! Are you all right?"

He chuckled. "Thanks, Bells. I thought I was going to cough up a lung there."

"Gross," I murmured, shifting my weight on the log, tucking my legs beneath me.

"But seriously," Jacob said gently, shifting to face me, "You are kind and smart and pretty. I think you're a better person than that Lauren chick or what's-her-name? Jessica?"

"Yeah, Jessica," I mused, staring up at the dark clouds. "Who likes to tell me I'm anorexic. I wish we could see the stars here. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Mmmhmm," Jacob agreed.

Suddenly my stomach twisted with nausea and I set the bottle on the sand. "Oh, Jake. I feel a little sick."

A sound echoed in the trees on the cliffs to our left, like tree branches snapping, and I whipped my head around to look. The quick movement filled my head with a sharp pain and I brought a hand to my temple, rubbing the skin there with clammy fingers. On top of the sick feeling, I was filled with a sense of unease, and felt almost as if we were being watched. But I knew the only people were across the beach at the bonfire; I could still hear hip-hop music blaring from that direction.

"My head hurts," I groaned, turning to lie back against the driftwood.

Jacob sounded very close when he answered, a chuckle in his voice, "No wonder. You practically drank a whole bottle all by yourself."

"But it was yummy, Jake. Especially that last one. It tasted like berries…." A little giggle burst from my lips and I lifted my eyes to the night sky. "And Edward… it tasted like Edward did in my dream."

I smiled, remembering the way he'd held me against his chest, and swept my hair back, trailing those cool beautiful lips down my neck.

But Jacob's voice interrupted the memory. "Who's Edward?"
A heavy feeling fell on my chest then and I gasped, turning my head to look at Jake. For some reason, he looked upside down. "Oh no! I didn't mean to say that!"

I opened my mouth to beg him not to tell my secret but the way his eyes were bugging out suddenly made me laugh. I continued with a teasing note in my voice, "Jake, if you tell anyone, I'll tell them you wear Spongebob shorts under your pants!"

Jacob frowned, or smiled, I wasn't sure because he was still upside down.

"How did you-" he began before he asked, "Bella, who's Edward?"

I let out a frustrated sigh, mad at myself for nearly blurting out my secret fantasy. Jake would never let me live this down, just as Edward wouldn't let me forget about almost fainting. *Why are boys so weird all the time?*

"He's my new friend. I just met him a week ago." I frowned. "Maybe two weeks ago? I don't remember but it wasn't that long ago."

"Where did you meet him?"

I groaned loudly. "I don't remember, Jake! A store somewhere."

"Okay, easy, Bella." Jacob came over to sit across from me on the log. I sat up and pulled my knees up to my chest.

Edward is so handsome, Jake. Like a… prince in a story," I whispered, and stared at my hands as they clutched the hem of my blouse.

"Really?" Jacob asked skeptically.

I raised my head, scowling. "He really is! And now you know that I think about him. But it doesn't matter if you tell because I'll never be good enough."

I laughed at that bitter reality, tossing my head back and sighing at the darkness above. "I'm damaged and he's... special."

"Bella, that doesn't make any sense. Why would you say something like that?"

I shut my eyes, and laid my head on my knees. "Because, Jake, I'm broken and stupid and ugly. Who would want me?"

Despite my best efforts to keep it from ever happening in front of Jacob, I wasn't quick enough to stop the tear that rolled down my cheek.

"Bella."

Jacob's fingers trailed through the wayward strands of hair coming undone from the butterfly clip. I almost leaned into his touch, but it felt too warm compared to Edward's so I kept very still.

"What do you mean, honey?" he asked in a softer tone, almost a whisper.
I couldn't bring myself to look up. My eyes were scrunched up tight against the stinging tears. "Because of Jimmy," I muttered, "Because he touched me when I was little. Jake, I'm so sorry!"

Sobs overtook me and my body shook uncontrollably.

"Hey. Bella, don't cry, honey." I struggled to breathe as Jacob's scorching hands wrapped around my arms and he pulled me up from the log. He stood, hugging me tightly to his chest. Even then, I tried to put some distance between us, though it seemed pointless; Jacob had seen me at my worst.

"Jake, my head's spinning," I said, stepping back and wiping at my tear-streaked face with both hands, trying to hide my shame.

"Okay, girl. Let's get you of here." He started steering me towards the bonfire but I halted abruptly.

"No, Jake. Don't take me back there. Mike was trying to look down my blouse."

"Mike went home, Bella. There's nothing to worry about."

I sighed with relief and felt my body sag with exhaustion. Jacob kept one arm around my waist as we walked back the way we'd come and I was too tired to protest. I was unsteady on my feet and didn't want to admit his touch helped keep me upright. Even his shoulder felt comforting in a hot and bulky sort of way, like a burning pillow. I leaned my head against him as we neared the bonfire.

Someone came running towards us and Jacob whispered in my ear, "its okay, Bella. I won't tell anyone."

I nodded heavily, not knowing if I cared anymore. Edward knew, and now Jacob. Did it matter? "Sure, Jake."

"Is she okay?" a female voice asked very close by but I was reluctant to raise my head to see who it was. I didn't want to throw up all that nice wine.

"Jake, what happened?" another voice demanded, youthful but deeper than the first.

Jacob tightened his hold on my waist when my knees buckled. "She just drank a little too much. Umm. I need to get her to Emily's."

"Oh, Emily went home, Jake."

Slowly I raised my eyes to see who the people were. I smiled when I recognized Seth in his baggy shorts, shirtless, despite the wind that nipped at my face and hands. How could he stand it?

"Hi, Seth!" I chirped. He smiled but glanced uneasily at Jacob as if something was wrong.

"I'm staying at Embry's tonight. I could take her with me, if that's all right?" the girl's voice spoke again and

I looked to see who it was. A copper-skinned girl with glossy raven hair was smiling at me kindly, her dark eyes framed with long lashes.

"You're pretty," I told her. She smiled sweetly and reached to sweep my hair back when a gust of wind sent it flying in my face.

"So are you," she said, then turned to Jacob. "Dude, your girlfriend's about to collapse in, like, two seconds. She needs to lie down. Embry's mom won't mind if we take her there. You can take her to Emily's after she wakes up."
"Bella's not my girlfriend," Jacob replied quickly and I saw something flash over his face. "But you're right. I just don't want to get her in trouble. Her dad's a cop."

I reared back and scowled at him. "Jake, you promised not to tell Charlie!"

"No one will tell, okay?" The girl assured me before Jacob could open his mouth to answer.

I leaned away from him and towards the girl's soft shoulder instead. She smelled better than Jacob did anyway. I pressing my cheek against her and murmured into her jacket.

"Okay. But my head hurts."

I was vaguely aware of Jacob and the pretty stranger carting me through the trees. I heard Leah saying something rude as we passed by, and Jacob and Seth telling her to shut up.

Then I was in a warm enclosed space with a roaring sound that could have been a truck engine. My eyes closed after that and didn't open for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Bella. :( And your poor head is going to be so sore when you wake up. Also, where the heck is Ali_pixy, anyway?

The next chapter will be Edward's.

Thank you so much for reading.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: karenc

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I can see you
But I can never reach you
"And It Rained All Night" – Thom Yorke

As I had predicted, tracking James Chase wasn't particularly difficult. The search was straightforward analysis, far simpler than the work I had done while tracking Alice. Every minute of it made me want to crawl out of my own skin. I hated the very idea of the man, of what he had done. And I nursed that hatred for him, letting it fill me with slow, cold fire as I worked.

A search in northern California for men using the name James Chase yielded a list that I immediately began paring down. The information Bella had given me steered me toward certain age and race groups. Then I scanned for red flags, looking for arrests and other public records of note. Given time and opportunity, I would have monitored the mens’ online activity with spyware. Instead, I searched for photos, opting for the quickest way to make the ID: through Bella herself.

My parents and brothers came and went from the library as I worked, stopping to chat. They were clearly curious about my work, but largely left me alone. Only Rosalie's absence was glaring.

I called Bella before it grew too late, and was disappointed when she didn't answer. My desire to see her became overwhelming as I heard her voicemail greeting, pushing me to drive or even run to Forks.

What, I'll sit in her room and watch her sleep? Because that's not at all creepy.

I closed my eyes and ground my teeth, struggling to control myself. A long breath in cleared my head enough to focus and make my fingers move over the keys again.

By sunrise, I had a list of five men who fit the profile I had constructed. Unsurprisingly, none of the men resided in Yuba County, where Bella had lived as a girl. I had mug shots of two of the men, and began searches for photos of the remaining three.

As I worked, I debated how to approach Bella, part of me balking at telling her what I had found. Though she was desperate for news, I knew it would hurt her. And that it would only be worse when I had a full set of photographs to show her. There's nothing like giving a girl an up-to-date perspective of the man who haunts her dreams.

My phone's alarm drew my attention at 7:00 a.m., and I reluctantly rose to get ready for school, thinking hard about my dilemma. Of course, there was no getting out of it: Bella was hungry to find this man, and I had to tell her. Regardless of how I gave her the information, it was going to cause
her pain.

I rubbed my hands over my head in frustration as I changed clothes, grunting when Rosalie's voice floated coolly through the house. "Edward, put the brakes on the brooding and come downstairs."

I put my sister off for a few moments longer by turning my attentions to my rehabilitated notebook. As Esme had predicted, I had been unable to recover the waterlogged pages. The cover, however, was even softer after drying and certainly usable with a new paper refill. I ran my fingers over the leather, taking comfort in the soothing sensation before tucking the notebook in my bag.

I sharpened my attention as I walked downstairs, letting my family's thoughts flow over me like smoke and guilt.

"... completely taken by that girl..."

"... have a feeling he's planning something..."

"... still can't believe he was thinking of leaving..."

"... have to admit he seems less depressed..."

Jesus. I pushed the thoughts out of my head with a grimace, and straightened my expression before walking into the kitchen. Five pairs of bright eyes followed me as I took my seat at the table.

"This all feels a bit familiar, doesn't it?" I put my bag on the table and smiled. "Why is it I think you all have many family meetings featuring me as the problem child?"

"Because we do," Emmett said dryly. "You're always too busy chewing on data to take notice."

I shook my head as the kitchen filled with laughter, grateful for my brother's levity.

"Yeah, yeah," Rosalie murmured, running her knuckles against the side of Emmett's neck.

With as little fanfare as possible, I opened my bag and reached in to touch the notebook. "So... which of my dysfunctions are we discussing today?"

Carlisle sighed, tenting his fingers over the bridge of his nose. "Edward, don't. We are not discussing you or the dysfunctions you seem intent on claiming. We do, however, agree that it would be a good idea to talk about what happened with the Swan girl and what she asked you to do."

"What you promised to do, Edward," Esme clarified gently. Her expression was neutral, but her eyes held an intensity that I didn't recognize.

"It's completely unnecessary for me to rehash yesterday afternoon." My eyes fell on Rosalie and I gave her a tight smile. "You all heard everything you needed to when you decided to eavesdrop on my conversation with Bella at the cafe."

Rosalie's eyes tightened, her lips pressing to a grim line. "Which you would have realized yourself if you weren't completely infatuated with that girl, Edward. We all appreciate that you don't listen to our thoughts. But it's unlike you to be totally unaware of a car full of your own kind sitting just feet away."

"That is complete bullshit, Rose," I retorted, then paused when Carlisle motioned for calm. I continued more quietly. "I did not listen for our kind very carefully, primarily because the topic Bella and I were discussing was so serious. I also suspected that at least some of you would be observing,
perhaps from a respectful distance. It never occurred to me that you would truly intrude on-
"Your date," Rosalie scoffed.

"My private and deeply personal conversation," I bit out, my fingers curling around the notebook under my hand.

"Okay, okay," Jasper broke in coolly just before a sensation of stillness filled the room.

Silence fell over the table as Jasper replaced the tension with serenity, and it was a few moments before Carlisle spoke again. "Have you decided yet if you'll help the Swan girl find her attacker?"

"I'm going to help her," I replied quietly, seeing zero surprise in the faces surrounding the table. "Bella has a... a need to confront her attacker. And, as you know, she believes that she wants revenge against the man."

"You don't think she's serious about committing murder?" Emmett said, his brow furrowing.

"I think that Bella doesn't understand what it is like to end a human life. I don't understand what that is like and I am a killer. My only experience with murdering humans has been through my discussions with most of you."

Esme reached to adjust my collar, watching me closely. "Then why agree to help her with that particular request? By all means, find the man that hurt her, but turn him in to the authorities. Whatever the girl's feelings for her attacker, she can't be held responsible for ending his life."

"I agree, Esme," I replied. "Even after all this time, Bella has the option to pursue James Chase legally. A loophole in the California statute will allow her to bring charges against him up to a year after she reports the incident. The problem is getting her to tell the authorities at all."

"Can't you convince her to do so?" Rosalie's voice was gentler now and sadness lurked in her eyes. I shook my head ruefully. "I'm doubtful. She never told anyone until now. Until... meeting me."

Rosalie gnawed on her lip for a moment. "What kind of plan have the two of you hatched?"

"It's not unlikely that James Chase still lives in the Sacramento metro area. I'm looking at likely candidates now in hopes that Bella will be able to identify him.

"She wants to take a trip next week, during school break, to visit her mother. We'll be paying a visit to Mr. Chase during the trip."

Jasper's gaze was sharp as he eyed me. "And you really plan to follow through with her plan? To kill him?"

"I told Bella that I would do whatever it took to make sure that sick bastard stops hurting children. If it comes to it, I'll be the one committing crimes. I won't allow something like that to hurt Bella further, even if it's what she thinks is best."

"And what's best for you?" Jasper asked. "You said it yourself, Edward: you've never killed a man. Are you ready for what that will mean for you if you go through with it?"

An oppressive silence filled the kitchen following his words. I did not know how to answer him. After a few moments, I pushed back from the table and picked up my bag. I left the kitchen, feeling too many eyes on me, and couldn't get out of the house quickly enough.
My siblings slid quietly into their seats in my car for the quick drive to the high school. Rosalie and Emmett murmured to each other, but Jasper sat silent in the passenger seat. I didn't need to hear his thoughts to know that he would wait until I was ready to talk.

I lingered behind the others after parking in the school lot, working to curb my anxiety. The conversations with my family about Bella, the research I had done overnight, the upcoming trip to Sacramento... the weight of it all felt oppressive. I reached into the bag for my notebook but paused to grab my phone instead; putting off calling Bella wasn't helping matters any.

Simply hearing her voice made me feel lighter, even as we discussed the results of my initial search. Emotion was clear in Bella's voice as we talked, and she sighed to hear that James Chase no longer lived in Yuba County. I made jokes about her truck to distract her, and grinned when I heard the red dinosaur's door slam.

"Don't hate the truck, rich boy. We can't all drive sports cars at 100 mph."

I laughed, enjoying her feisty reaction even as I cringed at the 'rich boy' label. "As I told you yesterday, I've never gotten a ticket or been in an accident. You'll be safe with me, Miss Swan."

"Yeah, yeah, perfect vampire driving record," she grumbled with a smile in her voice.

The warning bell sounded, prompting me to get out of the car. "Gotta get to class, Bella. I'll have more information when I see you on Sunday."

aDc

The tediousness of school filled the next few days, the hours passing far too slowly until I could get back to the library to continue researching. In between tasks centered on James Chase, I scanned the usual information sources for traces of Alice.

Though I knew it was likely my sister was dead, she was rarely far from my thoughts. I couldn't shake the feeling that Alice was out there somewhere, and, like Bella, that she was isolated and hurting. What would Alice think of me if we were to meet again? What would she make of what I had become? What would she think of me when my time came to shed a human's blood? I missed my sister. I wished for the millionth time that I could sit and talk with her just one more time.

By Wednesday evening, I had photos and the basic employment histories of the five men on our list. I stared at the snapshots arranged across the monitor screens, knowing that Bella and I were poised at the edge of no return. If she could identify the James Chase she had known from amongst the photos, our trip would be more than a simple visit.

It was painful to hear Bella's voice tighten the next morning when I called with an update. I cursed myself for calling so early, knowing that my suggestion she look at photos would likely ruin her day. But I understood the reality of her situation, too: there was no good time to talk about her past.

"All you need to do is identify the right one from his photo and we're set to make the trip," I said quietly, longing to see her expression. "I can call each of them to check for any recent changes, like a move or job change, but the information looks good."

"Okay, so when do you want to see me?"

I frowned at the breathless quality of Bella's voice, but relaxed minutely when a chair scraped the floor in the background. At least she wasn't alone in the house, in case she felt ill. I was surprised when Bella put off looking at the photos until Sunday, but kept quiet. When it came to James Chase, I had to trust Bella's reactions over my own.
That night, I sat at the piano instead of the terminals. I needed time away from the photos of the men I had been stalking, and the sad reminders of Bella's trauma. I needed to put aside, if only for a few hours, my failure to find Alice.

The sun went down as I played, running through some of the music I had brought home from Garrett's. I sensed more than saw Rosalie and then Esme stop and linger in the doorway of the music room for a little while. Neither one spoke to me nor did my hands stop as the night deepened.

It was late when Emmett's voice pulled my attention from the keys to where he and Jasper stood. "We're going for a run. Come with us."

I nodded and got to my feet, silently following them out of the house. We sprinted deep into the park, and while I could have easily outrun my brothers, I was content to keep pace with them and just enjoy moving.

The house had been quiet all week while everyone followed an unspoken truce to avoid the topic of Bella Swan. I was grateful to avoid further drama, but disliked walking on eggshells, particularly with my siblings. The tension I had been carrying dropped away, and a sense of relief drifted over me as we ran.

We climbed higher, racing over the ridges and toward the glaciers that so fascinated Emmett. We paused by an enormous icefall, and I grinned as I looked up at the astonishing canopy of stars.

_Bella would love this._

"When are you and the Swan girl hitting the road?" Emmett asked evenly, his eyes bright and curious when I looked his way.

I pushed my hands into my pockets. "Sunday morning."

"Meaning if she can ID the right guy," he clarified, his mouth tightening when I shrugged.

"We'll go even if she can't make a positive ID. Her mother is expecting her at this point. And not having a specific... candidate just means we have to get close enough to each one to attempt ruling them out."

"You said you want to turn him into the authorities." Jasper's face was expressionless when he turned to me. "Do you think you can keep it together and do that, Edward? Once you get near him, it's going to take a lot of control to push aside your own feelings."

"I don't know. I've never wanted to kill a man before, Jas. Knowing what that animal put Bella through, how difficult her life has been because of him-" I broke off as fury filled my chest.

Emmett looked away with a soft oath, while Jasper nodded, blowing out a breath before he spoke. "We can help you."

I blinked at him, and again at Emmett when he turned to face me. "What do you mean?"

"We'll go with you to Sacramento. You shouldn't have to deal with something like that on your own."

"You don't have to do that." I shook my head with a frown. "Bella is my responsibility."

"That may be," Emmett replied. "But it's not one you have to shoulder alone."
I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn't alone, that I had Bella. But the words wouldn't come. Did I have Bella?

*Of course not. She'll never truly be mine.*

The weight of that realization crashed over me, forcing me to face the truths I had been avoiding for weeks.

Bella was capable of growth and change, whereas I would remain the same forever, frozen like stone. Her future was still forming, while mine had ended five years ago in the basement of a Chicago warehouse. Someday soon, Bella would meet someone who could stand beside her while she built a life and family. And where would I be? Standing in the shadows on the sidelines.

I could offer Bella nothing that wasn't tainted with darkness. I could, however, help her and make sure she was safe. I could find and punish the man who had hurt her. I could watch over her as she became the beautiful woman I knew was inside her. And I could do the hardest thing imaginable, by letting her go.

"So, what do you say, E? Road trip?" Emmett's voice brought me back from my dark spiral of thoughts. I saw Jasper frown as he waited for my answer and wondered idly if he had sampled my emotions.

I shook my head. "Nah, it's okay, Em. Bella asked me for this one thing. While I can, I want to help her."

"While you can?"

"Yeah. I don't know how long I have to be around her. How long I have to get to know her before she decides it's time to move on."

"So you're not going to change her?" Emmett asked quietly.

"I don't see how I can," I replied, pulling together a semblance of a smile. "She's finally starting to pull herself out of a bad situation. She deserves to live her life once she's free."

*aDc*

No matter what realizations my brain had regarding my friendship with Bella, my body had other ideas. By Friday, I was more than desperate to see her. The urge that pushed me toward Forks was so overwhelming that I had to fight all day to keep it at bay. I gritted my teeth while driving my siblings to school, my hands itching to turn the car west on the 101. My notebook nearly ripped in two as I suffered through classes and endless, insipid conversations with teachers and classmates.

"You are an unholy mess," Rosalie murmured as she sat across from me in the cafeteria during study hall. "Get it together, Edward, before you scare the entire school to death."

"Believe me, I'm trying," I muttered back, closing my eyes as the grinding sensation of my desire surged. "You have no idea how hard it is to not just run the hell out of here and never come back."

The sound of Rosalie's soft swearing startled me into laughing. It only grew louder when I looked up to meet her deep glare, her face twisting with maniacal outrage. I noticed some of the girls at the surrounding tables whispering and staring at us.

"Now who's scaring the straights," I chuckled.
"I had to do something," she said as her face broke into a grin. "You are toxic right now, and that's a lot coming from someone who spends as much time with you as I do."

I groaned in agreement and sunk my head down on to the tabletop, sighing when my sister rubbed my head affectionately.

"I'm sure being hungry isn't helping matters either. Make sure you feed well tonight when we go hunting. You're going to need your wits about you if you plan to spend the whole day in a car with that girl."

"Can't any of you call her by her name?" I asked quietly, turning my head to peer up at Rosalie's slightly sour expression. "You can't just keep calling her 'the girl.' And, no, 'the Swan girl' isn't much better."

Rosalie rolled her eyes at me, but I saw some humor playing around her mouth. "Fiiine. I'll call her Bella if it makes you a slightly less sad bastard."

The bell drowned out my reply as I dragged myself up and toward my next class.

I held it together for the rest of the day, forcing myself to stay in Port Angeles. I managed to send Bella a text message that sounded tolerably sane, and promised to call her the next day. I left the computer terminal in the library untouched, instead of watching Bella's online activity. I even went hunting with the family, running down a herd of elk with Jasper at my side as if nothing were wrong.

But when the blood sent my head soaring, I was gone, running west toward Forks and Bella.

It wasn't fifteen minutes before I was standing at the back of the Swan house. And it was then that I realized being so close to Bella without actually seeing her was even more difficult to bear. I could smell her, everywhere, and my insides were crawling with need. I had made up my mind to knock on the front door when Jasper and Emmett appeared wearing identical expressions of exasperation.

"Christ, Edward. As a guy, I'm all about a good chase scene, but this is getting ridiculous," Emmett muttered.

"You didn't have to follow me," I replied, walking past them to head around the house.

"And you didn't have to slink off like a criminal." Jasper's voice was tense as he and Emmett followed close behind me. "That is exactly what her father is going to think you are when you step out of the woods with no car in sight."

I winced at Jasper's words just before realizing that there was only one car in the driveway: Chief Swan's cruiser. Bella's behemoth Chevy was nowhere in sight. I paused, and held my hand up to quiet my brothers' questions while sharpening my ears and mind to listen for voices inside the house.

We all heard the popping sound of beer cans being opened and the low murmur of men's voices over the drone of a television.

"I'm surprised you're not over there supervising, Harry," a deep voice said.

"Supervising what?" the man called Harry answered. "The kids are standing around a bonfire on the beach in La Push, just like we all did twenty-five years ago, Charlie."

"And that means they've got a bunch of beer and wine," a third voice chimed in. "Just like we all did twenty-five years ago."
"Bella knows better than to do any drinking," the first voice grumbled, one that I realized belonged to Chief Swan. "She'd better know it, anyway."

The rest of the conversation faded behind me as I broke into a sprint, Jasper and Emmett close behind me. We raced out of Forks, heading for the La Push reservation and its rugged, beautiful beaches. I had seen enough maps of the area to know where the cliffs would provide enough cover at this time of night. If I were lucky, perhaps the party Chief Swan had mentioned would be close enough to see.

My steps slowed as the sound of the surf grew louder, and we stepped carefully toward the edge of the tree line. The wind carried the tang of salt and the noise of music and youthful voices. I felt a jolt of excitement to see that the bonfire party was not far from our hiding spot.

A flash of movement below caught my eye and suddenly, Bella's voice was close and clear. I could see her, and see the long line of her throat exposed by a low-cut blouse that clung to her body. Her smile and the lovely sound of her laughter made me ache.

"We would be in so much trouble if Charlie could see us now," she said.

I ached for a different reason altogether when I heard a deeper voice answer her. A long-haired boy who bore the handsome features of a Quileute sat chuckling beside Bella. "My guess is you'd be grounded for a month."

The sweet smell of wine rolled over my tongue when the swish of liquid against glass mixed with their laughter. I looked to see a glass bottle tipped back against Bella's lips, and her throat moving as she drank.

I was frozen and unable to look away from their figures where they perched on a large piece of driftwood together, their bodies almost touching. Their conversation flowed easily and they giggled and teased, sharing bottles of wine and liquor back and forth.

Bella was... different. Relaxed. And happy. So much happier than I had ever seen her. I watched as she lay back against the log, talking lazily with the boy that she called Jake. Jake, the boy who brushed his big hands gently against the small of Bella's back. The boy who tucked loose locks of hair behind her ears and pinched her arm with affection.

I felt my brothers' eyes on me but couldn't bring myself to care as we watched the figures on the beach. Blowing out a breath, I focused my attention to hear the boy's mind, cursing softly when his thoughts filled my head.

He loved her with a childlike innocence that was colored with a man's desires. His eyes lingered on the curve of her lips and the hollow of her throat, and dared to glance shyly over the swell of her breasts beneath her jacket. He wanted her, but cared for her too, and tempered every moment of boldness with genuine concern. I shut down his thoughts with a grunt, unable to stomach their intimacy.

When Bella lurched forward on the log below us, my insides curled with anger, especially when she said she felt sick. A sudden, cracking sound on my right made me realize that I had pulverized the trunk of a young tree in my hand.

"Easy, Edward," Jasper murmured as he put a strong hand on my shoulder.

I watched Bella and the boy huddle together, their heads close as he comforted her and they murmured back and forth.
"My head hurts," Bella groaned, moving to lie back against the log.

The boy leaned closer, his face hovering over hers as he chuckled. "No wonder. You practically drank a whole bottle all by yourself."

"But it was yummy, Jake," she rambled, slurring her words slightly. "Especially that last one. It tasted like berries. And Edward... it tasted like Edward did in my dream."

"Who's Edward?"

"Oh no! I didn't mean to say that! Jake, if you tell anyone, I'll tell them you wear Spongebob shorts under your pants."

A lump lodged itself in my throat, while a roar filled my ears. I was soaring, knowing Bella dreamed of me.

And just as quickly, I fell, crashing back to earth. Every word she exchanged with the Quileute boy hammered the truth home. The girl I wanted so badly was feet away, threatening her friend to keep me a secret, while I watched from the shadows. There was no place in Bella's life for my kind. There was, however, place for a human boy like Jake.

I hated him, with everything I had. I hated him for being Bella's friend, and for knowing her better than I did. For being allowed to touch her and for his place in her family. For his life and the future that was still unfolding before him. I hated him for his warm body and beating heart, and for being everything to Bella that I could not.

"I've seen enough," I said, and began to draw back toward the trees. Bella's words stopped me cold.

"Because, Jake, I'm broken and stupid and ugly. Who would want me?"

"Bella, don't say that."

I closed my eyes and listened to Jake pay Bella earnest compliments. His voice was low and kind when he told her she was pretty and sweet, and I heard the truth in his words. There was affection in his voice, and I knew at once that Bella trusted him. Certainly, she trusted Jake more than she trusted me.

"Doesn't matter. My body is broken and I'm damaged. Edward will never want me."

My chest rippled with pain when Bella's low voice cracked. I could smell the warm salt of her tears and every part of me yearned to comfort her while I watched the boy's hand trailing over her hair.

*She'd be stupid not to want him. And even more stupid to want me at all.*

"I'm out of here," I muttered, pushing past Jasper and back into the woods.

A few steps became many and I ran. My mouth was set like stone and my feet moved in a blur over the cold ground. Behind me, I heard the sound of whispering feet and knew that my brothers were following. The wind roared in my ears as the trees flashed by, and I ran faster. But I couldn't run fast enough to get out of my head.

Chapter End Notes
Edward, what are we doing to do with you?

Many of you have asked about Ali_pixy - we are worried about her too, and hope she surfaces soon.

The next chapter will be Bella's.

Thank you so much for reading.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Out the window of your bedroom,
Climb on down the fire escape.
I left some money and a ticket.
For the first time in your life, don't be afraid.
And baby, I will be the first to say,
you are stronger than you know, you'll find your way.
Isabella, run away.
"Isabella"- Dia Frampton

My fingers brushed against the white skin peeking out from under the neck of his teal sweater. Edward's tongue flicked across my collarbone and began to sweep slowly up my throat in an agonizingly slow manner that had me twisting around on the lilac bedspread beneath me.

"Stop teasing," I gasped, releasing the breath I had been unconsciously holding.

His low chuckle left shivers on my skin. "It seems you're the one doing the teasing, Miss Swan."

I blushed hotly and pulled back. Edward's crooked smile was adorable and infuriating at the same time. Before I could reply, he pressed a cold finger on my lips and shook his head. I thought it was because he'd heard Charlie coming. Thunder rolled over the rooftop and I inched further back against the headboard.

Edward shook his head and a look of amusement graced his flawless features. "I can't believe you're afraid of thunder and yet seem perfectly at ease in a vampire's arms."

I glared at him and crossed my arms over my tank top. "I'm not afraid of thunder. How can I be when this is the rainiest place on earth?"

My disdain became quiet admiration when Edward peeled off his sweater and lay down beside me. He pulled the bedspread up to my waist as he spoke. "Too bad. I was hoping you'd let me 'comfort' you."

I chuckled at the suggestive lilt in his voice. My heart was pounding irregularly but I did my best to ignore it, trailing my fingers along his collarbone slowly. "I can pretend to be scared..." I glanced up at his face while sliding my hand over his granite chest. A low, playful growl echoed in my ear as Edward wrapped his hands around my waist and twisted me around on the bed, his lips grazing the hollow below my ear.

Something cool touched my cheek and for a second, I thought it was Edward's hand. I had been
dreaming about him again.

"That feels good," I mumbled as the coolness swept over my forehead.

A soft laugh echoed close by and my eyes popped open.

"She's awake!" A woman sitting on the edge of the bed called over her shoulder. My head was swirling but I recognized Embry's mother by her long ebony braid and gentle smile.

I struggled to sit up but she pressed a hand against my left shoulder. "Not so fast, Bella. Your head must be spinning like crazy, huh?"

"Hmm..." I mumbled in agreement, feeling too sick to be coherent.

Ms. Call stood, still smiling at me. "Stay still for a little bit more, Bella. I'll go get you some water."

"Hmm... okay."

Jacob's tall frame appeared in the doorway as Ms. Call turned to exit the room. I suppressed a groan, and managed to prop myself up against the headboard. What on earth had I said to him last night? The possibilities were frightening.

"Hi Jake," I mumbled as he crossed the tiny room in just a few strides and sat on the edge of the mattress.

"I thought you were never going to wake up, Bells," he replied, not bothering to beat about the bush as I expected him to. Whatever I had said in my drunken state the night before must have been very bad.

Awesome.

"My head's killing me," I whispered, dropping my gaze to the quilt draped over my legs.

"Well, that's what happens when you drink as much as you did last night."

I cringed. "Yeah. I'm really sorry for whatever I said last night, Jake."

Timidly, I glanced up to meet his eyes. They were filled with concern and not a trace of humor, despite the sarcasm in his tone.

"Well, I didn't mind hearing you call Lauren a bitch but there were some things you said that struck a chord."

I nodded, not knowing how else to reply.

"Maybe after you've had some breakfast, we could take a walk on the beach?" Jacob's voice became very gentle, as if he were nervous that I might refuse the invitation. But, considering all of the unfortunate things I could have blurted out the night before, it was only fair that I hear him out and answer his questions truthfully. Jacob had been nothing but patient with me for longer than anyone should be expected to and he deserved my honesty.

Embry's mom came back with a glass of water and I chugged it down gratefully. When she suggested breakfast, however, I declined. My stomach hadn't recovered yet.

After I found my shoes and jacket, I convinced Jacob that I needed to stretch my legs with a walk on the beach. He and Ms. Call kept insisting I needed more sleep but I figured there would be plenty of
time for that when I got back home. Thankfully, Charlie would be at the police station and wouldn't smell the alcohol on my breath before I had a chance to clean myself up. My cheeks flushed as I remembered all those cups of chardonnay and the bottle of champagne.

It was chillier than it had been the day before and I zipped up my jacket as we broke through the trees and headed for the first long piece of driftwood near the shore.

"Who was that girl that came with us to Embry's?" I inquired casually as we sat down on the bone white log. I knew it was inevitable that I would have to explain my behavior but at least we didn't have to start with a heavy topic.

"You remember her, huh? Her name's Sharon. She lives at the Makah rez."

I glanced at Jacob with honest curiosity. "Is she Embry's girlfriend?"

Jacob frowned. "I don't think so. Embry has been my friend almost as long as you have. He would've told me if he liked anyone."

I nodded, feeling a surge of guilt again for being secretive with my best friend. But it had been necessary. Jacob would have done the same if the roles were reversed. It would probably have been even more difficult if he had been the one molested. I had read somewhere that boys who were abused often feared being judged by society for being weak. In my case, that ship had already sailed; I had nothing left to fear or lose.

"Bells..." Jacob began before he stopped and stared down at the sand, his brows furrowing.

I reached over and brushed my fingers against his arm, my heart speeding. "It's okay. Go on."

He heaved a frustrated sigh and grabbed my hand before I could pull it back. "Damn it, Bells. I don't know what to say. I feel like a complete jackass."

That caught me off guard and turned toward him to get a better look at his face. "What? Why, Jake?"

Jacob looked away, his frown becoming a scowl. His voice was colored with bitterness when he spoke. "For all those times I made you feel uncomfortable whenever I touched you."

Immediately, I knew I had told Jake about Jimmy last night and everything came flooding back. "Jake, you didn't know."

"That's no excuse!"

"Of course it is, Jake!" I couldn't bear the sight of him berating himself and scooted closer. Jacob loosened his grip on my hand but I kept it in his large palm, feeling the warmth there. It wasn't uncomfortable anymore.

"I'm the one who should feel guilty. And I do. More than you know," I told him, blinking back tears while trying to hold his gaze.

Jacob cupped my hand with both of his. "Still... I was rude and stupid."

I shook my head, cutting him off right away. "More like patient and caring."

"Right..." he murmured sarcastically.

"You really are, Jake. I never told you this but I always thought you were sweet." I swallowed the
lump that suddenly rose in my throat and continued before my voice could crack. "And I'm so sorry for everything. I think any girl in her right mind would want to be with you."

Jacob lifted his stare to meet mine. A tear slid down his cheek. Without thinking, I raised a hand to brush it away, and when he took it in his I didn't flinch. Something inside me just wanted to stay in that moment. It might have been guilt or just the knowledge that Jacob had waited without knowing why he even had to at all.

"I don't think you're damaged, honey," he said, pressing a kiss on my hand before setting it back down on my log between us. Something seemed different with Jacob, too. He seemed to understand at last that we were meant to be just friends.

I inhaled slowly, glancing over at the grey water lapping against the rocks.

"Do you think you'll ever tell anyone else?" Jacob inquired after a moment.

By anyone else, I figured he meant Charlie. I shook my head, wordlessly. I could feel him watching me but I kept staring at the low tide ahead.

"Were you afraid your mom wouldn't believe you? Is that why?"

I bit my lip until it bled. "I just think the damage has already been done. It's pointless now."

*Besides, I'm going to have everything taken care of soon.* I sucked on the wound inside my bottom lip.

Jacob shifted on the log, bringing me back to the moment. "Have you thought about maybe talking to someone other than your parents?" His reluctant tone made him sound like he was afraid I might bite his head off. I almost grinned.

"You mean like a therapist? How would I explain that to Charlie?" I asked skeptically.

Jacob shrugged. "I don't know. Tell him anything... that you're lonely or whatever. I just don't like knowing you're keeping this painful secret. You don't have to be alone with this, Bells."

"I'm not alone," I lied. "Now you know. But Jake, you have to promise me not to tell Billy. If he tells Charlie-"

"Bella."

"I'll drive you home."

I smiled. "What about the Rabbit? Are you still going to let me borrow it for my trip to California?"

Jacob huffed, feigning irritation. "I'm not letting you drive like this. Your eyes are all bloodshot and scary, Bells."

"Embry and I can bring the Rabbit over after dinner."
I grinned, forgetting how physically and emotionally exhausted I was. "Yeah, you could ask him about that girl, Sharon."

Jake rolled his eyes theatrically. "Not this again."

"She was cute!" I insisted as we turned around and started walking back towards the woods.

"I guess."

"C'mon. You thought she was hot." I bumped clumsily against Jake's shoulder, getting him back for all those times he'd bumped me without getting a reaction. It had been a long time coming.

"I wouldn't say that, exactly," he answered hesitantly and my grin widened.

When we came within sight of Jake's house, he said, "Oh, almost forgot. Here's your phone."

He pulled my cell out of the back pocket of his jeans. I narrowed my eyes but let it go. When I took it from him, I noticed I'd gotten a new text message very early that morning. From Edward. I gulped.

Edward
I just got back. Wanted to check in. See you tomorrow morning. Early. Don't forget.

My heart slammed in my ribcage. The message was very brief and direct compared to the playful one he had sent yesterday. For some reason, this unexpected change left me with a feeling of unease.

Jacob drove me home in my truck, ignoring my weak complaints. The skies were clearing up with just a thin cloud covering and I thought it would be nice to spend some time in the backyard with a good read later on. Unfortunately, my fatigue combined with a pinching headache and nausea required that I rest first.

Jake turned off the ignition and turned to me. He'd gone quiet as we passed the town sign.

"You know, Bells," he said in a soft voice, "if you ever do decide to talk to Charlie, I'll support you. I know you don't feel like more than friendship for me, but that doesn't change that I'll do anything for you."

A small smile pulled at the corners of my lips and I sincerely hoped that Jacob would meet someone soon who could make him happy. He was so sweet and understanding, and really deserved to find someone to share that with.

"I know that, Jake." I opened the passenger side door but lingered for a second more. Jacob was looking at me uneasily as if I might start crying again. Instead, I turned to slide my arms around his neck and let him wrap his around my waist.

"You deserve a proper hug," I whispered in his ear, caressing the back of his head. "I'm sorry it took so long."

aDc

The Tylenol I took knocked me out for a good three hours. I woke up just before four and found that the throbbing in my head had lessened a great deal. My body still felt lethargic but only due to natural drowsiness, rather than the after effects of alcohol.

I stumbled into the bathroom to take a long steamy shower. Afterward, I still had an hour before Charlie got off work, so I slid on a warm pair of sweats and a long sleeved shirt before going
downstairs to make dinner. When the chicken was roasting in the oven, I decided I couldn't ignore Edward's text any longer. I kept my reply simple, asking him to come to Forks instead and taking care to mention we'd be driving Jacob's car.

"Bells, you look very tired," Charlie said at dinner that evening. I almost cringed under his scrutiny. Fortunately, having dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep was nothing out of the ordinary. "Oh well, I did take a nap earlier," I mumbled, staring down at my plate.

"Hmm," Charlie grunted in response as I shoveled food into my mouth. I was eager to get away before he began asking questions about the beach party.

"So you're heading out early?" he asked as I stood to clear the table.

"Yeah, at around 7:00."

Charlie nodded. "Hopefully there won't be much traffic."

I knew that was his way of saying he was worried about me. I gave him a smile and a peck on the cheek before going to bed.

aDc

My eyes kept straying to the duffle bag on the floor near my bedroom door as I lay in bed hours later. I couldn't quiet my breathing and more than once, my fingers inched toward the phone on my bedside table. I wanted to hear Edward's soothing voice before we left for California and everything changed. Instead, I got out from under my warm quilt and padded over to the computer. While it booted up, I went to the kitchen for a glass of water, resisting the urge to take another Tylenol. Charlie's snores echoed down the hall on the way back.

Renee had sent me an email but there were still no new messages from Ali_pixy. I sighed in frustration and logged onto the chat site only to be disappointed again by the lack of updates on her profile page. The whole mystery surrounding this girl was starting to set me on edge.

Edward was setting me on edge too. I had a gut feeling there was still something about his transformation that he wasn't telling me. A little voice in my head kept asking if I honestly wanted to know, and reminded me that it was likely something bad. But I told that internal voice to shut up, and grumbled to think that, after everything, Edward was still keeping secrets.

I woke long before my alarm went off, too jittery to lie in bed until the appropriate time. I showered and brushed my teeth before dressing warmly. I ran a comb through my tangled hair while double-checking the contents of my duffle bag.

Charlie was still snoring loudly, but I lingered at his bedroom door before going downstairs. Though we had said our goodbyes the night before, my throat still tightened at the prospect of what I was about to do. For one fleeting moment, I considered Jacob's advice about what Charlie should or shouldn't know before pushing it out of my mind and tiptoeing down the stairs.

"So this is the smaller dinosaur I'm to drive?"

Edward's voice made me jump as I stepped out the door, and I dropped the car keys.

"Damn it, Edward!" I muttered, bending down to retrieve them. He was at my side in a flash, his bag slung over one shoulder, dangling the keys over my head with one hand.
I glared at his handsome face. "Show off."

The cool and crooked smile that pulled at the corners of his lips almost rattled me. "Good morning to you too, darling."

I turned towards Jacob's car, hiding my blush at the unexpected term of endearment and the memories of my dreams it brought. Edward's mood, however, appeared to be as bad as mine.

"You don't have to drive," I said as he walked around to open the passenger door for me.

His smile didn't reach his eyes, which were hard as stones. "Yes, I do. My reflexes are quicker than yours."

I rolled my eyes, not caring if he saw, and slid in to the car. The interior smelled of peppermint and tobacco, just as my truck had when Billy Black had first given it to me.

"Have you had breakfast?" Edward asked as we drove out of Forks and took the 101 south.

Fishing the granola bar out of the pocket of my jacket, I held it up for him to see.

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"We're not stopping," I declared before he could suggest a diner or something. "I'll tell you whenever I get dehydrated."

Edward raised an eyebrow skeptically. "You will?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Fine. I'll show you the James Chase photographs I collected when we stop for lunch."

He turned his eyes back to the highway stretching in front of us and I twisted my hands in my lap, trying to control my breathing.

After we'd driven for a couple of minutes in silence, I asked timidly, "What does your family think of you coming with me?"

Edward gripped the steering wheel tightly with his hands, though his face remained neutral. "Honestly, they're not exactly supportive. They don't understand why you don't go to the authorities instead of-"

He stopped abruptly and his jaw hardened. I thought I saw anger flash in his eyes. But I folded my arms over my chest. He had a right to be angry at my choices. And I had a right to be angry, too. What's more, I wanted to understand exactly what he planned to do.

"Sex offenders get only 10 to 20 years in prison. I've heard cases of them getting out on parole in even less time," I said.

Edward turned his eyes to meet my pointed stare. "Bella, that won't be the case with you-

"I don't care," I snapped, ignoring the way my throat hurt. "No punishment some clueless judge gives Jimmy will be enough in my mind. I'm damaged, Edward. There's no way to fix me because of what he did."

I drew a shaky breath and quickly turned my face towards the window. "Sure, I can go to parties and pretend to be a healthy girl like Jessica and Angela. But you and I both know it's pointless because
I'm not healthy and I can't have a normal life like them. All my classmates care about are their outfits and who's asking whom to prom. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't hate myself for worrying if I'm going to be raped by the next person who touches me."

A dead silence filled the car. Edward was so still, I wasn't sure he was breathing.

"Edward, with me it's all or nothing. If you can't agree with that, then I want you to turn around and take me back home."

Edward sounded exasperated when he spoke, and his voice was a bit unsure. "How can you expect me to forget something so serious, Bella? I'm just trying to make you understand the risk you're putting yourself in."

"Why bother? The worst has already happened to me. And besides, I won't get caught."

Edward laughed bitterly. "You can't just run away."

"Of course not! I'm not stupid." I began fumbling with the zipper on my jacket, suddenly very nervous under his fiery gaze. "If you decide not to help me kill him, I'll do it myself and I'll make sure I'm not arrested. I'd rather not be here at all than go to jail for someone like James."

Edward was quiet for a moment before he continued in a softer tone. "Bella. You can't honestly mean that you would consider something like suicide."

I kept my gaze fixed on the zipper as I tried to explain. "I'd rather not do that to my parents. It would be too selfish to leave them behind, especially Charlie. He can't cook anything besides fried eggs." I smiled mournfully.

"You're not the least bit worried about taking a human life?" Edward asked slowly. The emotion beneath his words made my anger flare and I was thankful that it stopped my tears from falling as my thoughts wandered away from my parents.

"Jimmy is not human, not really. And I don't have a life because of him. He shouldn't have one either." I raised my head and met his eyes, knowing my own were filled with full-fledged hatred. "His body should be destroyed because mine was too. And I'll do whatever I need to if you bail on the original plan, Edward."

Edward sighed. "Is this your way of coercing me into helping you?"

I blinked, thrown off by the unexpected starkness of his question. "No. This is my way of asking how far you're willing to go."

I sat back in the seat, turning to stare at the clouds through the windshield. "I know you care about your family and what they think about my situation. I'm sorry if I sound too forceful, Edward. I really didn't mean to drive a wedge between you and your parents and siblings. You're much more... human than I thought."

Edward was silent as we continued moving south, merging onto the I-5 towards Oregon. I ate my granola bar and drew circles on the window where fresh raindrops started to accumulate.

"Would you prefer that I be some sort of killing machine?" Edward asked abruptly, straining the car's speed to match those of the other vehicles on the freeway.

My lips turned up at the corners and I swept my hair back, turning to see his expression. But his beautiful mouth was set in a tight line and his eyes were steady on the road ahead, displaying little
emotion except for a hint of sadness. My chest tightened and an apology hung on the tip of my tongue.

"Well, it would make things more convenient," I replied gently.

"I was wrong about you too, Bella," Edward said evenly, "You're not a damsel in distress. Not really. I think you're even holding back what you're capable of."

I sighed, relieved that he didn't sound furious. "You're right. I'm holding back. But I won't anymore. We agreed to be honest, right?"

He nodded stiffly.

"So I'm just letting you know how deeply I feel about this. I've kept so much hate bottled up inside and now I feel like I'm about to explode. If you think it's too much on your conscience, then you should say so now before we get in any deeper."

Edward drew in a long breath before turning to focus his gaze on me. This time I could see more of the emotion swirling in them, a mixture of frustration, empathy, and sadness. "What conscience?" he asked flatly.

Despite being slightly offended by his accusation of coercion earlier, I fought to hide the smile that threatened to spread across my face. I knew Edward was holding something back and trust was something I couldn't afford. When it came down to it, he was too loyal to his adoptive family to be fully on my side.

Making James pay was more important to me than some unattainable fantasy boy. Vampire or not, Edward wasn't going to ruin this for me. If he had something up his sleeve, so did I... or more fittingly, I had something tucked at the bottom of my duffle bag that might come in handy. Billy Black's .44 Magnum.

Chapter End Notes

Eeeeeeep!

Look at it this way: Bella and Edward have got a nice, long car ride together to do all kinds of talking.

The next chapter will be split between Edward and Bella.

Thank you so much for reading.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter authors: karenec and transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Okay follow me down
Come on you can trust me now
"Follow Me Down" - UNKLE

Driving south toward California, I was sure of one thing: Bella Swan was the most infuriating creature I had ever encountered. We had hardly passed the Forks city limits before I was grinding my teeth in frustration.

While my body's compulsion to be near Bella was more powerful than ever, I found myself actively rebelling against it for the first time. Since our first meeting, I had fought every day to control the impulse, while still allowing it to steamroll me. Now I battled to kill the impulse entirely.

In truth, I had been struggling with my emotions since the night of the beach bonfire. Watching Bella's interactions with the Quileute boy, Jake, had been painful. Her drunken confessions of feeling worthless and unwanted had cut me deeply, because she had no idea how wrong she was. Bella would probably never understand how badly I wanted to be with her, in any way she would allow.

Of course, I couldn't go to her that night or tell her how I felt. Instead, I stood in the shadows, hiding and spying as she cried, because that is where I belonged. Whatever I felt for Bella, the reality was simple: it was impossible for me to take the place of that human boy or find a place amongst the family around her. Bella had a life in front of her, while I was a literal dead end.

Our dark moods matched well that morning. Despite having steeled myself to be around Bella during the run to Forks, my injured feelings from Friday night reared up as soon as I saw her. She was pale in her dark tracksuit and looked exhausted, no doubt from stress and sleeplessness over the trip we were about to take.

As I watched Bella, rumpled and lovely under her damp hair, I realized that she was also still suffering from the effects of the alcohol she had drunk at the beach party. Though I knew better, I goaded her and smirked when she scowled in return. My sardonic comments put her on the defensive immediately, and she pushed back mulishly. Before I knew it, we were snapping at each other in the boxy little Volkswagen that she had insisted we drive.

The tension between us continued to climb as the miles passed. Bella's moods ran between extremes of hot and cold, leaving me bewildered and sullen. She continued to shut down my attempts to offer alternative ways to "take care" of James Chase. Worst of all, she took zero interest in her own self-preservation, calmly informing me that she would go to any length to achieve her goal. My dead heart sank as I listened to her calmly declare she would rather be dead than serve time in prison for
murder.

Our conversation grew more heated as we traveled, until Bella called my commitment into question, after which neither of us spoke. The tiny car was choked with tension and her scent, and a strange smell I couldn't identify, like oil and matches. I rolled down my window with a sigh, realizing that the progress Bella and I had made getting to know each other had largely disappeared. When we passed Aberdeen without having spoken, I made up my mind to break the ice once more. Whatever happened during and after the trip, Bella and I needed to communicate over the next several days, if only for her safety.

"Who do we have to thank for the use of this fine piece of German engineering I'm driving?" I asked dryly.

Bella turned away from the passenger window to look at me. Her face was pinched and her voice thin with irritation. "Not used to slumming it at the speed limit, Edward?"

Jesus. All I wanted was conversation that didn't devolve into angry sniping.

"I was just curious, Bella," I said wearily. "There's nothing wrong with the car, and you can't deny that it moves faster than your truck."

Something in my expression seemed to register with Bella because her voice was less sharp when she continued. "This car belongs to my friend, Jacob. Charlie thought the truck wouldn't be up to the trip, so I agreed to swap cars with the Blacks to make my dad happy."

Ah, yes. Of course, this is Jake's car. Fantastic.

"Does he let you borrow it often? Your friend?" Deadness crept into my voice as I spoke, but I kept my tone even and my hands loose on the wheel.

"I don't need to, generally." She smirked, though I saw a hint of confusion in her eyes as she watched me. "Despite what you think, my truck is reliable."

I nodded absently before turning to stare at the road again. "You haven't mentioned your friends before, Bella. Why is that?"

"I've never been good at making them," she admitted quietly. "I moved back here when I was fifteen and everyone already knew each other. Plus… I have a hard time letting people in."

"There are a few kids at school… well, one girl, really. And some of the kids on the Quileute reservation, like Jake. I saw kids from school and the rez on Friday, at the beach in La Push. The Quileute kids are a lot easier to get along with than the kids in Forks."

"Are you and Jake very close?"

"He's my best friend." Bella's sad sigh drew my eyes and I saw an expression of regret cross her face. "I… I just haven't been a very good friend back."

"How so?"

"I haven't been honest with him. About a lot of things," she murmured. "Important things like how I feel… the things that happened to me."

"If he's a good friend, he'll understand."
"That's just it. He does understand, and he always has." Bella turned to gaze out the passenger side window as she spoke, her voice growing soft. "He's stood by me for years and been so damned patient. He never complained or got angry… he was just someone I could count on.

"I wish I'd had the nerve to tell him sooner. Not just about Jimmy but to thank him for being such a good guy."

My words choked me as I forced them out. "It sounds as though you told him how you feel, right?"

"Some of it," she agreed tiredly. "He knows about Jimmy. And that Renee and Charlie have no idea what happened. He wants me to tell them, but I don't know. I'm sure he'll want to have more conversations after I get back to Forks."

"I'm sure you'll figure out a way to carry on only the conversations you want to have," I replied, and the corner of my mouth quirked up when Bella chuckled in amusement.

Silence descended again, but most of the crackling tension between us had calmed, and the atmosphere was easier. We were an hour outside of Portland when I thought back to Bella's words about keeping secrets from friends. Despite our promises to be open and honest, I was keeping things from Bella; how much was she still hiding? Would we get to a point where we didn't feel the need to hide? Would things between us be different if we finally revealed those last pieces?

"What about you, Edward?" Bella asked suddenly, pulling me from my thoughts. "Are you… are you able to have friends? You and your siblings, I mean."

"It's difficult. We can't stay in any one place for very long. We try not to draw attention to ourselves, so staying friendless is easier in many ways."

"So the friends you had before you were changed…?"

"They have no idea what became of me," I said quietly. "I wasn't ready to be around humans after being changed, so Emmett, Jasper, and Rosalie drove me out of Chicago as soon as it was safe to travel. Carlisle and Esme took care of closing up my parents' house and cleaning up the evidence of my life. When we could, the family moved to the east coast, and that was it.

"They helped me to erase Edward Masen... and I remade myself as Edward Cullen. As far as anyone from that life knows, I just disappeared. I never had a chance to say goodbye to anyone."

"That's sad, Edward," Bella said with a frown. "Do you miss your friends? Or your family?"

"Not really. In the beginning, I was overwhelmed learning about the new life I had to lead. And then after that first year, when I was finally calmer... even if I had missed my friends, they had their own lives and all of the changes that years bring to humans. Our existence is very different, frozen in many ways. It's not as if I could explain what had happened to me to my frat brothers. And if I were around them for long enough, they'd notice how different I am."

I smiled wryly. "And as for family, I just don't have any. My parents were both only children from small families, and the families just got smaller when my grandparents died. It was always my parents, Alice, and I."

"Will you tell me about her?"

I looked at Bella and read the soft sympathy in her eyes. "What do you want to know?

"Oh, what she was like. I always wanted siblings growing up and I feel like I missed out on a lot of
stuff, good and bad. What Alice liked to watch on television, and whether she played the piano like you? Was she good at her schoolwork? Did you guys fight over who was going to take the garbage out or eat the last doughnut?"

I laughed softly. "Alice was... is the more outgoing of the two of us, though she is younger. She has my father's dark hair and my mother's green eyes, and a wicked sense of humor. She's pretty and lively, and smart. She never takes anything lying down.

"She's always had too much energy to concentrate on learning to play the piano, but she would quiet down when I played. My mom used to say that the only time Alice sat still for more than five minutes at a time was to listen to me practice.

"It was my job to take the garbage out, but Alice always managed to make a big deal out of the chores she was assigned." I smiled again. "Like dusting. Who makes a big deal over wiping a cloth over furniture?"

"We never fought over doughnuts, but we once had a brawl over a bag of Doritos. Alice handed me my ass that day and I couldn't hit her back, of course. She gave me a black eye and split my lip. My mom was so pissed she grounded Alice for a week."

Bella's soft laughter filled the car with music. "It sounds like you guys liked spending time with each other."

"We did," I agreed and then said somberly. "I... I wish in some ways she had been with me when I was first changed. Those days when I was trying to figure out how to wrap my head around my new life – they were difficult. I would have hated her seeing me like this, but Alice's energy would have been good for me.

"I'm sure it sounds stupid, Bella... but I hope that Alice and I will get to enjoy spending time together again someday."

"That's not stupid, Edward," Bella replied gently. "I really hope you find her. I can't help wondering how much she has changed, though. I mean, you haven't seen her since she was six years old."

I nodded, feelings Bella's gaze on the side of my face as the mood between us shifted, tightening slightly. Without looking at her, I knew Bella was waiting for me to continue, waiting for an answer about Alice that she didn't dare ask for. I knew then that Bella didn't entirely believe my story about Alice. I wanted to tell her the truth, and finally come clean about the night Alice was taken. But the words caught in my throat and I swallowed them with silence.

Bella eventually turned away with a soft huff, signaling that she had given up waiting my secrets for the moment. Her breathing gradually slowed as she relaxed against the seat, sinking into sleep after a surprisingly short time. Clearly, the stress of the weekend and preparing for this trip had worn her out.

When her breathing signaled that she was truly under, I allowed myself to look at her again. Bella was facing away from me, but I took comfort in the steady rise and fall of her shoulders as she slept. After a long moment, I reached out toward the ends of her long hair, and held my breath as my fingers met the wonderful softness of her dark curls.

"Edward."

I froze when she said my name, her voice a soft whisper that human ears might have missed. I waited, unsure of how to react were she to say more, and my mind and body swelled and soared...
until I felt I would burst. When the silence lengthened, I slowly withdrew my hand and drove on, feeling dazed and bruised, and impossibly aroused.

*So much for trying to kill the mating urge.*

aDc

"Bella. Bella, are you awake?"

"Mmmmm, yeah," she murmured. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of the dashboard clock. "Whoa... holy crap, is that really the time?"

"It's a bit off, but close enough," I replied, amused by her groggy confusion. "It's almost 12:30."

"I've been asleep for three hours? Why didn't you wake me, Edward?"

"What for? You were tired; it didn't make sense to keep you up just to watch me drive."

"Okay, but I'm not exactly being a good road trip buddy here," she mumbled with a frown. Her mouth dropped open slightly when she glanced at the highway signage. "We're already in Eugene? But that's an hour ahead of where we should be."

I snorted and tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. "Yes, and we'd be even further ahead if you had let me drive my car instead of this thing."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure my friend would like to get this thing back in one piece. Pull back on the gas a bit, if you don't mind." Bella muttered darkly, though her eyes were teasing. She stretched, a breath shuddering through her as she yawned. "Not that I'm complaining exactly, but why did you wake me up?"

"Your stomach was gurgling while you slept," I replied, shrugging when her cheeks colored. "It's been several hours since we left Forks; I thought we could stop for lunch.

"It's time I showed you the photos of James Chase, too," I said quietly, turning my eyes back on the road. "That way we'll have an idea of what we'll be facing once we reach Sacramento."

Bella swallowed loudly, her breath hitching once. In my peripheral vision, I saw her hands ball into fists against her legs.

"I know you don't want to do this, Bella—"

"No, you're right." She cut me off, her voice wavering slightly before she pulled in a deep breath. "I can't put it off forever. It would be better if I looked at the photos before I eat anything."

I gave her a questioning look, unsure what she was hinting at, and took in her pallor and general air of discomfort. Bella's heartbeat and breathing had increased slightly, and the car filled with a fresh wave of her scent as she began perspiring. I held my breath and trained my eyes forward, searching for the next roadside café.

Five minutes later, we had parked at the far edge of a diner parking lot on I-5. Turning off the ignition, I took another sharp look at Bella, noting the sheen of sweat on her forehead and the grim cast to her features. She looked ill, even before I had taken the envelope of photos from my bag.

That she was so frightened and sickened by her history and by the animal that had hurt her filled me with rage. I knew by now that this intensely physical reaction was only a small part of the stress
Bella endured every day. She was haunted nearly every moment, even in her sleep, by a man she had not seen in nearly a decade.

_Is it any wonder she wants to take that fucker out? No._

I glanced through the windshield, checking that there was adequate cloud cover before turning toward the backseat for my bag. Letting myself out of the car, I walked around to Bella's side and opened the door, meeting her curious gaze with a nod. After a moment, she swung her legs out of the car to rest her feet on the ground. Squatting down in front of her, I put the open door to my back, just as I had done on that day in Port Angeles when I had found her in the alley. I pulled the envelope of photos from my bag, and held it out to Bella, who took it after a long pause.

"Alice was nineteen when she was abducted, not six," I said quietly. I licked my lips as I met Bella's startled gaze with my own steady one. "It happened the night I was changed. The vampire that did this to me took her."

I blew a long breath out and ran a hand through my hair before dropping it to my thigh, gathering my thoughts before I spoke again.

"It was shortly after our parents had been killed. Alice and I had buried them… and we were trying to figure out what we would do next. I wanted to go back to school right away, but Alice thought taking a semester off would be easier. We were hanging out on the sun porch behind the house one night, just talking about those plans, and about Mom and Dad. We were remembering them and laughing together.

"The lights went out and I heard something loud, a-a-a crunching sound… something breaking and Alice sounded so frightened. But I don't remember anything after that until I woke up in the basement. Alice was there, I know that. She was crying, but I think she was all right, otherwise.

"He was there too. The one who changed me. He told me—" I broke off and swallowed hard, struggling to control myself. Then Bella's warm fingers brushed my forearm for a moment, steadying me. "He acted like he was playing some kind of _game_. He beat me. He broke my bones. And he threatened Alice… made her beg me for help, even though I couldn't get up off the ground."

My head spun, my anxiety crawling up my chest and throat. I focused on Bella's fingers, gentle and so warm on my arm. They anchored me, and reminded me where I was. I shook my head to clear it.

"The thing is, I don't even know why he bothered with it."

"Bothered with what?" Bella asked gently.

"Torturing me, frightening Alice more than she already was," I murmured, clenching my eyes shut. "There was no _point_ to it, Bella. He was cruel for cruelty's sake. He bit me when he got bored and drank and drank… I'm not sure he didn't mean to kill me. The last thing I remember about that night was seeing him carrying Alice up the stairs. She was so quiet and still in his arms, and her eyes were closed… but I think she was alive."

"I'm so sorry, Edward," Bella said softly. "Sorry about what happened to you, to your sister. And I'm sorry you didn't feel comfortable telling me before today."

"I should have told you the truth that afternoon in Port Angeles when you asked me about Alice." I shrugged. I opened my eyes and the corner of my mouth turned up when she gave me a timid but warm smile.

"Why are you telling me now?"
"You told me this morning that you hadn't been honest with your friend, Jacob. That you hadn't been a good friend to him. What kind of friend does that make me, when I hold back things that are important, like Alice's story?"

Bella nodded, lowering her eyes to the envelope as her cheeks colored. "Are we friends, Edward? I wasn't sure after the way we acted toward each other this morning."

I shrugged and clasped my hands together. "Everyone's entitled to a bad day, Bella. Including the undead, apparently."

Bella wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, that's just weird, Edward."

"I suppose. But it happens to be true," I allowed with a small grin. "It seems truer for humans than my kind. I think your mood this morning could be classified as foul."

She nodded and her eyebrows furrowed in distress. "I know. I've been pushing everything down for so long, Edward. For years. And now that I'm dragging it all back up again… I can't seem to control my feelings anymore. I don't even know how I'm supposed to feel. It's as if I was frozen for a long time, in my own way. Being in motion again after all those years is overwhelming."

I reached to tap the envelope softly with my finger. "I told you I would help you, Bella. If you change your mind about any of this, I'll help you find a way to get James Chase without you ever having to see his face again."

"No," she shook her head firmly. The color drained slowly from her face as she raised the envelope a bit higher and slid her finger under the flap. "I do want this. I need to do it. Even when it's hard on me."

I gave her one more encouraging look and her eyes sparked before she turned her attention to the envelope. She drew in a breath and held it as she raised the flap and reached in to pull the photos out, then blew the air out in a long, shaky gust.

Clipped to each photo were printed pages listing the information I had found during the search, as well as various handwritten notes that I added as my research progressed. While the information on those pages was important, Bella's eyes were naturally drawn to the images of the men in question.

Her hands trembled slightly as she ran her right index finger over the face of the first man. Her eyes flicked quickly over his broad features and dark hair, lingering for one moment on his light blue eyes before she moved the photo to the bottom of the pile. She repeated the same pattern for the next couple of photos, silently discounting the redhead in the second and the dark skinned man in the third.

The fourth photo, however, provoked a profound reaction. Bella's breathing became shallow and her heart thundered while the tremor in her hands increased. I glanced at the face on the paper, seeing the plain features of the man with the sandy colored hair as Bella saw them. Now, his brown eyes held something dark, and the slight smile he wore looked more like a sneer. I took a good look at the Jimmy Bella had feared so deeply and my vision tinted red with rage.

"Uh," Bella grunted.

I looked up to see her white face twisting. She shoved the photos toward me before she stood and pushed past, walking jerkily toward the trees beyond the edge of the parking lot. I tossed the envelope onto the driver's seat before darting to Bella's side, silently cursing the need to use human speed. Without even thinking about it, I curled my left arm around her waist and used my right hand...
to steady her shoulder as she bent forward and vomited the meager breakfast she had eaten into the bushes.

Bella's heaves and her rushing heartbeat were loud in my ears as I held her wordlessly, the noise of passing cars and voices of the diner customers around us. I waited until she straightened at last, rubbing her fingers over her face. When I was sure she was steady on her feet, I let her go but stayed close as we walked back to the car.

"I guess we'll be making a trip to Vallejo this week," I murmured, watching Bella lower herself back onto her seat.

She huffed out a strangled sort of laugh as she closed her eyes and ran her hands through her hair in a calming gesture. "You are a master of the understatement, Edward Cullen."

"So I've been told," I replied, feeling some relief when she opened her eyes and I saw that she was rallying.

"Never change," she said, striving to lighten her tone though her eyes were somber.

"Are you all right, Bella?"

I nodded, not feeling in any way all right but unsure how else to answer. Edward walked around the car and slid into the driver's seat.

"I'm sorry for grossing you out like that. If I'd known it was coming, I would've tried to… be more ladylike while throwing up." I gave Edward a little, halfhearted smile but the gold in his eyes softened at the sight of it.

"You were very ladylike," he said, looking at me with an expression I could only describe as tender. My insides suddenly turned with butterflies instead of nausea. "I thought covering your mouth with one hand at the end was very demure."

I tried not to smile at his gentle teasing. How could he be so infuriating one minute and adorable the next? It didn't seem fair – I could hardly keep up with Edward's mood swings. Even worse, I'd started losing control of my emotions more and more since meeting him.

"I don't think I can eat anything right now," I said, leaning my head back against the seat.

"Bella, you haven't eaten anything since 8:00 a.m. Just tell me what you want and I'll get it to go."

I groaned, closing my eyes in frustration. I thought I heard Edward mutter something that sounded like, "Let me take care of you, damn it!"

My lips turned up at the corners and I sighed. "Fine. Just get whatever."

"Bella..."

"Okay, okay. Chicken tenders if they have them, please. If they don't, then a burger and a house salad. Thanks, Edward."

"Will do. I'll be right back."

Edward let himself out of the car and started towards the diner. My eyes wandered to the slope of his back and broad shoulders before dropping to my lap. I felt my heart thundering in my chest as I stared at my sweaty hands. Why, why, why did I have to throw up in front of him? He belonged on
a runway in Paris and I was heaving into the bushes. Of all the humiliating things I could've done, that took the cake.

I felt my cell phone vibrate in my pocket and pulled it out of my jacket. "Hello?"

"Hey, Bells. Just wanted to check in," Charlie said from the other end.

"Hi, Dad. I just stopped for lunch. How's everything at home?" My voice softened and the pounding in my chest lessened as Charlie's familiar, gruff voice soothed my anxiety.

"Everything's fine here, Bells. Hey, how's Jake's car holding up?"

"It's fine, Dad," I smiled and shook my head. Charlie was more than pleased to think he had convinced me to borrow the Rabbit.

"Be sure to get some rest, okay? Don't drive too much tonight. Get a hotel, if you have to."

"Okay, Dad. I'll call you when I stop again."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. Just stay safe. Call me when you get to Renee's."

"Sure, I will. Take care of yourself too. Don't eat at the diner every night while I'm gone, okay?"

Charlie chuckled. "Don't worry, honey. I've got a freezer stocked with trout and salmon to last me a couple of days, and there's always pizza."

I rolled my eyes, smiling at what wasn't a joke at all. "Fine, Dad. I'll talk to you soon."

"Bye, baby."

I clasped the phone shut and settled back against the seat.

Edward returned with a plastic bag that filled the car with a delicious aroma when he let himself back in and shut the door. My stomach growled and I pressed my hands against the seat to keep from snatching the food right out of his hand.

"Don't judge," I grumbled when he smirked.

"I'm sorry to be so long," he sighed. "I'd forgotten how long the cooking process can take."

I found a plastic fork at the bottom of the bag and opened the plastic container of salad first, tearing into it eagerly. "That's okay. Charlie called to check on me while you were gone."

Edward nodded, his eyes straying to the steering wheel. He sounded suddenly uncomfortable when he asked, "Did your friend Jacob call?"

*Why does he keep asking about Jacob?* I frowned as I shoveled down lettuce and tomato. I shook my head, too busy chewing to answer.

"Oh. I just thought he'd be calling a lot," Edward continued.

"Why would you think that?" I asked after swallowing the mouthful, and picked at a tomato in the plastic bowl.

"I thought Jacob was your boyfriend."
My head snapped up in response to the words and Edward's reluctant tone. His jaw was set tight, and his eyes were still focused straight ahead, avoiding mine. Edward looked... nervous.

"No," I replied slowly, letting my confusion show. "We've never been close like that."

I felt myself blush fiercely at my use of the word 'close'. Edward shifted in his seat while I fumbled to put the lid back on the salad bowl.

"I'm sorry if I'm being nosy," Edward said quietly while I busied myself opening the box containing chicken tenders, fries and a burger. I was baffled to see that he had gone all out for a simple request.

"It's fine, Edward," I replied, stabbing a French fry with my fork.

"I'm just wondering how someone... someone as wonderful as you could be alone."

I almost laughed but didn't want to choke on the food. "You think I'm wonderful?" I asked skeptically.

Edward's brows furrowed seriously and he turned at last to look at me again. "I do, Bella. You're intelligent and caring, and you can hold your own in an argument. I should certainly know."

Despite myself, I smiled to see a playful gleam in his eyes. "I thought you didn't enjoy arguing," I teased timidly.

Edward's crooked smile appeared and almost knocked the breath right out of me. "Well, I don't. But I've never argued with anyone quite like you. You're challenging, which is always good, I suppose, even when you're infuriating."

The warmth I felt faded with his last comment. "Well, you infuriate me too," I retorted, fighting my urge to scowl at his ridiculous, beautiful face.

Edward's features remained neutral but his tone hardened slightly. "Why? Because I want to know more about you? Because you fascinate me and that scares you?"

Yes, all the warmth I'd felt a few seconds ago was definitely gone.

I almost looked away but guessed that Edward would see that as a confirmation, so instead I leveled a glare at him. "I'm not afraid of you, as ridiculous as that might sound."

"Maybe it's not that you're not afraid, Bella. Maybe you don't care."

"What do you mean?"

Edward folded his arms over his chest and I tried not to notice the way his shirt outlined the strong contours of his upper body.

"I'm starting to get the feeling that the reason you seem so comfortable around me is because you really wouldn't mind if I lost control."

I sat frozen by his fiery stare for a long moment. The words I had been about to shout were suddenly stuck in my throat. I thought back to the many times I had wondered about Edward biting me, the times I had dreamt about his mouth on my neck.

"You wouldn't mind if I bit you, Bella."

"I know what you meant," I retorted and looked away, unable to continue the bizarre staring game.
"What do you want from me, Edward?"

"The same thing you want from me. The truth. You wouldn't mind if I bit you, would you?"

I blew out a breath, feeling my flight instinct kick in. Of course, I couldn't run away now. "I guess I wouldn't mind at all."

Edward didn't reply, and I was thankful. I put all the food containers back in the bag, no longer hungry.

After a long beat of silence, Edward turned back to the wheel. "What will it take for you to see what I see, Bella?"

His words were spoken so softly I wasn't sure he intended for me to hear them. Even so, my heart rate picked up again and I couldn't help asking, "And what do you see?"

Edward shook his head. "You wouldn't believe me anyway."

I couldn't respond. My biggest problem was that I had started to fantasize again, about what this strange boy at my side might say to me. I had to stop. Whatever dignity I had left would be gone when I finally realized that my silly daydreams would never become reality. It was one thing to joke around but another thing entirely to believe the fantasy in my head.

Edward interrupted my thoughts again with another strange question. "Do you think if the right person came along, you would let them in? You told Jacob about what happened, after all."

I shook my head immediately. "With Jacob it was different. I got drunk and blurted out the whole thing. The next day, I had no choice but to answer his questions truthfully."

Edward didn't look convinced, so I continued. "And anyway, there is no right person. There won't ever be."

"You don't know that, Bella," Edward said, turning to face me again. "You deserve someone who understands how to take care of you. Someone who respects you."

I felt tears sting my eyes but I forced them to stay back. "And what do they deserve? I don't have anything to offer someone normal, Edward," I said as quietly as I could, hoping he wouldn't hear. But of course, he did.

Edward's cold finger touched my chin, raising my face until our eyes met. I blinked rapidly to clear my vision. "I disagree. And I think your friend, Jacob, would too."

"He doesn't know everything," I argued, but now it felt like we weren't talking about Jacob anymore.

"Still, I don't think it would scare him away." He smiled gently, his fingers brushing against my cheek for the briefest instant before he dropped his hand.

"So when we get to Sacramento," I began a new subject, "I take it you'll be staying at a hotel?"

Edward cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "That's the plan. I saw some places downtown, so I'll be close. I talked to Emmett and Jasper before we left Washington, and they agreed to drive my car down so I have something to use while you're at your mother's."

The mention of his brothers caused a nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Hmm... Emmett and Jasper?"
"That's right," Edward said slowly, sounding confused by the hesitation in my voice. "We're close. And they wanted to help."

I nodded, trying to disguise my distress at the reminder of the rift I had apparently caused in his family.

"Rosalie may come too, though I'm not sure," Edward continued. "She's worried about Emmett."

I cringed. Well then, this Rosalie must hate my guts.

Edward started the car and revved up the engine a few times before he pulled back onto the road. The sky outside the windows was clearing as we continued to drive further south. It got warmer too, and I rolled down my window, feeling the humid breeze ruffle my hair.

"Is this the first time you're visiting Renee since moving to Forks?"

I leaned away from the window to answer Edward's question without the wind humming in my ears. "No, I came down last year for winter break met Renee and Phil near Anaheim. Phil took us to Disneyland. Renee hates the cold weather so she hardly visits Charlie and me. But during the summer of my freshman year she came for two weeks and we went to a concert in Seattle."

"What concert?" Edward asked.

"The Black Keys."

"Nice." Edward grinned in approval and I found myself smiling back. "Is that your personal favorite or Renee's?"

"Oh, we both like the blues. But I don't listen to much besides classical. Renee is more open-minded about music," I admitted bashful. A feeling crept over me, much as it had when I visited SU, making me feel like a country bumpkin with limited knowledge of culture.

Edward's tone was nonjudgmental when he spoke, however. "I used to play Debussy a lot. Clair de Lune is one of my favorites."

"Oh yeah?" I was surprised. "I like that one too. It's so calming."

"Have you heard Pachelbel's Canon in D? It's really soft and relaxing."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." I hesitated then added, "I have trouble sleeping most nights."

Edward's voice was cautious when he spoke again. "Do you find it difficult to drift off, or do you have bad dreams?"

"Bad dreams," I replied, glancing down at the zipper on my jacket. "I've had them for as long as I can remember, but I don't scream the way I did when I was younger. They've become so regular that I've learned to stay quiet."

Edward knew what the nightmares were about without my explaining anything. There could only be one thing causing them.

"Are the dreams the same every night?"

"No. They're mostly memories." I let out a soft breath and rested my cheek against the seat's faded upholstery. "One time, Renee heard me crying and she came into my room to see what was wrong. I might've been nine."
Edward turned his eyes from the road and fixed them on mine but I kept my expression empty. "What did you tell her?"

My mind drifted back to that time and the lie I had told. "I said my dream was about being chased by zombies."

A sad smile graced Edward's features and he took one hand off the steering wheel, ghosting it over mine. The contact shocked me but not in the same manner that it usually did when someone would touch me. I was surprised that he even wanted to hold my hand. His skin was cold and strangely hard, but incredibly smooth, and it felt good against my hot flesh. It seemed that whenever Edward was close, my body became overheated.

"I should've brought my collection of nocturnes," he murmured thoughtfully before he cracked a smile in my direction. "Can I assume the radio works?"

I rolled my eyes good-naturedly. "It works fine."

"Well then." Edward let go of my hand to turn on the car's radio. He switched through a few stations before finding one that played classical music. I smiled, settling back against the seat, and Edward took my hand again.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY, Edward spills the Alice beans. We knew you had it in you, buddy. And, we have a positive ID on Jimmy. Most excellent.

The next chapter will be Bella's.

Thank you so much for reading.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

Dreaming comes so easily
'cause it's all I've ever known.
True love is a fairy tale.
I'm damaged so how would I know?
I'm scared and I'm alone,
I'm ashamed and I need
For you to know.
"Damaged" - Plumb

Edward drew his hand back when I shifted in my seat, and goose bumps rose on my arm, making me shiver.

"You don't have to do that," I blurted without thinking. My cheeks burned when he met my gaze.

Wordlessly, he threaded his fingers through mine again. His manner was abrupt when he spoke again. "How long do you want to wait before we make the trip to Vallejo?"

I frowned. "Wait... what do you mean?"

Edward's mouth was set in a firm line. "Well, your mom believes that you're making this trip to spend time with her. Shouldn't you make time for Renee before we visit James Chase?"

"Right," I whispered, feeling a wave of shame spread over me for forgetting my mother in all of this. "Um. I just need a few days to convince her that everything's fine. Renee's easy. A few shopping trips and movie sessions ought to do it. I know she's planning on taking a few days off work, but she'll be going back by mid-week."

"Okay," Edward replied. "The auto shop where Chase works is on 34th Street. Once I have my car, I can keep an eye on him there. In the meantime, I can watch his house in the evenings."

My brows furrowed in confusion. "How will you get to his house without a car?"

Edward gave me a cheeky grin that made me think he thought the answer was kind of obvious. "I'll run," he said simply.

We sat in uncomfortable silence then, the atmosphere tainted by the unsettling topic.

My eyes drifted closed while the soft strains of Moonlight Sonata played on the radio.
I giggled, circling the eucalyptus, trying to get away from Renee and her muddy hands. She had been puttering about her little garden when I'd found her and was now playfully threatening to get me dirty if I didn't relinquish the shovel.

"You'd better give that back to your mom, Bella."

I glanced up at the hulking shadow that appeared over me. Jimmy always made me feel so much smaller than I actually was. I hated that.

"You don't want to be a bad girl, do you?" Jimmy said as a sickening grin spread over his face.

Something brushed against my arm and I jerked awake with a little shriek before I realized it was only Edward's hand.

"Bella, it's okay. I'm sorry I scared you."

"No," I gasped, feeling my heart slam in my ribcage. "It's all right."

There was a bit of moisture under my eyes and I hurriedly wiped it away with clammy fingers. Laying my head back against the seat, I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was late afternoon and the sky was a brilliant robin's egg blue over the cedars.

"Where are we?" I wondered absently.

"We're passing Winston," Edward replied lightly, "Grants Pass is an hour or so ahead."

I nodded. "It's very pretty here. I like these types of trees. They're not covered in moss like the trees in Forks. Like everything in Forks, actually."

Edward grinned. "So you do like the outdoors..." he trailed off teasingly.

I shrugged. "I like some parts of the forests, but hiking's not really my thing. I'd rather sit somewhere and paint or take pictures."

Edward lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "I didn't know you were an artist."

"I'm not," I scoffed. "They're pretty simple watercolors and not remotely interesting. Renee had an arts and crafts phase where she would decorate photo albums and frames, stuff like that. She grew tired of it after a while, but I kind of enjoyed gluing seashells and painting sunsets, that kind of thing. It's not serious art."

"It's just fun and creative," I mused as Edward steered the car around a semi hauling a long trailer.

Edward smiled easily. "Sounds like you."

I shook my head. "Me? Fun? You should know better by now, if my lack of extracurricular activities is any indication."

"No, you are fun," he disagreed with a note of sharpness in his tone that surprised me. "You're just not into the same things as the rest of your classmates. That's good. It makes you unique and fascinating to me."

"You make me sound like a lab experiment," I said with a scowl.

Edward didn't respond as he accelerated, passing two more trucks and a Hummer. My eyes fell on the speedometer and widened.
"Are you planning to outrun the cops too?"

"We're not being followed by any cops, Bella," he replied dismissively.

I sighed, exasperated. "I know that. But if we were, that wouldn't be a problem for you, would it?"

"Not at all." That adorable, lopsided smile spread across his face, resurrecting the butterflies in my stomach. He tapped his forehead with the hand that wasn't on the steering wheel. "I have a built-in radar detector."

"Hmm," I mused, trying not to gawk at him for too long. "I suppose that if I was as strong and indestructible as you, I'd probably be just as smug."

"I doubt that," Edward replied, his tone thoughtful. "*The human spirit is stronger than anything that happens to it?* Have you ever heard that quote?"

I frowned, struggling to remember. It sounded like something Mr. Berty, my English teacher back in Forks, would have recited during class. "Probably."

Edward glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "Do you think that's true?"

"I don't really know," I mumbled, feeling cold all of a sudden, despite the warm air blowing from the vents.

"What kinds of books do you like to read?" Edward asked after a short pause and I looked up, relieved by the subject change. "Do you have a favorite author?"

"I'm a big fan of the Bronte sisters," I answered, smiling timidly.

"Which of their works is your favorite?" Edward asked. His tone was so serious, as if it was the most important question in the world.

"Wuthering Heights."

"Really?" Edward's tone was skeptical.

"Yeah, why?"

He shrugged. "Aren't the characters a bit too selfish? I'd think someone sweet like you would enjoy reading something a little less morbid and melodramatic."

I folded my arms indignantly. "Maybe I see beauty in morbidity, where someone else wouldn't."

That earned me a smile from Edward but it didn't reach his eyes. He still looked skeptical and even concerned for some reason I couldn't identify. "Fair enough. But I still can't understand how you can relate to Cathy and Heathcliff on any level."

"It's not really that I can relate to them," I mused quietly. "It's just that nothing can separate them, not even at the end. Sure, they're cursed and all. One's a ghost, the other is bitter and resentful. But their love is the only thing they care about more than their pride. It's their only redeeming quality."

For a second, my thoughts drifted back to a discussion I had had with Ali_pixy online at Charlie's house and I continued without thinking. "Heathcliff and Cathy are kind of like a modern day Chuck and Blair."

"Excuse me?" Edward snorted beside me.
I glanced over, feeling my cheeks heat up at my embarrassing comparison. "What?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Chuck and Blair?"

I nodded. "Gossip Girl."

"You watch Gossip Girl?" Edward looked like he was fighting laughter.

"No!" I explained hurriedly, feeling like a complete idiot. "I'm just remembering a similar conversation I had with somebody who does watch the show, and she pointed out how the characters are sort of alike.

Edward shook his head, chuckling. "I can't believe you watch that petty teen crap. All those kids do is get drunk, make out, and then fight with everyone and each other. I have to keep from strangling Rosalie whenever she has the remote so she doesn't turn that stuff on."

"I do not watch Gossip Girl!" I muttered angrily. "Well. Maybe just one or two episodes for research purposes."

Edward laughed louder. The sound was like music and I couldn't help smiling. "I can't believe we're talking about Gossip Girl."

"You started it!" I scolded between giggles.

It was bizarre that Edward could make me react so naturally, and make me feel so carefree out of nowhere. I wasn't used to laughing so much, which was probably why I sobered as my mind raced over the last half hour. My pulse sped as I recalled how Edward had called me 'sweet' and implied that I was 'unselfish' not long ago. I knew he wouldn't think those things about me if he could hear my thoughts that would tell him I was ready to betray his trust if he betrayed mine. I told myself again that my mistrust was unavoidable: I could not trust anyone but myself.

"What about you?" I asked, eager to distract myself. "What books do you like?"

Edward rolled down his window again, tilting his face into the fresh air before he turned to me. "To Kill a Mockingbird is my favorite classic," he said, reaching to slip his hand over mine again. This time his thumb made lazy circles on my skin.

I smiled, glancing at his hand then at the calm look on his face. "I should've known you'd be into something complicated like that."

He grinned but didn't respond so I asked, "What about movies?"

"Alice and I used to watch The Lord of the Rings trilogy together almost every weekend. We still tried to get together to watch during school, when we went home for weekends." His smile was wistful with a hint of sadness. "And I like sci-fi movies. What about you?"

I blushed. "Well, I mostly watch remakes of old films but I really like Johnny Depp's movies. Benny and Joon is my favorite."

I wondered if naming a film about two misfits falling in love despite society's judgments was a little too close to Edward's and my situation. Not that I expected real life to be that romantic, but Edward could easily think I was as naïve as Joon.

"I also like Public Enemies. Though it's kind of violent," I quickly amended.
Edward nodded. "It's very violent, but the violence is in context. You keep surprising me, Bella."

"Right back 'atcha," I countered, glancing away. "I love the song from the movie, 'Bye Bye, Blackbird'."

"It's a beautiful song," Edward said quietly.

We continued talking as Edward drove, pausing at a few rest stops for what he jokingly called my 'human moments.' We entered California discussing music, books, and movies. Sometimes we teased each other about our likes and dislikes, but never too seriously, and we often found middle ground. The miles and time passed with startling speed and before I knew it, the sky was growing dark.

We were moving toward downtown Sacramento, passing the familiar palm trees lining the streets when I noticed signs for 11th and 12th Streets. I nodded absentmindedly, my stomach twisting with hunger. But I felt too nervous to reach into my paper bag of leftovers from lunch, now that we were nearing our destination.


"I remember, Bella."

It was almost 6:30 when Edward pulled into the parking lot of a hotel near the city center. Edward gave me a smile as he switched off the ignition and popped his door. "This hotel has an underground parking garage – perfect for those sunny California days."

He let himself out and went to the trunk for his bag, while I slid out of the passenger seat awkwardly and walked to meet him. I unzipped my tracksuit jacket as the warm air soaked through the fabric of my tank top. Edward closed the trunk and stood frozen for a moment, holding his duffel and messenger bag over one shoulder. His gaze was gentle but I saw doubt in his eyes, too.

"Do you-" I began, not sure exactly what to ask. "Do you want me to call you tonight? Or will you call me when Emmett and Jasper get here?"

Edward blinked. "Right. I'll call you when they get here."

"Okay," I murmured, walking around to the driver's side of the car. But Edward followed me and reached out to wrap his hand around mine before I could open the door.

"Bella." He stepped closer and I was suddenly reminded of how tall he was. I craned my head to meet his stare but he didn't make me feel intimidated like I'd felt as a child, looking up at Jimmy's towering frame. No... Edward made me feel safe. And that was something new.

He dropped my hand only to reach up and ghost his fingers over my cheek, brushing a strand of tangled hair behind my ear. I realized I was probably a mess. But for some reason, the way Edward's eyes lingered on mine made me think about the beach party at La Push, and the Mike and Jacob had looked at me.

Don't be ridiculous, Bella. I shook my head, dismissing the thought. Obviously, Edward couldn't think me attractive in that way. I mean, Mike and Jacob were only human. It was ridiculous to think that a magnificent and very inhuman creature like Edward would be attracted to me.

"What is it?" I asked softly, hating the way my body responded to his subtle touches. I actually wanted him to touch me more.

Edward pulled his hand back, seeming to realize something. He probably had a moment of clarity
and realized how plain you really are, you dope.

"Just... take care of yourself." Edward's face was very still.

I nodded. "No problem."

Edward turned toward the hotel entrance and I hurriedly slid into the Rabbit, putting on my seatbelt and twisting the key in the ignition. My skin felt hot and I badly wanted to get away from that lot as quickly as possible. As I waited for a break in traffic, I caught a glimpse of Edward in the rear-view mirror as he was stepping through the front doors. His expression was the saddest I'd ever seen on any person.

aDc

Renee and Phil's house was a cute one-story with an octagonal window over the garage and a low white fence bordering an emerald green lawn and little garden.

I parked behind Renee's station wagon and Phil's Ford Explorer in the driveway. I padded to the front door carrying my duffel bag and the paper bag of half-eaten food. One ring of the doorbell was all it took; Renee had probably been peeking out the window as I'd driven up.

"Bella!" she exclaimed, swinging the door open widely and reaching out with one hand to pull me in by the waist.

I tried to hug her and hold onto my bags at the same time, and a smile spread over my face. "Mom, it's so good to see you."

"Oh honey, I can't tell you how long I've been waiting for this." Renee took my duffel bag as I stepped inside the cozy foyer.

"C'mon, Mom," I said awkwardly, fighting the urge to cry as I saw her brush a tear from her lower lashes. I had had no idea she would react this way. "It hasn't been that long."

"Oh, yeah right," Renee scoffed, closing the door. "I've been such a jittery mess all weekend. Phil will tell you." Turning towards the living room, she yelled, "Phil! Bella's here!"

My smile widened when Phil came out of the kitchen wearing a 'Kiss the Chef' apron. He still had on his River Cats baseball cap, which made his appearance even funnier.

"Hey, kiddo!" He spread his arms wide for a hug as I approached. Phil was the polar opposite of Charlie when it came to showing physical contact, and it was impossible for me to hold back. Phil was too kind-hearted to disappoint, as well.

"Hope you're hungry," Phil declared, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and steering me towards one of the stools surrounding the kitchen counter. "I made baked ziti with garlic bread, and there's Caesar salad too 'cause your mom told me you really like those leafy greens."

I hopped up on the stool as Renee stuffed the bag with the burger and chicken tenders in the trash.

"That sounds awesome," I said, watching Phil take platter out of the warming oven and set it on the table in the breakfast nook.

"Your mom suggested catfish," Phil continued, giving Renee a teasing grin. "But I thought you might want something different seeing as your dad's a fisherman and you probably eat that every night."
"Yeah pretty much." I laughed easily before leveling a playful glare in Renee's direction. "Mom, what did I tell you about too much fried seafood?"

"Oh you'll know what I'm talking about pretty soon, Missy," Renee teased back, carrying a pitcher of lemonade from the fridge to the table. "I'll take you to one of my favorite lobster shacks this week."

Before we sat down to eat, I excused myself to go clean up. The guest bathroom was decorated with seashells and a scented potpourri that brought back memories of Renee's scrap-booking phase and my childhood fascination with lighthouses. I was surprised that I didn't feel uncomfortable in the house, but rather safe. Then again, I hadn't been molested in Phil and Renee's house. If I were to return to the house in Yuba County, I might feel very differently.

After dinner, Phil and Renee sat down to watch TV but I excused myself in favor of a badly needed shower. My cell phone vibrated as I was getting dressed for bed in the guest bedroom. Pulling on a pair of pajama shorts, I stumbled towards my duffel bag on the floor by the bed.

I noticed that Renee had covered the bed with a lovely new cerulean spread before I sat down to look at the new text message. It was from Edward.

Edward- How's it going?

I answered swiftly: I'm fine. How are you?

Edward- The hotel is pretty boring. I wish I could sleep like you.

Sitting back against the headboard, I typed, No you don't. When you sleep, you have bad dreams.

I sighed and felt embarrassed when I remembered the nightmare I'd had in the car and waking up to find Edward's hand on my arm.

Edward's next message flashed across the phone's screen, standing out more than his earlier ones.

Edward- I'd dream about you, if I could.

I hated and loved the way my chest fluttered. Stupid butterflies.

aDc

Thankfully, the night passed without any dreams, good or bad. The guest room didn't have a window so it wasn't the bright morning sun that awoke me the next day but a light knock on the door.

"Bella?" Renee opened the door a crack, poking her head.

I rubbed a hand over my eyes. "Hey, Mom."

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

I sat up to get a better look at her. She was wearing sweatpants, a short-sleeved shirt, and running shoes. "What time is it?" I asked, holding back a yawn.

"Just after 9:00," Renee replied, opening the door a little wider to let the golden light from the hallway stream in. "I just got back from my morning jog. Do you want to join me for breakfast? We can eat out on the patio. Strawberry waffles sound good?"
"You know how to make waffles?" I asked, confused.

She rolled her eyes, grinning mischievously. "Phil made them before he left for work."

"Oh, okay," I said, rolling out from under the soft sheets. "I'll be right there. Let me brush my teeth first."

"Okay, honey."

Something occurred to me as an afterthought and I called to Renee as she turned to leave.

"Yes, honey?"

"Is there a computer here I can use?"

Renee's laptop was a thousand times faster than my computer back home. I logged onto my email as she took plates out to the patio and started smearing on sunscreen.

I almost screamed out loud when I saw two new messages from Ali_pixy in my inbox. The first had been sent on Saturday night.

From: Alipixy
To: BellsForever

Hi, Bella - How's it going? I'm sorry I haven't been online much lately. I've had meningitis. I'm doing okay now, though. Hope you're doing okay, too. I miss talking to you.

"Meningitis?" I muttered, for some reason not believing her. I clicked on the second message. It was from early that morning.

From: Alipixy
To: BellsForever

Hi, again - I'm feeling a little better now. Hope to hear from you soon. Please write when you can - I missed you so much.

My fingers raced across the keyboard, typing a quick reply to Ali_pixy's first message.

From: BellsForever
To: Alipixy

Hey, I missed you too. How bad was the meningitis? I'm at my mom's house in Cali for spring break. It's great to hear from you, but you sound down. Everything okay? I've been worried.

Renee called me as I was in the middle of sending the message so I quickly finished the process and pushed away from the computer. But my stomach was all twisted in knots. It could've just been my imagination running wild, but I couldn't help thinking there was something strange about Ali_pixy's sudden reappearance. Something that went further than a simple case of illness.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... they made it to Sacramento without killing each other. And Ali_pixy's reaching
The next chapter will be Edward's.

Thank you so much for reading.

Notes:
The quote, "The human spirit is stronger than anything that happens to it," has been attributed to C.C. Scott.
There is no 34th Street in Vallejo to the best of our knowledge - we made it up :)
A hotel room is like purgatory for a vampire. Humans on each side, underfoot, and overhead, inescapable and untouchable.

Even in a lavish top floor room like the one I had reserved, I was surrounded by sensory stimulation. So many smells, both sweet and sour, covering every surface and filling every space. A constant, low buzz of voices and breaths as they ate, spoke, prayed, and slept. Sighs and groans of passion, and the sound of soft bodies wrapping around each other.

After Bella dropped me off at the hotel in downtown Sacramento, I sat on the bed in my room and ran my fingers over the notebook at my side. My laptop sat untouched on my other side, logged in to the Port Angeles house network. I closed my eyes and tried to lose myself in the chaos of human traces around me. I could smell out the contents of room service orders, and the perfume of hundreds of shampoos and shower gels. My ears filled with the music of movies on the televisions and the pad of bare feet over carpet. Voices rose and fell in scores of different conversations. And a stream of thoughts moved over me in streams, a legion of internal voices whispering and shouting, singing and pleading.

None of it truly registered. Nothing filled the hole left by Bella’s absence.

I realized almost at once that spending so many hours in the car with Bella had heightened my mating urge exponentially. Within minutes of separating from her, I was a bundle of jangled nerves, strung tight and in danger of snapping. I fought to keep myself from pacing around the room, my hands twitching and my teeth clenched against the desire grinding inside me.

I used the remote to turn the television on, letting the theme song of an old sitcom wash over me while I struggled. With a shaky breath, I made up my mind to take a shower and seek comfort in the hiss of the hot water. But images of Bella filled my head with stunning clarity and I froze in place.

Oh, hell. I groaned as my body grew hard and eager, flooded with the cold fire of lust. I saw Bella sitting in the passenger seat of the VW, her slim limbs arranged gracefully under the dark tracksuit. My nose was flooded with the remembered sweet, clean smell of her long hair and my fingertips ached to feel the silk her curls again. I saw her dark eyes and the fan of her lashes when she closed
them. I watched a flush bleed beautifully over her cheeks and down her neck, and her perfect pink tongue wet her lips.

"God, help me," I murmured, clamping my eyes shut as my brain went further, imagining things to which it had no right.

_Bella standing before me in this room as her luscious scent filled my nose and rolled over my tongue. Her gaze on mine, her eyes shining as my hands rose to rest on her hips and I pulled her gently onto my lap. Warm fingers moving over my jaw before trailing delicately down my neck, dipping beneath the collar of my shirt to trace my collarbones. Her sweet breath whispering against my skin as I gathered her against me. The velvet softness of her lips lingering over mine for a long moment before her mouth opened in a kiss that was hot, full, and alive._

_Christ._ My whole body shuddered once, before I dug my hands deeply into my hair and pulled a long breath in. I laughed weakly as I exhaled, exasperated by my body's helpless response and knowing one thing: the very last thing I needed to be was naked.

An hour passed, then two, while I sat moving air in and out of my lungs as a means of keeping myself from leaving the hotel room. I shoved my desire aside to control it, and my body slowly calmed. There was no way to banish Bella from my mind entirely, however, and I slavishly recalled the details of the trip we had taken from Forks that day.

I thought about the arguments and anger, and the tentative, unspoken truce we had drawn. The trust Bella had shown when she slept; curled up only inches away from the most dangerous predator she might ever meet. Her gentleness when I confessed the truth about Alice's abduction, and the way she had comforted me with patience and respect.

My mind lingered longest on the moments that Bella and I had actually touched one another, small gestures charged with intense intimacy. Bella's hand on my arm, warm and centering, while I told her about Alice. Her visceral reaction to the photo of James Chase, and the way she had allowed me to support and comfort her. Her hand in mine, pressing her hot fingers into my cool skin, and seemingly without fear or disdain. Bella seemed not only to tolerate my touch, but also to quietly welcome it.

As the hours and miles of the trip had passed, I recognized softness in her eyes that made me wonder what she was thinking when she watched me. I began to wonder if, somehow, she felt something more than friendship for me.

I was more than a little surprised when Bella claimed she was not interested in the Quileute boy, Jake, or in any of the boys she saw every day. Given her history, I understood her reticence to become involved. But it was still difficult to believe that some young human had not managed to turn her head before now.

While she seemed remote and sometimes even cold, Bella was anything but beneath the surface. She was strong-willed, and capable of intense loyalty toward those she loved. And when Bella held my hand, I imagined that there was something between us. That the strange spark I had felt from our very first meeting was changing, and growing stronger and brighter.

_Could a human girl feel anything for a creature like me, or see me as more than a ghoulish mercenary? Was I more than a means to an end for Bella? She needed my help, certainly. But perhaps she needed more from me than my help. Perhaps she wanted more._

Before I quite realized what I was doing, my phone was in my hand, and I was exchanging text messages with Bella. My fingers seemed to have a mind of their own, ticking over the screen and forming unbearably earnest messages that made me roll my eyes at myself. I threw the phone down
in disgust after a few minutes, relieved and stung when her replies stopped. If it had been possible, I would have kicked my own ass. Hard.

I had made up my mind to call Esme to distract myself when I caught the familiar voices and thoughts of my siblings in the lobby of the hotel. My sigh of relief was loud as I listened to them check in and use the elevator to travel to the other end of the floor to leave their bags. Glancing at the nightstand clock, I grimaced to see that my brooding had locked me in same spot for four hours. When a low knock sounded on my door a few minutes later, I had it open in a flash.

"You look worse than you did before you left," Rosalie said in lieu of a greeting. She walked past me toward the sitting area, a frown marring her lovely face when she turned to face me. "What the hell have you been doing with yourself, Edward?"

"He's been watching porn, obviously," Emmett put in as he walked toward the glass door leading to the balcony. He peered out at the night as he continued. "Not much else to do in a hotel, right, E?"

I rolled my eyes at him and closed the door behind a chuckling Jasper. "Nice to see you too, Rose. It's always a pleasure to be on the receiving end of one of your total ego smackdowns."

"Oh, there is no tolerance for whining, my dear brother," Rosalie scolded lightly. "Not after we drove all this way. Who else would keep you company while you're stuck inside a hotel all day and the sun is shining on this godforsaken city?"

"We won't be stuck inside a hotel all day," I said dryly. "We'll be stuck inside a car all day, in a different godforsaken city."

"Okay, you two," Jasper said with a smile, holding his hands up to placate us both. "You're both pretty. You're both popular. And if you behave yourselves, I'm almost sure Emmett will ask one of you to the prom."

"Forget it," Emmett deadpanned. "These two drama queens can go with each other for all I care. I'm going stag."

Rosalie sat on the couch a snort, but her grin faded as she turned her eyes on me once again. "You can try to blow me off, Edward, but it's as clear as day to anyone that knows you. This thing with the Swan girl is taking a toll on you. How are you holding up?"

I nodded and leaned against the door before closing my eyes. "It's manageable."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Rosalie asked impatiently. "Is the urge under control, or are we going to have to keep you under lock and key for the remainder of this misadventure?"

"It's tolerable, Rose," I replied thinly. "I have it under control. I'm actually most in control when I'm with Bella. Being close to her helps quite a lot. It's the time I have to spend away from her that has become a problem."

I opened my eyes to find three bright gazes fixed on me with not a little concern. In Jasper's eyes, I also saw understanding.

"It's worse now that you were in the car with her for half the day," he stated quietly. He was certain enough of my answer leave out asking what he already understood.

"Yes. Much worse." I walked toward the seating area and took my place on the couch beside Rosalie. "At this point, being in close proximity to Bella is difficult only for a few minutes, especially if there's plenty of fresh air. It's as if a switch inside me flips and it just becomes... easy. The urge is
there, but it's steady... almost like a silent companion. When she's gone, it turns on me and I have to fight so hard to get myself under control."

Leaning forward, I propped my elbows on my knees and rubbed the back of my neck with my left hand. "Despite feeling like a detoxing junkie, it's probably for the best that I'll be unable to Bella her for the next few days. Maybe the distance will help me get my head sorted out. Help me from going out right now doing something incredibly stupid."

Emmett sat next to Rose and raised his eyebrows at me. "I'm surprised you're even here and not at the girl's house. I'm sure there's a tree outside her window that you could use for creeper purposes."

"Believe me, it crossed my mind. And yes, I know that's weird, even for me." I shrugged at my brother's knowing huff.

"Besides, I wasn't talking about Bella. I meant that I'd be disposing of James Chase right now." My sibling's grim expressions did not escape me.

Jasper's eyes were so calm when my gaze met his, reminding me that he had killed many humans in the past and was, in fact, an extremely efficient assassin. "What's stopping you from doing that, Edward? You've said you want to protect the girl from committing any crimes; eliminating Chase yourself would certainly take care of that."

"I've thought of that too," I admitted. "And you're right, that would kill two birds with one stone. But, Jas, all I'd be doing would be taking Bella's choice away from her, yet again. Just as Chase did when he molested her, just as Bella's mom did when she didn't hear the words her daughter was saying. I'd be guilty of stealing her control as anyone else in her life, and I don't want to do that."

Jasper's voice was low and his eyes flashed with disappointment for a fleeting second. "So you're really going to kill that guy? You're going to go against everything that Carlisle believes in and has tried to teach us just because a human girl tells you that's what she wants?"

I winced at Jasper's words and at the thought of our father's disappointment. Carlisle and I had spent a long time talking during the dark hours before I had left Port Angeles this morning to meet Bella. His patience and kindness had humbled me since the day we had met, but that night I felt myself crumbling with grief, knowing how thoroughly I was disregarding his wishes.

"No," I said quietly, my eyes on the floor. "Bella wants to see Chase with her own eyes. Perhaps it's because she wants to confront him, to call him what we all know he is. I'll help her do that; I think she deserves that... closure, for lack of a better word."

I looked up then, and stared in turn at each of the faces before me. "After she has a chance to do that, I want to turn Chase in to the police. Without hurting him. I'll still be taking the control from Bella, but this way, he'll be unable to hurt anyone and Bella will be safe. She'll be safe from Chase and from the police."

"What do you think the police can charge Chase with, Edward?" Rosalie's expression was skeptical but curious.

"My guess is that Bella is not the only child Chase has hurt over the years," I said. "And, if he is like most of his kind, there will be some kind of record of his predilection. Maybe there's something on his computer, or even some things from the children that he might have kept."

Rosalie's face grew stony with rage as my brothers hissed with revulsion. I nodded, my lips pressed together in a hard line.
"All I need to do is ask him the right questions," I said. "It doesn't matter what his answers are, because I'll hear the truth in his thoughts. And whatever he has is what I'll take to the police."

"How can we help?" Emmett asked in a surprisingly gentle tone.

"I need you to keep me from losing control when I confront him," I replied, filled with gratitude for my siblings' unwavering support. "If one of you could confine him, then the other two could just stand by to make sure I don't... rip his throat out with my bare hands. I need you to make sure I don't kill him. God knows how much I want to."

The others exchanged quick glances, nodding in agreement and Jasper spoke for them all. "Of course we'll help you. We told you before you left Forks that we would stand behind you, Edward."

"Thank you," I murmured, leaning into Rosalie when she slid closer and curled her arms around my waist.

"Don't be an idiot," she said gently, her lips curling in a smile when I raised my eyebrows at her. "You'd do the same for any of us. If any of us had the misfortune to fall in love with a human hungering for vengeance, anyway."

I chuckled and shook my head as I put my arm around her shoulders, though I felt the weight of her words keenly. They were all taking a risk being here with me, and I knew it.

"You should call Carlisle and Esme," Rosalie continued, giving my side a little squeeze as she spoke. "They're worried about you. And they'll be happy to hear this new plan of yours."

Horrified at the lump growing in my throat, I nodded and gave my sister a squeeze in return before standing to retrieve my phone from the bed. By the time I reached the balcony door, Emmett and Rosalie were arguing about renting porn while Jasper looked on in amusement. I found myself smiling as I stepped out to call my parents.

aDc

As my sister had predicted, Monday was a perfect, cloudless day, pouring relentless golden light over the city. Rosalie and Emmett returned to their room with promises to meet us in the evening, while Jasper and I donned long sleeves and baseball caps and headed out.

Jasper was quiet as we descended into the hotel's parking structure to retrieve my car, and I knew he was running the information I had given him on James Chase through his head. My brother had a natural talent for planning and strategy, skills enhanced during the time he had spent in the army as a young man. He was already a Major in the army by the time he lost his human life shortly before shipping out for active duty in the Great War. Had he not met a hungry vampire in a Times Square back alley, I had no doubt Jasper would have continued climbing through the Army ranks, gaining power and prestige.

The short trip to Vallejo seemed to pass in a flash as I mused on the different strengths of my parents and siblings. Among Carlisle's many strengths were wisdom and extensive medical training, while Esme's abilities for planning and spatial design set her apart. Rosalie had a natural ability for mechanics, and Emmett's constant levity disguised a keen mathematician's mind. Jasper was the strategist, and I was the systems expert, skilled at understanding patterns in data.

Combined, there were few things our strengths could not accomplish. Human behavior, however, continued to confound us in ways we could not predict, though each of us had once walked amongst them. The inconstant and shifting nature of humans made them difficult to understand and intensely
unpredictable. Confronted by someone complicated like Bella Swan, all of our heightened abilities for thought and reflection were of little use.

Even as I spent more time with Bella and gained a better idea of who she was, I had only limited insight into what motivated her to act. I understood even less of where her deeper passions lay. I knew I could simply ask her, but I had no idea if she would be honest with me or continue hiding versions of the truth. I sighed to think again how much more straightforward things would be if I could hear her thoughts.

I shook off those thoughts as I pulled onto 34th Street in time to see James Chase walking through the doors of the garage where he worked as a mechanic. Driving two blocks down the street, I parked in the shadow thrown by an apartment building. The shade would be fairly deep throughout the day, but I was grateful for the car's heavily tinted windows. This was especially true after having spent the long and sometimes bright ride in Bella's borrowed car only the day before.

Jasper fixed his eyes on the garage's entrance. "Is there anything we're watching for in particular?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I mostly want to get an idea of where he is and what he does during the day. The more I know about his behavior, the safer it will be to let Bella near him, if that's what she chooses to do."

Jasper's eyes slid toward me and I saw the amusement in them though his face remained impassive.

"Okay, studying him may not make him any safer to be around. But I'm going with that theory," I said, nodding when he let the smile move to his mouth. "I don't expect too much in the way of surprises while Chase is here at work. That may change when he goes home."

"He lives alone, I take it?"

"From what I could tell, yes. But I won't know for sure until we see for ourselves."

We watched as customers came and went from the garage. Chase showed himself on occasion, handing over keys to customers by the door, and filling out paperwork. He and his coworkers emerged from the garage to buy tacos from a food truck that stopped across the street. Each time I saw him, the rage flashed over me like a fever, settling a low growl deep in my chest and wetting my mouth with venom.

"Can I ask you something?"

I cut my eyes toward Jasper, frowning when I saw his serious expression. "Of course you can."

"If everything goes the way you expect it to, James Chase will be out of the way by the end of the week."

"Okay. What's your point?"

Jasper let a long breath out through his nose before he replied. "Where do you see this thing with the Swan girl going, Edward? Will this... thing you have with her go anywhere once you'd taken care of her problem?"

I looked away as I tried to decide how to answer. My voice was low when I spoke again. "I'm almost sure this thing, as you call it, will end as soon as Bella discovers that James Chase has been taken into custody."

"And why would you think that?"
"It is Bella's wish that James Chase be killed, rather than incarcerated. She feels that it is the punishment to fit the crime. When she understands that I have gone against her wishes, that I have betrayed her trust..." I trailed off weakly.

"She'll be angry, of course. But you don't think she'll forgive you?"

I felt Jasper's eyes on the side of my face, but kept my gaze focused on my hands as they rested in my lap. "I'm almost sure she won't."

"Then why are you going forward this, Edward? If you think you'll lose her-
"

I cut in gently. "She deserves to be safe, Jas, and happy. Once Chase is out of the way, she'll be able to work on that. And some day, she'll be happy again."

I looked at my brother finally and managed a small smile. "That's all I want for her."

Jasper and I followed Chase from the garage to his home that evening, parking a block and a half from his address and behind Rosalie's midnight blue sports car. Moving quickly through the dimming light, we slid into her back seat, closing the doors as Emmett turned and flashed us a grim look.

"What is it?" Jasper asked, just as my phone chimed.

I pulled it from my pocket and saw Bella's name flash across the screen. 

_Bella – Hey, I've been in shopping hell all day. What have you been doing with yourself?_

My fingers moved rapidly over the keys. _Sounds like fun, I think? Been in Vallejo all day._

_Bella – How is that going? Have you seen him?_

I replied quickly. _He's been around. Jas and Em are here with Rose._

_Bella – Glad they made it okay. I'm in for another day like this tomorrow, free Wednesday._

I nodded, and was pleased to know it would be another day before Bella had to be near James Chase. _You can come with me that day, if that's still what you want._

_Bella – It is. Will you text me again before Wednesday?_

A smile worked its way across my face without my permission. _Of course. Call me, too, if you want._

_Bella – kk. Goodnight._

_Goodnight, Bella._ I ran my finger over the screen slowly, looking at our conversation.

Emmett cleared his throat, startling me out of my reverie. "Edward, we have a bit of a problem here."

I pocketed my phone at once. "What's the matter? Isn't Chase in there?"

"Oh, he's in there all right," Rosalie spoke and I met her furious eyes in the rear view mirror. "But he's got company."

Immediately, I pricked my ears and opened my mind to hear the last thing I hoped for coming out of James Chase's house. Mixing with his voice were the soft tones of a woman's voice, and the high,
sweet voice of child.

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh… who the heck is in that house?

We know many of you are worried about Ali_pixy. Edward, of course, does not know Ali_pixy, so he can't help us. The next couple of chapters will be split between Bella and Edward, however, and we hope to catch up with Ali_pixy very soon.

Thank you so much for reading. The next chapter will be split between Bella and Edward.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07 and karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Break the skin ’cause I can't tell
Where your body ends and mine begins.
Tear the flesh, I woke today feeling
Like some kind of masochist.
Oh I go off like a gun.
"Bang"- Armchair Cynic

"Did we really need to get so much stuff, Mom?"

My arms felt like they were about to fall off as I unceremoniously dropped the bags of new blouses, skirts, shoes, and accessories onto the guestroom bed.

Renee ambled in, carrying her own Nordstrom bag. "Yes, we did, Bella," she chided. "Now your classmates will see you as a trendy young lady with a mother who cares about her daughter's appearance and well-being."

"Uh-huh," I replied dubiously, lifting a snakeskin wallet from one of the bags. "And what impression does this overpriced item make in a tiny town like Forks where nobody cares what you're wearing because everyone dresses the same?"

Renee put her hands on her hips, looking exasperated. "The impression it makes is that you're not just a small town hick like all those other people."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Forks isn't that bad, Mom."

aDc

Later that afternoon, Phil set up a barbeque pit in the backyard. Renee was bringing out the meat and corn, so I took a break and logged into my email on Renee's laptop in the living room.

I'd received messages from Jacob and Ali_pixy. It made me happy to hear from Ali_pixy again, but some loose ends in her meningitis story disturbed me. I decided to reply to her message first.

From: Bells_forever
To: Ali_pixy

Glad you're feeling better. Are you going back to the group home or have they found you a new placement?
I moved on to Jacob's message.

From: JakeB21
To: Bells_forever

Hey, Bells. Hope you're alright at your mom's house. Just wanted to let you know that my dad noticed his gun is missing. If you need help, please call me, okay? Hugs.

I bit my lip and closed the laptop. The backyard door swung open, sending in a wave of warm air and the scent of charcoal. I turned slowly and saw Renee carrying an empty plastic tub and dishrag.

"Sweetie, everything all right?" She asked, looking at me curiously. I realized that I'd been stuck in a sort of trance since reading Jake's message. I cleared my throat and rose from the couch.

"Yeah, um, do you need any help?" I followed Renee into the kitchen.

"Oh, no. Phil's got everything under control," she replied as she dumped the tub in the sink and then fanned herself with the dishrag. "It's so hot today!"

"Yeah," I agreed, leaning against the sink. "I'm not used to this weather. It feels weird."

Renee suddenly turned to me with a concerned look in her eyes. "Bella, your father called me before you left Forks and told me he thought that something was bothering you."

"Nothing's bothering me," I said immediately, and wondered what Charlie had seen in my behavior to cause him to alert Renee.

"Are you sure?" Renee persisted, sweeping a strand of hair away from my face. "I know you say that Forks isn't so bad and I think it's great that you're helping Charlie out, but I'm just still confused about why you moved there instead of staying here with me and Phil."

"Oh, Mom..." I swallowed the lump in my throat at her wounded expression. "It's not that I didn't want to stay with you-"

"I know, sweetie," Renee interrupted. "It's just that I wonder if I did something-"

"No, Mom." I sighed and took her hands in mine. "You're amazing and supportive, even when you don't understand why I do things. That's more than enough. It's all I really need from you; knowing that you care."

Renee's clear blue eyes softened at my words and I hoped they were enough to reassure her. The last thing I wanted was for her to feel guilty.

"Okay, sweetheart," Renee, whispered, folding her arms around me.

When Ali_pixy replied, she claimed that her meningitis had been caught early and was viral, but it had frightened the people at the group home. To avoid infecting the others, she had stayed at the hospital for several days. I tried to show my relief at her recovery in my messages, despite secretly wondering if her words were true.
From: Bells_forever  
To: Ali_pixy

You really scared me! Thank goodness, you got treatment early and it wasn't bacterial. That's the deadliest, you know? Were you vaccinated?

From: Ali_pixy  
To: Bells_forever

Yes, I got a couple of vaccinations. The weird part is that I thought I'd already had those shots when I was a kid, before my parents died. Everyone was freaked out here. The group home lady wouldn't let anyone come into my room until she got an okay from the doctor. Now she's talking about finding me a placement in Blue Mountain. The woman and her husband are supposed to come up next week for an interview. I don't know how I feel about it.

I decided to ask Ali_pixy more about her brother.

From: Bell_forever  
To: Ali_pixy

Have you tried to find your brother, Edward? Maybe you could look him up online.

The reply I got was entirely too brief for my liking.

From: Ali_pixy  
To: Bells_forever

It's harder than it looks, especially when I don't know the name of the first group home we stayed in after our parents died. Social workers won't tell me anything. He could even be out of the system by now. Edward is a year older than I am.

I thought about pursuing the subject, prodding her to begin the search with her brother's full name and birthday, though she'd never told me either one, rather than through the foster care system. Then I decided to take an easier route.

From: Bells_forever  
To: Ali_pixy

What does he look like?

From: Ali_pixy  
To: Bells_forever

Edward was always tall and he could be even taller now. His hair is brown and was always messy, but in a cute way. He has green eyes like our mother. I look more like Dad with black hair and dark eyes. Why?

I sat back against the couch, propping Renee's laptop on my stomach, and chewing on my bottom lip. Though she hadn't given many details, I considered the slight similarities in the Edward she was describing and the one I knew: messy hair, tall. Green eyes weren't much to go on. I struggled to recall if Edward had mentioned what color his eyes were before he was changed. I didn't think he had, so I just sent Ali_pixy a quick reply before logging off.

From: Bells_forever  
To: Ali_pixy
Just curious... we never talked about what we look like.

On Wednesday, Renee left early for work. She taught kindergarten at the Park Vista elementary school. I had told her the night before that I planned to visit a bookstore or two and maybe swim at the public pool. Instead, I was meeting Edward at his hotel for lunch before driving to Vallejo. My stomach twisted in knots every time I thought about the trip and I had to choke down an apple for breakfast.

My mind was racing as I drove to the hotel but I did my best to appear composed when I finally pulled into the crowded lot. I swept a hand through my hair, not knowing if I was entirely ready. It was easier to just turn around, go back to Renee's, and convince myself that it wouldn't make a difference. At the end of the day, I would still be broken. The difference between giving up now and going through with it was that at least I would have a chance at what I considered true justice. It wouldn't undo the past but it might salvage someone else's future.

My eyes flickered to the rearview mirror and for a split second, I saw the innocent little girl I used to be. If not for me, I'd do it for her.

I knocked once on Edward's hotel room door and adjusted the bow on the front of my blouse, knowing his siblings would be with him. I had no idea how to act around them and new it would be uncomfortable for everyone. I knew their secret and they resented me for putting Edward in danger of exposure. The best I could was to maintain a blank expression as the door opened to reveal Edward in a spotless white shirt. Hovering in the background were three figures that I had to assume were Emmett, Jasper, and Rosalie.

"Bella," Edward greeted me shortly, seeming just as hesitant as I felt.

"Hi," I said, gripping the handle of my purse and trying not to let my eyes linger on the outline of his body visible through the t-shirt. Noticing things like that didn't help my nerves any.

"Come in," Edward said politely, holding the door open. Behind him, the gorgeous blonde female was staring at me with disdain brimming in her eyes. I wanted to turn around and run, but knew that would be rude. "Okay," I murmured and stepped into the room.

A smothering silence fell around us after Edward shut the door and I heard myself swallow loudly. One of Edward's brothers was built like a wrestler with thick, muscled arms and short brown hair. The other was tall and lean, and with blonde hair like the female. All of them shared Edward's unusual, light gold eye color.

I looked quickly at the white faces around me, desperate for something to say. And then Edward sighed softly, and rubbed his hands over his face.

"These are my brothers, Emmett and Jasper, and my sister Rosalie." Edward looked strangely tired, and he kept his eyes on the floor as he spoke. "Guys, this is Isabella Swan."

I nodded and mumbled a hello, while the three vampires returned the greeting quietly, their faces and posture polite and rather stiff.

"Would you guys excuse us?" Edward lifted his eyes finally, looking at his siblings as he stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Right," Emmett said and wrapped his arm loosely around Rosalie's shoulders. "We'll just be down the hall."
Rosalie gave me a piercing glance as Emmett led her out of the room, with Jasper following close behind them. Edward shut the door after they'd gone but I still didn't know quite what to say.

My eyes wandered over the room, taking in the huge bed and the seating area near the window. "Almost like déjà vu," I mumbled to myself, remembering the dream I'd had the night before the La Push party. I felt a hot blush creep over my face at the memory.

"Bella?" Edward's voice snapped me back into focus. The look on his face surprised me, though. His hazel eyes were troubled, even pained.

"What is it?" I inquired, taking a step towards him.

"I found out something about James Chase," Edward said in a careful tone. He waved toward the chairs near the window. "Let's sit down."

I slowly sank into one, keeping my gaze on his reluctant expression the whole time.

Edward sat on the couch across from me, and folded his hands in his lap. "I went to Chase's house Monday night with my brothers and Rosalie. We heard other people there; a woman and a little girl."

My throat tightened at Edward's grim expression.

"Chase was having dinner with his girlfriend and her daughter."

I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure if I could say anything. My lips felt sewn shut, and my mouth went dry as my stomach churned with dread.

"We stayed a little after the woman and her daughter had left, until Chase had gone to bed. He hasn't touched the girl yet, that much I could get from both of them. But he's thinking about it."

Edward raised his eyes to my face but I still couldn't move a muscle. "Bella?"

"Huh?"

"Do you know what this means?" Edward leaned forward, his gaze holding mine. "We have to be smart about confronting Chase, and make sure he's alone."

His words snapped me out of my trance and I fought to keep my voice from shaking. "Then we'll wait until nighttime when he's alone in the house. Maybe you could ask Rosalie to find out where his girlfriend lives and makes sure she stays home safe while we go to his house."

Edward nodded, thoughtfully. "Yeah, good idea. I'll still have Emmett and Jasper around in case-"

He broke off, seeming uncomfortable suddenly, and leaned back in his seat. I rubbed the back of my neck with one hand, trying to disguise the fact that I knew exactly what he was about to say, and the awkwardness of that knowledge.

I finally rose to stand on stiff legs. "Can we go?"

We took Edward's car to Vallejo, shortening the trip, particularly because he already knew his way around. I watched him as he drove, and lost myself for a few moments admiring his inhuman beauty. Especially his lips...

I turned my head when he caught me staring.
Vallejo was a typical town like the others we'd passed since arriving in California: dry and sunny, with some small businesses and chain link fences surrounding suburban homes. It felt surreal, driving through such a normal-looking place. In my imagination, Jimmy's residence was something out of a horror film: a thorny swamp or fairy tale dungeon. It was ridiculous, but I had always associated my attacker with nightmare scenarios.

"Do you think he's home right now?" I asked, absentmindedly peering out the passenger window.

"He should be on his lunch break. He usually stays at the repair shop but I overheard him say he was going home to pick up some tools." Edward abruptly turned left.

I glanced at Edward, quizzically. "When did you hear this?"

"When we went by the repair shop a moment ago. Someone ordered a part that wasn't in stock. Chase said he would check if he had it at home and bring it in today."

"Oh..."

Edward parallel parked alongside the curb and nodded toward a white one-story house with, located about a block down the street. "That's where he lives."

My eyes fixed on the unassuming structure and the black Ford truck in the driveway while we waited for someone to come out. About ten minutes later the front door swung open and a man with sand-colored hair stepped onto the porch, dressed simply in a gray t-shirt and torn jeans. He carried a toolbox in one hand and walked briskly towards the driver's side door of the truck.

Jimmy.

"Whatcha got there?" He asked, peering at the binder I clutched tightly against my chest.

"Just homework," I mumbled, wishing that it were Renee instead of Jimmy sitting in the car with me. But she'd had to run a late errand so he came to pick me up from school.

I was mad at Renee. I hated sitting in Jimmy's truck. The seats were too hard and the windows were too high, so I had to crane my head to see the trees and stuff outside. The truck felt too stuffy and confining, and especially so when Jimmy swept his hand through my hair. His fingers grazed against my neck, and slipped inside the collar of my dress.

"Bella!"

I felt a tug on my arm and realized it was Edward. My hands were clenched against the seat, my nails digging into the upholstery.

"Bella, are you all right? Look at me!"

I realized that I was hyperventilating and forced myself to take a slow, shaky breath.

"I'm okay..." I whispered. I pulled my hands back and flexed my fingers, wincing when they ached dully. When I looked back at Jimmy's house, the black truck was gone.

"I'm sorry," I said, glancing at Edward's bewildered expression. "I just... remembered something."

Edward started the car and drove until he found a shaded spot behind a convenience store. He turned off the ignition and we sat staring at the faded wall of the store in silence.

My breathing was steadier by then and I leaned my head back against the seat. "It's been so long..." I
murmured quietly, staring straight ahead without really seeing anything. "I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd freak out."

"No, don't worry about it," Edward replied in a soothing tone. "It's not your fault, Bella. None of this is. You do know that, don't you?"

I laughed humorlessly. "What difference does it make?"

"It makes a world of difference! You can't blame yourself for what that sick son of a bitch did to you. It wasn't your fault."

"But your siblings blame me for making you come here with me," I said bitterly, raising one eyebrow, daring him to deny it. "Rosalie? I can tell she loathes me. And I don't blame her."

Edward looked unhappy but determined. "She just doesn't want me to get hurt. She's really protective of our family... and a bit stubborn too." He cracked a little smile.

I sighed, raking a hand through my hair. "So what are we going to do?"

Edward scrutinized my face for a long moment. "You still want to confront Chase?"

I gave a stiff nod.

"Bella, that might not be the safest thing to do-" Edward began, pausing when I gave him a piercing glare.

Is he serious?

"But you'll be there," I stated evenly.

"Fine," he said. "But you're not going to be anywhere near his house when it's time to put him away."

"What?" I gasped, seeing a strange gleam flare in Edward's eyes.

"You heard me. I want you to get in your car and drive back to Renee's the second you finish confronting him."

My fingers twitched before my hands curled into fists. I barely registered the rest of his words over the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

"I won't be in control of my actions when it's time to kill Jimmy, Bella. I need you to be as far away from me as possible."

"To hell with that!" I heard myself saying loudly, ignoring the quiver in my voice. "How do I know you won't just take him to the cops?"

Edward's expression was like a thundercloud but it didn't lessen my rage. "I gave you my word-"

"I'm not stupid, Edward!" I snapped, already feeling betrayed.

Edward stuck a hand in his hair in frustration. "Don't you have any self-preservation instincts? Is that bastard more important to you than your own life, Bella?"

His tone was so harsh I almost turned away. But I knew it would have been a sign of weakness, and I knew that was what Edward wanted: to be proven right. I am going to prove him wrong until the
"You already know my answer to that, Edward."

He scoffed angrily. "It doesn't matter. I'll have Emmett or Jasper carry you out if it comes to that."

My cheeks burned at his threat. "The hell you are!"

"That's right," Edward shot back, leaning across the seat to glare at me. "Because I'll do anything to keep you safe, even if it means you'll hate me afterwards."

I shook my head slowly, fighting back the angry tears that threatened to spill from my eyes. "That's not fair. I have to make sure Jimmy dies. If not for me, then for his girlfriend's daughter. Or for every other little girl out there who has suffered through the same thing."

The fire in Edward's golden eyes dimmed slightly. "Bella."

I continued in a rush. "And if you turn him into the police, he will get out of jail in a few years and molest another kid. Then it's going to be your fault!" I bit back a sob and muttered under my breath, "and it'll be my fault too."

Something cold and gentle brushed against my jaw. I resisted the urge to lean into his hand.

"I won't let that happen," Edward replied in a more subdued tone. "I wish you'd trust me, Bella. But even if you won't, I'll still take care of this for you."

I shook my head disbelievingly. "Why would you do that, Edward?" I hated the way Edward's hand on my cheek seemed to incinerate a desire to be normal inside my chest.

"Why wouldn't I?" Edward asked gently. "I hate seeing how Jimmy hurts you, even now. I told you before that I like you and I meant it, Bella. I want to make you feel safe again, as ridiculous as that may sound."

I bowed my head. "What's ridiculous is you saying that you like me."

Edward pulled his hand away from my face and sighed in exasperation. "Well, it's not ridiculous! Why don't you believe me? Why would I even be here, agreeing to this, if I didn't feel something for you? You have been my top priority since we met, Bella, in spite of what my family thinks, which is that I'm insane for going to such lengths to protect you, even risking exposure."

"Are you trying to make me feel guilty?" I demanded, raising my eyes to meet his again. "No need. I already do, but it still doesn't change anything."

"I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. I'm trying to make you care at least a little bit about your own safety."

I shook my head, feeling exasperated as well. I leaned my head back against the seat and stared up at the car's ceiling. "Edward, I really don't care if you understand my reasons for doing this or not. But you still don't have the right to tell me what to do. If you don't want to risk exposure, then let me deal with this my way. You've already helped me enough."

"Christ! You get more irrational every minute!" I turned my head to see Edward slumping back in his seat, a scowl marring his handsome features.

"It's not irrational, it's my business," I said with a frown.
"Then you shouldn't have dragged me into it!"

My cheeks burned and I almost screamed. "Well, now you don't have to stay anymore!"

"It's too late for that now, Bella," Edward shot back. "Either you agree to do this my way, and keep yourself miles away from any blood that gets spilled, or we go alert the cops right this second."

"You can't be serious-"

"No pun intended, but I'm dead serious."

I didn't know whether to laugh or yell or cry, and bit down on my lip to keep from doing all three. Edward started car with a roar and backed out of the parking space shade in the direction of the street.

"Why go to so much trouble for someone you just met?" I muttered resentfully, crossing my arms over my chest. I was starting to regret ever asking him for help. Despite my own lack of confidence, I started to wonder if I could have found James Chase on my own months ago, and saved myself from all of the arguing and humiliation.

"I told you before; I care about you," Edward answered in a hard voice.

"So you keep saying," I scoffed. "And that's all sweet and noble, right? You get to play the strong protector for a defenseless little human girl, but you won't want to stick around when you find out just how messed up I really am."

"That's ridiculous, Bella."

"No!" There was acid in my voice. "What's ridiculous is you acting like you care about me than is really necessary. Do you want to know why I'm not afraid of you? It's because I know what real fear is, Edward. I feel it even after all these years. The nightmares are just the frosting on a cake. That's only what's on the outside. And pretty soon you won't have to deal with my abnormally emotional crap, so don't pretend like you care now."

My body was zinging with adrenalin. I glanced out the window as a means of calming myself.

After a beat of awkward silence, Edward said quietly, "If you mean that you don't like being touched, Bella, I respect that."

"Really?" I challenged without glancing away from the window and the passing houses. "For how long? Why should you be stuck with someone who won't let you get close physically? Why would you settle for that kind of disappointment when you deserve better?"

I wasn't embarrassed by the words coming out of my mouth. In just a few seconds, it had become obvious that Edward knew I had feelings for him... romantic ones. I just couldn't understand why he claimed he felt the same.

Edward didn't respond and we left Vallejo in silence.

We arrived back at the hotel, both of us still unable or unwilling to break the ice. My chest tightened as Edward pulled up alongside the Rabbit and turned off the ignition. For a moment, he just sat there, silently staring out into nothing.
"We're not that different," he said at last in an emotionless tone. "I don't have anything to offer, just as you don't think you do."

"But why would you think that about yourself?" I couldn't help asking, my confusion obvious. "Have you looked in a mirror? You're strong and intelligent, and cultured. You're a gentleman, which is practically unheard of these days. I'm sure there's some female vampire out there who would jump at the chance to be your mate."

"And what if I don't want some female vampire?" Edward shot back, sweeping his eyes over me in a way that made my breath hitch. "What if I've already found who I want to be with? A shy but secretly stubborn small town human girl with the prettiest brown eyes I've ever seen?"

My breathing almost stopped altogether when he lifted a hand to brush it against my jaw line.

"What do you say to that?" he demanded irritably.

I turned my head away and quickly pushed the passenger door open. "I'd say you're toying with me."

I let myself into Jake's car and turned the key in the ignition, backing out and rapidly driving away from Edward. I didn't look in the rear view mirror once.

An hour later, I found myself sitting on a bench in a playground in Renee's neighborhood. School was in session, so there weren't many kids around. The few kids playing on the swings and jungle gyms were still toddlers and preschoolers with nannies watching from a few feet away. I watched two little blonde boys who looked like twins fight over a soccer ball, and a girl with freckles and glossy red hair sail down a blue slide.

Renee would be at work until four o'clock, but I didn't know what else to do. I kept thinking about the little girl Edward had at Jimmy's house the other night. I wondered if she was like any of the girls at the playground. Did she have green eyes like the girl playing in the sand pit or raven black braids like the toddler pulling on her nanny's hand? I wondered if she would grow up to be anything like me.

That thought bothered me the most. I didn't wish my feelings of self-hatred and shame on anyone except the one person who really deserved them... the man who was going about his day, not caring that he had destroyed my life.

"Umm... hi."

The hesitant greeting came from the girl with red hair and freckles. She was standing awkwardly about a foot away from me, twisting both arms behind her back.

"Hi," I said quietly.

"My nanny's busy right now so can you push me on the swings, please?" she asked in an adorably unsure voice.

I mustered a smile and rose to my feet. "No problem."

I followed her to the swings. She pointed at an irritated-looking woman trying to keep the blonde boys at an arm's length from each other as they continued arguing loudly.

"That's my nanny, Jessica," the girl explained.
I nodded. "She looks... busy."

The girl plopped down on one of the swings. "And those are my brothers, Alec and David. They're so annoying!" She rolled her eyes and I smiled, giving the swing a little shove.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Nope. Just me."

"Lucky. What's your name?"

"Bella. What's yours?"

"Megan. You can push harder, Bella. I want to go really high!"

I did as Megan requested and gave the swing a harder shove, sending it soaring higher and making her squeal with glee.

Then she wanted to see if I could go just as high, so I joined her and next thing I knew, we were competing for who could go over the swing's posts. Megan's nanny called to her when we were rocking lazily back and forth after reaching our limits.

"Are your knees tingly?" she asked, standing up shakily.

"Yeah, a little bit," I replied, gripping the swing's chains for support.

"That was really fun," Megan said, sweeping her hair back and wiping the sweat from her forehead.

I thought it the perfect time to tell her, "I like your hair. It's a beautiful color."

Her light brown eyes widened a bit. "Really? My brothers call me carrot-top. Thanks, Bella!"

She gave a little wave before scampering towards her nanny and younger brothers. I watched them walk away before turning back in the direction of the Rabbit.

aDc

As I stood in the hallway of the hotel, I hoped desperately that Edward was alone. The last thing I wanted was for any of his siblings, especially Rosalie, to see the tears brimming in my eyes. I had checked my appearance in the car's mirror about ten times since pulling into the hotel parking lot and my nose was still red from crying. It was embarrassing but somehow I felt I could keep it together if Edward was by himself in the room.

Sucking in a breath, I knocked on the door. It confused me when it didn't open right away. Edward and the others would have heard my footsteps down the hall and smelled my scent. I wondered nervously if Edward had gone out for some reason. But the door cracked open and he was staring at me with a mixture of confusion, and what I hoped was forgiveness.

I really had behaved badly. I could've worded things so differently.

And it occurred to me that I should be saying these things aloud instead of just thinking them. I cleared my throat. "Can I come in? Are your siblings here?"

Edward blinked and held the door open wider. "Sure, come in. They're not here."

He shut the door behind me and I stood awkwardly near the foot of the bed. The blinds were drawn,
blocking any sunlight from entering the room, and only the lamp on the nightstand was lit.

Edward started to speak but I held up my hand, stopping him. "I came to apologize. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that."

Edward ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up in odd directions. It looked darker in the shadowy room, but I could still see the copper peeking from between brown strands. It reminded me of Megan, the little girl from the park.

"Bella, I shouldn't have lost my temper."

I almost laughed but it didn't feel right. "Are you kidding? You have every right to be furious. You were right; I shouldn't have dragged you into this." I folded my arms tightly around myself. "I was selfish and I didn't think I could do it without your help, no matter who got hurt."

Edward moved away from the door. "I don't want you to feel like I don't understand. I do think you have every right to get back at Chase for what he did. But Bella, if you get hurt, what difference will it make?"

I bit my lip, not wanting to argue again. The difference would be that another child, someone like Megan, wouldn't go through the same thing. But I didn't want to fight with Edward so I mumbled, "I know. I'm sorry. I only said those things because… I think I love you. And I've been afraid to admit it."

I felt my cheeks flush. "I know I'm not worthy but…"

"Bella."

"I wish I was."

A tear escaped the composure I had struggled to keep up since getting out of the car and I rubbed quickly at it with one hand. That was the other reason I wanted to make Chase pay: if he hadn't taken advantage of me, I wouldn't be damaged. I might even have been good enough to deserve Edward's love. It wasn't fair that I had no power to change that.

Edward's shirt was cool against my cheek. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest as a second tear fell from my eyes and a third. I choked back a sob, clutching him with both fists. I felt Edward's lips brush against my hair before he tilted my head back with one hand.

"Say it again." The gold in his eyes shone almost blindingly.

"No." I smiled as more tears trickled down my face. "Make me."

Edward leaned down, so carefully, and grazed his lips against mine. We stood very still for a moment, and then I slid my hands up his chest and into his hair, pulling him closer, telling him it was all right. Edward kissed me harder, his lips pressing against mine almost roughly. But I only wanted to be closer.

"Edward," I gasped when he pulled back. He ducked his head, pressing quick kisses along my throat and I slid my hands down his smooth neck to his shoulders.

Edward pulled back again, peering down at me, still unsure. "Do you want me to stop?" There was nothing flirtatious in his voice - he really wanted to know if I was okay with what he was doing.
I nodded, not knowing how else to respond to the respect I saw reflected so clearly in his eyes. Edward scooped me up, his hands locking firmly around my waist, and sat down on the bed, pulling me into his lap. My fingers gripped his jaw, tracing the sharp outline as our lips met again. Each kiss was a blend of cold and warm, melting pressure, pushes and soft shoves. Edward's hands stayed around my waist but mine roamed the front of his t-shirt, slipping beneath the fabric. His ribs contracted against my fingers and he groaned into my mouth.

Kissing Edward wasn't what I'd come to expect from my late night fantasies. There was so much more to consider, to notice. And I tried, though Edward made it terribly difficult, tracing my lips with his cold tongue, pulling away to lick the hollow beneath my ear and then down the side of my neck with aching slowness. I managed to notice that the skin along his ribs and chest was much smoother than I had imagined, like pure marble.

I gasped when I felt myself jolted backward, but laughed when I realized Edward was twisting around and cradling me in his arms as he laid me on the bedspread. The abruptness would have frightened me if it had been anyone else. But Edward made me feel safe in ways I still didn't understand. I lay there, grinning foolishly, as he trailed kisses across my collarbone, his arms positioned on either side of my frame. My hands moved on their own accord, climbing tentatively up his forearms, and trailing over the muscles leading to his shoulders.

"You're shivering, sweetheart," Edward murmured against the skin above the neckline of my blouse.

"If I am, it's not because I'm cold." I blushed furiously when he chuckled and raised his head to meet my stare. I held his face with one hand, tracing his grin with my fingertips.

"Aren't you naughty?" he teased, his eyes dancing.

I raised an eyebrow in challenge. "I believe you started it."

"Is that so?"

"Ah!" I cried as Edward held me close and rolled onto his back, settling me on top of him.

My skin prickled from my scalp to my knees as I found myself straddling Edward with my legs curled against his hips. He reached up with one hand, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"You're lovely, you know that?" His voice shook a little, which surprised me. "And so warm."

I blushed, feeling that strange tingly sensation spread to my center. It didn't go unnoticed that Edward's body was... hard beneath me.

"Kiss me," I said, needing that distraction, and was all too grateful when he did. A couple of moments later, I lay against his chest, trying to control my breathing as his fingers skimmed lazily up and down my spine.

"I have to go," I whispered.

Edward's fingers reached my hairline and he took his time answering me, combing through the waves gently. "It's still early. Only a little past 3:00."

"No... Renee will be leaving work soon. I need to be there when she gets home."

For a few minutes, neither of us said anything. I pressed my ear against the spot where his heart should have been beating but it was completely silent on the other side.
"You know, it's weird," I murmured. "It doesn't feel like I've done anything worth remembering until now. I don't think I was even living until two months ago, really. I just... existed. Going to school, doing homework, making dinner for Charlie; I was just a ghost, drifting through each day."

Edward's hands became still in my hair. I raised my face to meet his stare. "When you're near, I feel like Alice in Wonderland; just naïve and infatuated by all this craziness."

Edward's brows furrowed with concern. "And you think this craziness is all good?"

I deliberated for a second. "Well, when we're joking around about pointless stuff, for a short moment, I don't feel so freakish and broken."

I bit my lip, not wanting to shed any more tears in front of him, and looked down. But Edward moved to take hold of my face with both hands.

"You don't know what it does to me when you call yourself broken or damaged." Edward's voice was intense, his eyes brilliant. "I want you to stop that right now."

Then his lips were crushing mine, and it hurt but in a strangely good way. His arms folded around my body protectively as he lifted us into a sitting position. I closed my eyes when the room started spinning, but even then, he didn't let go.

aDc

When my phone rang that evening I hurried to answer it, sure it was Edward. But Jacob's name flashed across the small screen and I sighed, relieved and disappointed at the same time.

"Hi, Bella?"

"Hey, Jake. What's up?" I sat down on the bed in Renee's guestroom, tucking my feet underneath me. Renee and Phil had already turned off the light in their room.

Jacob sounded a little uneasy on the other end but I knew him well enough to understand that he was trying to make his voice sound calmer. "I just wanted to know if you got my email."

"Yes, I did," I reassured him automatically. "You don't have to worry, Jake. I've got everything under control."

My duffle bag sat in the corner with the gun and a box of bullets tucked safely inside.

My sister was on a mission to drive me insane. Between Rosalie and Bella, I was ready to throw myself off the roof of the hotel. Fat lot of good that would do.

"Edward, I don't understand how you can stand to be around that girl," my sister ranted as she paced around my hotel room wearing a terrifying scowl. "Not when she makes you feel so badly."

"Jesus, Rosie, give it a rest." Emmett threw me a look of sympathy. "They obviously made up. Besides, Edward can take care of himself. The Swan girl is just a kid. I'm sure she doesn't mean to-"

"Don't give me that 'they're only human' line right now, Em," Rose snapped. "I can't remember a single time Edward has been around that girl and not looked like someone kicked his dog afterward."

"We don't have a dog, Rosie."

"Don't call me Rosie!"
"Don't tell me he didn't look damned happy before you jumped all over him!"

I groaned as their argument escalated and quietly made my way toward the door. I knew from experience that once Rose and Em got going, it could be hours before Em finally gave in; he always did in the end. Hoping they could at least remember to keep their voices down, I went to hunt down Jasper.

aDc

Letting Bella meet my sister in Sacramento had been a mistake, I could see that now. I had hoped that, by meeting her, my siblings would gain some kind of insight into the girl I had promised to help and wanted to protect. But the circumstances around the meeting were all wrong. Worse, I had not considered how Bella and Rose's thorny personalities would clash. They had spent only a few minutes in each other's company, but it was long enough to cement Rosalie's dislike for Bella.

As much as I wanted to tell my sister to keep her opinions about Bella to herself, I couldn't. Rosalie hated seeing anyone in the family sad or upset and wanted only to support me. And deep down, I knew she was right. For all the wonderful highs I experienced when I was with Bella, the lows were darker.

Bella threw me off kilter in a way no one else ever had, and I both hated and loved it. She could send me soaring with a smile or a glance. She just as often sent me sprawling with wounding words that seemed to come to her so easily. Bella told me often enough that James Chase had left her broken. Understanding the reason behind her hardness and turns of mood, however, didn't make them easier to bear.

Meeting my brothers and sister had been awkward for Bella. But learning about the new child in James Chase's life had shaken deeply, and things didn't improve from there. The teasing, playful girl I had seen during the later part of our trip from Washington had disappeared. Instead, Bella's eyes were haunted and shadowed with pain, and I sensed her anger and bitterness just below the surface, waiting to unload on someone.

We sat outside Chase's house in Vallejo, each of us bracing ourselves in our own way to see the man we had been focusing on so intently. The sight of him again after all those years had a devastating effect on Bella. Her face drained of color and the light fled from her eyes, as she seemed to turn inward, drowning in memories and emotion.

It was easy to get Bella away from Chase's house, but there was no helping to her escape herself.

I should have kept my mouth shut, taken Bella home or somewhere quiet where she could process her feelings. But I couldn't. Instead, I pushed her, because I knew that it was time she really listened to me. I was willing to go a long way to help Bella. I was already flirting with the edge of human laws and the line that kept my true identity concealed. In a day or two, I would cross that line even if turned Chase over to the police instead of killing him. In exchange for that, I expected Bella to pay a price. It wasn't the first time I tried to convince Bella to change her mind and walk away from James Chase. She was as unyielding as ever, and determined to look the man in the eye once again before I 'took care of him'. This time, however, I made sure that Bella understood my terms for helping her with Chase, and that she would get no more help from me unless she agreed to them.

Bella's rage exploded, just as I knew it would.

Nothing either of us said felt right, and our words flew like razors. Like a fool, I tried to reason with Bella even as her anger swelled until I thought it would overwhelm us both. All of her self-loathing came roaring out, crashing over us as we sat shouting at each other in my car.
As Bella screamed at me, I realized that she was right: I didn't have to help her anymore. As she felt the need to point out, I had already done my part by helping her find Chase. When it came down to it, there was nothing to hold me in Vallejo except the pull of my body and my foolish desires to be near this girl. I was free to go.

We were on our way out of Vallejo when she spoke again, challenging my feelings for her once more. And my traitorous mouth couldn't help answering her, though a part of me knew it was pointless. All it did was set the stage for the exchange of more hurtful truths and words, even after we made it back to the hotel for Bella's car. I tried to reach past Bella's doubt and cynicism, to reach her, the girl locked inside the hard shell. But Bella pulled her armor tighter than ever and walked away.

A dark voice filled my head, one I hadn't heard from since meeting Bella, when it had told me to take her and make her mine. Today, it urged me to turn away. Leave her, it whispered. She's dangerous for you. You'll find a way to forget her.

For a moment, I understood the truth in those words. Even with the draw of the mating urge, it would be easy to turn my back and walk away. Going back to Washington would mean I was safe, and that my family was out of danger. Leaving Bella to deal with Chase in whatever way she wanted would be nothing but a relief.

I began to believe that dark voice in my head.

aDc

Jasper's door was open and I found him on the balcony, sitting in the shade near the door. It was late enough in the afternoon that his side of the hotel was out of direct sunlight, making it possible for us to go outdoors without having to conceal ourselves so completely.

Jasper gave me an amused glance when I pulled a chair over near his and sat down. "Rose and Em fighting over the Swan girl again?"

"Do they ever stop?" I retorted, making him laugh.

"Well, you have to admit you weren't in a good place when you got back earlier. We could all see it and it's not as if locking yourself in room does much good at that point. What the hell happened between you two, anyway?"

"We argued, which seems to be pretty standard for us," I said with a sigh. "I gave Bella an ultimatum: in exchange for helping her get near Chase, she leaves when I tell her to and goes back to her mother's."

Jasper let go a low whistle. "How'd she take it?"

"About as you'd expect; she would have cheerfully strangled me. We spent a lot of time saying awful things and shouting at one another."

Jasper let out a dry laugh and shook his head when I gave him a look. "I will say, E, that your girl sure knows how to push every button you have."

Jasper's barely concealed innuendo made my lips twitch. My girl. "Jas, you're not forgetting I can hear what you're thinking, are you? Because if by 'button pushing' you're talking about what happened when Bella came to apologize—"

"Now, now, Edward," he said. "I know you were raised to be a gentleman. You'd never push
buttons and tell."

I shook my head as he indulged in a laugh at my expense. "When you're done cracking yourself up, I wondered if you want to go for a ride with me."

"Heading out to Vallejo again?"

"Later on, I think. Right now, I just want to see some trees and run. We can be in the woods before sundown."

I tossed Jasper my car keys and chuckled when his reply was to get to his feet and walk back inside. Jasper loved driving but didn't get much of a chance when he was around Rosalie and me; we shamelessly monopolized the Cullen cars. We sent a text to Emmett and Rosalie as we rode the elevator down, letting them know our plans, and we were quiet until we passed the city limits.

"I take it you feel fairly confident leaving the girl by herself in the evenings," Jasper said as we drove north.

"She should be safe in her mother's house," I replied. "Her mother may have failed to do some things for Bella as a child, but she and her husband seem to take good care of her now. Knowing Bella, she wouldn't want to worry them unnecessarily, as well."

"Of course... now that you've said that I'm tempted to drive past Bella's mother's house to make sure she stays put."

"You could always ask Rose to mess with her car. A dead battery would certainly keep the Bella Swan from getting into trouble."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing when I imagined my sister's gleeful expression at hearing that request. "Whatever you do, Jas, don't give Rose any ideas."

The sun was low in the sky when we left the car at a campground near a reservoir in Little Grass Valley. We wasted no time ducking behind the trees and dashing deeper into the woods. As a human and now as an immortal, I had always lived in urban or suburban areas and loved the energy of city life. Tonight, however, I craved the shelter of woods and mountains. I didn't need to race or outrun anyone. I just needed to drop my guard and, for a few moments at a time, let go.

Jasper and I ran higher, climbing the thickly forested ridges, and raced west through the gathering shadows. The forest was rugged and beautiful, and the stillness of the place soothed me like a balm. For a long time, I heard only the sounds of wildlife and our light, flashing steps brushing over the ground.

It was my body's movements as I ran that prompted me to think about the surprising knock that had sounded on my door a couple of hours before. And then there were the even more shocking words that came from Bella's mouth. An apology. An admission that she had been ignoring the seriousness of my involvement. And a halting, tender declaration of love.

Those words triggered a response in my body that made me nearly drunk with desire. My body pushed me across the room toward her, screaming at me to touch her and comfort her as she wept. Her scent was overwhelming, filling my head and chest, and coating my tongue. She felt amazing in my arms, at last, so warm and soft, and the vibration of her breath beneath her ribs tingled under my fingers. Bella was so alive.

The few scraps of control I had left wavered, and I knew that Bella was in more danger with me in that moment than she had ever been. It would be so easy to lose control. Everything in me wanted to
give in to the desire, to surrender and stop fighting.

It was the sight of Bella's eyes, glistening with tears, that helped me bring myself back under control. She looked at me with such trust. With care. With love.

"Say it again," I almost begged, and hoped she would tell me those words, again and again.

She smiled through her tears and my chest constricted under its weight. "No. Make me."

I leaned closer, struggling silently to be gentle, desperate to feel her mouth on mine. We stood very still for a moment, lips whispering against each other, until Bella's hands began to move. They slid over my body and twisted in my hair, pulling me closer with a heat that sent shock waves of desire through me and told me I was welcome. I was somewhat rough with my kisses, but Bella pulled toward her and I knew she wanted more.

Lying with Bella in the big hotel bed was almost more than I could take. I could hear her heart pounding, and the blood thrumming through her veins. The sensation of those hands trailing fire over my arms and back as I bent to taste the salty, perfect skin along her collarbone drove me crazy. And then when she sat over me, pressing against me with that soft, incredible warmth–

"Edward," Jasper grunted, abruptly pulling my thoughts away from Bella. His expression was somewhat pained when I looked over, and I heard the thoughts he could not control. My desire for Bella was destroying not only my composure, but also my brother's as he felt everything I was experiencing secondhand.

"Sorry," I murmured, and laughed when Jasper rolled his eyes at me.

The sun was beginning to set when we raced above the tree line, moving along the mountain passes while the sky shaded red. We stopped on the shore of a glacial lake below one of the larger mountains, and grinned at the explosions of firey light in each other's skin.

"I really am sorry about that, Jas," I said after a moment, and knew my expression was guilty. "Bella coming back to the hotel today was so unexpected. I haven't had much time to really... absorb what happened and what it felt like. How I felt."

Jasper shook his head, waving me off with one hand. "It's fine, Edward. Perfectly understandable, really. Just, er... maybe do it a little bit further away from me next time. Or I won't be responsible for how I feel about the Swan girl."

A thin, warning growl came out of me, though I knew perfectly well that Jasper was teasing.

His answering grin faded and the expression on his face grew serious before he spoke next. "When will you approach Chase?"

"Bella and I talked of going Friday evening, after Chase is done with work." I stuck my hands in my pockets and began walking around the lake, Jasper falling into step beside me. "I'm going to ask Rose to cover Chase's girlfriend and her daughter; we don't want them anywhere near Chase's house when things start happening.

"I want you and Em there at Chase's, and close. Bella knows what I want her to do after she's had a chance to confront him. But that doesn't mean she'll do as I've asked. If it comes down to it, you or Em will need to carry her out of the house and make sure she gets in her car."

"Of course," Jasper replied. "You may want to rethink your idea of Rose watching the girlfriend, though. If one of us needs to drive the Swan girl home, it would be a good idea to have more than
one person on hand to help you. You're not as big as Emmett, but you're plenty strong and you're faster than all of us."

I frowned at his words, knowing he was right. Controlling myself around James Chase was going to be difficult. I had a feeling making sure Bella didn't lose control around James Chase would be even harder.

Chapter End Notes

Ooooh, boy. These two certainly keep each other guessing, no?

Good to hear from Ali_pixy, too, though she sounds pretty down.

The next chapter will be split between Bella and Edward.
Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07 and karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

Warning: This chapter contains sensitive and graphic material, including descriptions of violence and sexual assault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I want my innocence back
And if you can't pacify me, I will break your bones.
You think I'm bluffing, just try me.
I will never forget the words you used to ensnare me.
Till my dying day, you'll suffer for this, I swear.
"I want my innocence back"- Emilie Autumn

There was so much to keep me up at night and so many restless thoughts to sift through. I stared at the floral patterns on the wallpaper in Renee's guestroom, counting daisies and roses in hopes that the monotony would eventually lull me to sleep.

It was almost 2:00 A.M. before my eyes finally closed and when they reopened, I still felt on edge.

My heartbeat sped every time I remembered what had happened in Edward's hotel room. He had sent me a text the night before to say goodnight and my reply had been short and unremarkable, a result of my stunned frame of mind. It still seemed surreal; his cool arms wrapped tightly around my body, my hands tentatively exploring the skin of his neck and chest, our lips pressed together.

I took slow, even breaths to calm my racing pulse as I slid out of bed and stumbled towards the shower. I wanted to catch Renee before she left for work.

"Mom?" I asked, knocking lightly on her bedroom door at around 6:15. "Can I come in?"

"Sure, Bella." Her voice dragged and I guessed she was just rousing herself from bed.

I pushed the door open and peeked inside. "Good morning."

Renee was buttoning a pair of slacks and fumbling with a pearl bracelet on her dresser. "Good morning, honey. Why are you up so early?"

"I wanted to ask if I could borrow your car," I said hesitantly. "I want to visit some colleges around here. SCC… maybe Carrington. I thought your car might make a better impression than Jake's Rabbit."

Since arriving in Sacramento, I'd noticed how materialistic Renee had become during our years apart. I gave her a smile, hoping my request would have the effect I anticipated.
"Oh, I think that's a great idea, Bella!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands childishly. "Of course you can take my car. I don't mind driving the Rabbit, though the other teachers will sure have a good time teasing me about it." Renee winked and I managed a tiny smile in her direction.

"I know it's Spring Break so I'll be touring without a guide but-

"That's perfectly all right. Just be sure to pick up some brochures and maybe even take some pictures of the campuses so you'll remember which ones you liked best. Oh, I'm so excited!" She rushed across the dimly lit room and folded her slender arms around me warmly. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you're giving Cali a chance."

"Yeah." I struggled to keep my voice from shaking. "I might find something that suits me."

aDc

After Renee left for work, I borrowed her laptop and logged onto the support website where I had first met Ali_pixy. I was relieved to see her online.

Bells_forever: Hi girl! Missed you.

Ali_pixy: Hey... I missed you too. What's up?

Bells_forever: Not much. Just hanging out at my mom's. What about you?

Ali_pixy: Getting some homework done now that I'm not sick anymore.

Bells_forever: Do you have a lot?

Ali_pixy: Not really. Just some science questions and a history essay.

Bells_forever: Oh, okay.

Ali_pixy: I was never good at science. Art is my thing, and computers. I want to be a fashion designer when I get out of the system.

Bells_forever: Really? That's impressive! I'll bet you're really talented.

Ali_pixy: Well, I can draw more than stick people :). My brother Edward was good at almost every subject when we went to school together. Science, history, math. His favorite was music appreciation. He was such a nerd but in a classy sort of way. I'll bet he still is, wherever he is now. At least I hope he is.

My heartbeat sped again when she mentioned Edward.

Bells_forever: A nerd, huh? Would you say he always did the right thing?

Ali_pixy: Totally! Not that we didn't get into trouble, but he always took the blame when it was something really bad. One time we were playing baseball and I accidentally broke one of the headlights on our dad's car. Edward told my parents he did it.

Bells_forever: Why do you think he did that?

Ali_pixy: I'm not sure. It could've been just so I'd owe him something later, but I don't think so. Edward always was a gentleman. Even then.

"Yeah," I whispered. "He still is."
And that presented a problem.

Edward and I hadn't exactly come to an honest understanding when I had left his hotel room. He thought I had grudgingly agreed to his terms, and would leave Jimmy's when he asked me to. But there was no way I was going to leave Edward to deal with Jimmy, because I had already guessed at his true intentions. Edward was going to take Jimmy to the police instead of killing him. He was going to go back on our deal the second I was out of the house and out of his way. And a girl whom I suspected was Edward's long-lost sister confirmed my suspicions.

"I might be physically slower and weaker," I said to myself, pushing away from the computer desk. "But there's no chance in hell I'm letting that happen."

My hands shook slightly as I held Billy's .44 Magnum. The metal was cool from sitting at the bottom of my duffel bag, but holding the weapon made my body feel ice cold. I'd never fired a gun before. At any other time, the thought of how much power and violence it contained would've frightened me out of my wits. When I dug up my memories of feeling helpless and terrified, however, the rage and hatred I had locked away for so many years were easily salvaged. They obliterated my fear.

Plumas National Forest was 90 miles outside of Sacramento and, I thought, the perfect place to practice shooting. I didn't have a manual to read or safety goggles to wear, as the Internet advised for first time shooters. But I managed to find some earplugs in a drawer in Renee's computer desk to protect my hearing.

I ignored the queasy nervousness in my stomach as I drove Renee's station wagon out of the city. As I was turning onto the freeway towards the forest, my cell phone rang and I reached for it while keeping my eyes on the exit ahead.

"Hello?"

"Bella, its Edward. Are you all right?"

I struggled to keep my voice from quivering and wondered why he would think I wasn't all right. Had my behavior the day before freaked him out? I cringed internally as I replied. "Hi, Edward. I'm just fine. Why do you ask?"

There was a pause from his end. When he answered, his tone was nonchalant. "Just wondering if you'd had a restful sleep, that's all. No nightmares?"

My eyes narrowed. "No."

"That's great. I've been thinking about you, every five seconds actually. I've been driving my siblings insane." His chuckle made a warm blush creep over my face but I stayed suspicious.

"You were?"

"Yes, I really was. What are you planning to do today?"

Immediately, I was on guard. "Nothing much. Just spending a few hours with Renee and Phil. We might go to a game later this evening."

"Okay. My siblings and I are going hunting in the mountains north of the city. And I may go back to the repair shop and keep tabs on Chase during his shift."
My stomach somersaulted at his words. "Oh, okay," I whispered, almost inaudibly.

There was another, longer pause. I took the exit and drove along the ramp.

"Bella, I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable yesterday..." Edward trailed off and I was overwhelmed by memories from our time on that hotel bed.

"No, you didn't. I... uh... I have to go now. Renee's on the other line."

"All right. Talk to you later. Take care."

"Yeah. You too."

I snapped the phone shut and dropped it on the passenger seat. Edward had a way of distracting me and I could not afford to let him mess with my head. He was just so infuriating... and gentle, and just...

When my head stopped spinning and I was able to breathe again, Edward brushed the stray strands away from my face, smiling.

"Breathe, Bella."

I rolled my eyes. "Now you tell me."

He chuckled, leaning down to kiss my jaw. "Just remember that."

In one sudden movement, he grabbed my hands, which were lying slack at my sides, and raised them above my head.

"You're so bossy," I complained as his lips grazed my collarbone. Deep down, it didn't bother me, though I wasn't sure why. And the new position made me feel pleasure instead of discomfort.

"I'm not arguing, sweetheart." Edward chuckled again, pulling his hands away from mine and sweeping them over my ribcage. He gripped my waist with his hands and lifted my body off the mattress, trailing kisses over my shirt from the underside of my breasts and over my stomach.

"Ugh... Edward." I dropped my hands to his hair, tugging at the strands as a form of punishment.

"That feels good," Edward murmured, contradicting my intentions but making me smile all the same.

"Of course you'd say that," I replied as he set me back down raised his gaze to mine. "Crazy, much?" I asked, raising an eyebrow tauntingly.

"Damn straight," he said, kissing the corner of my mouth and making my heartbeat race.

"Ah!" I jammed my foot on the brake, almost missing a stop sign. "Damn it, damn it!" I muttered fiercely.

Just when I thought I could block Edward from my mind, he came traipsing back in. It was easier to focus when I was angry with him, but that just wasn't working. Instead, I pictured Jimmy and focused my rage on him as I drove into the forest.

I left the car near a secluded stretch of wood that was far from the trails and hoped that I wouldn't run into any hikers. It was the middle of the afternoon and stiflingly hot, even though I wore a short-sleeved shirt and khakis. I pulled my hair into a ponytail, covered my head with a baseball cap, and
pulled on a pair of sunglasses. Before taking out the gun, I also pulled on a pair of black gloves. After Jimmy was dead, I would burn the gloves to destroy gunshot residue and any traces of DNA. The last thing I wanted was to be linked to that filthy son of a bitch.

I slung the mini leather backpack Renee bought for me over my shoulder and trekked over the paths, listening for sounds of campers and hikers. Luckily, I seemed to be alone in that part of the forest. I knew I was supposed to have an adequate target, but I didn't have time to look for acorns or pinecones hanging from the trees. I found a well-shrouded spot and pulled some orange tape from the backpack, using it to mark some of the trees. I walked to the opposite side of the clearing and took the gun and a box of bullets from the backpack. I opened the chamber and slid six bullets inside before re-chambering it and unlocking the safety. Spreading my feet, I curled my fingers around the gun's grip and focused on the strip of orange tape in the center of a pine tree twenty feet away.

_Hopefully, Jimmy would be closer._

My stomach churned with that thought and I squeezed the trigger. The gun roared.

The blast and the gun's recoil almost made me jump out of my skin. The bullet pierced the bark above the orange tape but just the fact that it was close excited me. I drew in a long breath and pulled the trigger again. The second shot didn't make my heart race quite as much and I managed to control the recoil better. I remembered the advice I'd read on the Internet, and leveled each shot with my breaths.

One breath in… out. Pull.

After an hour of practice shooting, I took down the orange targets, locked the gun's safety, and started making my way back to the Rabbit. It was time to pay Jimmy a long-awaited visit.

I tried to keep my mind as clear as possible during the drive out of the forest, which wasn't too hard because I had to pay close attention to keep from getting lost. It was almost three hours later when I finally found myself entering Vallejo. My legs were stiff from sitting in the same position and from the nerves that I did my best to keep under control.

Adrenaline zinged through my body and I tensed as I fought to contain myself for just a little while longer. When I turned into Jimmy's neighborhood, I pulled the hood of the baseball cap down lower and put my sunglasses back on to hide my eyes. I parked two blocks away from Jimmy's street, assuming the distance would help me keep a low profile but wasn't too far to run once I was finished. The clock on the dashboard and the fading light told me it was getting close to sunset. I held my breath, then exhaled, and slid my hands into the gloves before taking the gun from the backpack. I left my phone and the backpack in the car.

I walked briskly to Jimmy's house, trying to keep from breaking into a jog in case anyone was watching from the neighboring houses. The street was almost empty and the only real noise was from traffic on the highway a few blocks west. To my relief, Jimmy's truck wasn't in the driveway. I peered over my shoulder one last time to survey the street. I spotted an older woman walking her dog a few houses down and a red van rounding the corner, but otherwise there was no activity.

I hurried to the right side of the house and noticed a window set a little too high above me to reach. I inched along the wall into the shadows, making it impossible for anyone to see me. The backyard was fenced, and I couldn't see another entrance from that side of the house. Realizing that Jimmy would be getting off work soon, I decided I had no choice but to climb through the little window above me.

Bending my knees, I leaped once and grabbed the narrow brick ledge beneath the window. My
fingers curled around the bricks and I groaned as I hauled myself up enough to get my left elbow on to the ledge. I pulled harder, my body curving up until I had hoisted myself high enough to balance my torso against the ledge. I tapped the glass with the butt of the gun a couple of times until it shattered and used the gun to clear the rest of glass out of the pane. I peered into what was clearly a kitchen and carefully braced my hands against the bricks to pull my legs up. Very slowly, I lowered myself into the house.

The kitchen was plain, simply painted in coral tones. There was a toaster on the counter top next to a coffee pot, and a few dirty dishes in the sink. The waning sunlight cast golden rays here and there but for the most part, the interior of Jimmy's house was shadowy and completely silent.

My heart thumped in my chest as I thought about the window I had just broken and the fact that I would soon be face-to-face with the monster from my nightmares. For a fleeting moment, nausea twisted my stomach and I wanted nothing more than to be in a safe environment with people who made me feel protected, like Charlie and Jacob... and Edward. But I'd come too far to back down now.

My stomach lurched painfully at the sound of the front door opening. The clock on the microwave above the sink read 6:00 P.M. My pulse quickened. And I took a long, calming breath.

I was sitting on the kitchen counter, swinging my legs back and forth carelessly when Jimmy walked in to the house. I let my eyes roam up and down his hulking frame as he walked around in the dim light of the living room, unaware of my presence. He dropped a bag on the couch, and turned on a light that bathed the room in yellow light and spilled partway into the kitchen. I stayed perfectly still, my muscles tensed, and he didn't notice me. Instead, he took a cell phone from his jeans pocket and pressed the keys, probably sending a text message. Jimmy smiled while he looked at his phone. I despised that smile. He had smiled like that every time he felt me up.

I stroked the barrel of the gun. Unlocking the safely, I carefully cocked the trigger and the click drew Jimmy's attention toward me. He frowned, seemingly confused as to whether the figure sitting in his kitchen was real or just another shadow.

I grinned. "Hi, Jimmy."

With my words, I made him really see me. Stepping slowly, Jimmy walked from the living room to the kitchen. His expression was perplexed and even a bit curious.

"Excuse me, do I know you?" he asked. He stood awkwardly by the sink, across the kitchen from where I sat.

I raised one eyebrow as my heart drummed in my chest. My anger built and I fought to keep cool until the right moment.

"You don't recognize me, Jimmy? It hasn't been that long."

That slow grin crept across his face. "You're from Richmond, aren't you? I'm sorry I never got around to-" He took a step closer and suddenly saw the gun in my hands. I was holding it tightly, pointing it toward the floor.

"What-" Jimmy stammered, his eyes fixed on the gun. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

"My name is Bella Swan," I answered, my voice thick with emotion. "And no, I'm not all right."
"Bella Swan?" he whispered. His forehead creased and I barked out a hard laugh.

"Yeah, you remember. I was the little girl you liked to touch between the legs." I bit my lip to keep from vomiting.

His ice blue eyes widened for a second before he folded his arms over his chest.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said in an even voice, though his eyes betrayed his fear. That fear made me smile widely.

"You're trespassing, young lady. If you don't leave now, I'll call the cops-"

I swung down from the counter top, keeping the gun pointed at the floor. My other arm swung loosely at my side, maintaining my air of carelessness.

"Why not call them, then?" I prompted, amused by his threat. "Cops these days will believe anything anyway. They might even believe you're a stand-up guy with a heart of gold."

Jimmy's face contorted into a freakishly unreadable expression. He looked nervous but somehow confident, too. "Bella or whatever your name is, you're confused and need help, but I-"

I raised the gun and aimed, squeezing the trigger and keeping one eye closed as the blast echoed in my ears.

The bullet pierced Jimmy's groin and his legs buckled, throwing his body to the floor. "Ah! Oh! What the-"

His scream wasn't very loud and I fell back a step, lowering the gun.

"Aww... did that hurt, Jimmy?" I was surprised by my good luck. Now I just had to worry about how long it would take one of the neighbors to call 9-1-1. I might only have a few more minutes.

Jimmy gasped and pressed a hand against the crimson blossoming from the wound.

I smiled as I continued talking. "Now, imagine feeling pain like that when you're only eight years old."

"Please, don't," Jimmy grunted, staring up at me pitifully.

"That's what I used to say to you, Jimmy, remember?" I asked, unshaken by his pain. "And you never listened when I begged you to stop hurting me."

My voice was dripping with venom. I could almost taste my hate, and it tasted sugar sweet. I took another step back towards the counter and glanced over his body, searching for another worthy target.

Maybe between the legs again. That's always good.

"What goes around, comes around, Jimmy. I've always liked that idiom. And it's so fitting, don't you think?" I raised the gun and took aim.

"You're crazy," Jimmy said with a hiss, struggling to his knees.

His words hit me with the force of a freight train. I sucked in a breath, my limbs trembling with a sudden bolt of rage.
"You're right, I am." I forced my feet apart and fixed my aim below the first wound on his body. "But maybe that has something to do with a grown man molesting me when I was a kid. What do you think, you stupid son of a bitch!"

Jimmy lunged at me as my fingers shook uncontrollably. I took a step back but it was too late. He crashed into my legs and knocked me to the floor, wrestling with me as I squirmed to get away. He wrapped one arm around my waist and reached up to knock the gun out of my hands with his other hand.

Disgusted at the feeling of his weight on top of me, I tried to knee him in the groin and screamed at him to get his hands off me. Jimmy pulled away abruptly, backing away clumsily and smearing blood along the floor as he moved. He gave a shaky laugh as he lifted the gun and pointed it at me.

The sound of Jimmy's heavy breaths filled the kitchen and blood dripped from his hands on to the floor. He shook his head and smiled grotesquely. "You're still so pretty, Bella."

I ducked my head as he squeezed the trigger, waiting for the pain.

Bella's scream reached my ears as I slammed the car into park. In a flash, I was out of the car, dashing heedlessly through the darkening streets toward Chase's house. My mind raced even faster than my feet, turning over bundles of information.

*Chase's girlfriend and her daughter are not in his house.*

*The others are right behind me.*

*Someone is bleeding.*

*Bella lied to me.*

Fear for her safety left me cold even as I raged at her recklessness and my own poor judgment. All day, nagging doubts about Bella had refused to be silenced, and I had pushed them aside. Even after our strained phone conversation, when I knew from the tone of her voice that she was keeping something from me, I had forced myself not to act.

I'm not sure what pushed me to drive past Renee Dwyer's house shortly before sunset. I sat and eavesdropped on the family, even after spotting Jacob Black's car in the driveway. My stomach sank when I heard Renee telling her husband about Bella's sudden interest in Sacramento area colleges. The steering wheel creaked under my grip when she proudly claimed she had swapped cars at her daughter's suggestion, agreeing that the VW would make a poor impression.

The last thing Bella Swan seemed to care about were the impressions of others. I knew then that she had been lying to her mother and to me.

I had trusted Bella purely because I believed I *should*. I had wanted to believe that she was incapable of that depth of deception and that she had trusted *me* to help her, regardless of whether I deserved her trust or not.

I had been very stupid.

Now she was paying the price for my naiveté. She had approached Chase a day early and alone. She was in that house and I knew in my bones that the fucker was hurting her somehow. An ugly growl ripped through my chest when I heard his thoughts, seeing Bella through eyes that lingered on her body with dark hunger.
My fingers were curled around his door's knob when I heard him speak, his voice pained and dangerous. "You're still so pretty, Bella."

The door came half off its hinges as I raced inside. More pieces of data hit me as I dashed through the little house and into Chase's kitchen.

Rosalie's car engine roaring to a stop several blocks behind me. Slamming doors and light, sprinting steps.

Chase on the floor, sitting propped against the kitchen sink. His panting breaths made loud with pain and effort.

The gun in his hands.

Bella sprawled on the floor. The sweat on her face, and the rage twisting her features. The sunglasses hanging from one ear like a bizarre talisman, before they clattered to the floor.

Blood. Thick and red, smeared on the floor, dripping from Chase's body and hands, staining Bella's clothes. Choking the air with its rich, salted copper smell.

I had already stopped breathing. And still, a thirst unlike any I had ever known raced through me like a wildfire.

Oh. I want it.

At last, I understood why my kind hunted men. My nostrils flared, opening wider to gather as much of that mouthwatering scent as possible. My vision changed as my pupils dilated, sharpening to a heightened razor accuracy that I only ever knew when hunting. And feeding. A sweet, terrible heat filled my throat like a roaring fire. And then the venom filled my mouth, spilling over my tongue. I think I let out a dark chuckle.

My God, I am so fucking thirsty.

Chase squeezed the trigger and Bella ducked her head as I threw myself at her. It was my job in that moment, more than ever before, to protect her. She gasped when she felt me over her, shocked as much by the hardness of my body as by my sudden appearance. The thundering sound of her heart and Chase's filled my ears in the second it took for the gun to roar.

Despite his wound and pain, Chase's aim was true as he emptied the gun. I felt the bullets bounce harmlessly off my back and neck, tearing holes in my shirt before they ricocheted wildly through the air. I shielded Bella's body with mine as the bullets sank into the walls and ceiling, and into James Chase.

He uttered a gurgling moan when one of the bullets struck him in the throat, and slumped to the floor as my brothers and sister flew into the kitchen. I dared to throw a look their way, taking in their glittering black eyes before Bella shuddered beneath me. Her movement reminded me in a screaming rush that the girl in my arms was warm and living, and she smelled so, so good. I let out a strangled groan as the fire screamed in my throat and the last vestiges of my control began to crumble.

"Rose," I croaked out, knowing that my sister was the only one with enough control to be trusted around Bella. "God, please, get her out of here, now."

"No!" Bella screamed, twisting in my arms to free herself. I ground my teeth and silently cursed her for being so blindly focused on the man she considered a monster. It never occurred to her that she was trapped in the arms of a much more lethal monster.
I leaped to my feet, hauling Bella with me, unsure and uncaring if I was being gentle. Hastily, I shoved her at Rosalie, who stepped forward and practically lifted Bella off her feet to pull her across the kitchen.

In a blink, my brothers were at my sides and wrapping their hands around my upper arms to keep me from bolting. Jasper tried to calm me with his gift, but the blood around us and the dying man on the floor proved too much when combined with the hunger of so many vampires. Jasper's focus faltered and weakened, and despite his effort, he hardly made a dent in my bloodlust.

All along, Chase's heart slowed with each thumping beat. His breaths grew shallow, the air moving in and out of his lungs in wet gasps. His blood spilled, thickening as it cooled.

I stared at Rosalie, gritting my teeth as I pushed the words out. "Is she okay?"

Rosalie's eyes flashed over Bella's body and she gave me a hard nod. "She's fine. That's Chase's blood on her clothes."

"Let go of me," Bella insisted as she struggled uselessly to wrench her arm out of Rosalie's grasp. "What happened? Is that bastard dead? Let me see him!"

"Stop squalling," my sister said in disgust. "The human is dying. And you'll be dead soon too if you don't get the hell out of here."

Bella's shouts grew louder as my sister continued moving her toward the door. "I don't understand! Take your hands off of me!"

With a final snarl, Rosalie began marching Bella out of the kitchen. But Bella persisted, fighting to get a last look at the carnage in the kitchen. Her eyes widened at the sight of Chase lying in a pool of blood, his sweat-slicked face grey and drawn. She looked up, presumably searching for me, and an expression of horror crossed her face when her eyes met mine. Her jaw dropped and her eyes bulged, a funny, strangled noise coming out of her before Rosalie finally dragged her away.

"I guess the girl's never seen your game face before," Emmett thought grimly.

I knew all too well, what Bella had seen. Nothing in my face at that moment was gentle, or beautiful, or kind. Nothing in my face was human. There was only the killer. My expression was one of greed and hunger, and pure, animal lust. And in that moment, I didn't give a damn that she had seen it.

"We have gotta get out of here." Jasper's stress was evident in his thoughts. "The police will be here any minute."

A snarl built in my chest and I bared my teeth at the idea that we would leave behind the meat and blood still pulsing at our feet. My rage exploded as iron hands gripped me more tightly, holding me in place. Neither of my brothers flinched when I snapped at them, though Emmett gave a low growl in warning.

"Don't you dare breathe, Edward," he thought. "The human is dying. There's no point in giving in now just to feed on a cadaver."

My stomach clenched in revulsion at the thought, even as I hungered to hurt the man on the floor. The meat and blood were mine.

Chase's heartbeat grew fainter and so, so slow. Each breath he struggled to draw was clotted with blood. His death was moments away.
"Rose just put the Swan girl in her car," Jasper thought, and I heard my sister snarling over Bella's heated protests. Jasper rolled his eyes before shooting Emmett a look and together they began to pull me away from the dying man on the floor.

"Wait," I ground out. "The gun."

"I've got it," Rosalie thought as she walked back in. She wrapped the bloody gun in a tea towel she found on the counter, and shoved the bundle in her jacket pocket. Her black eyes were hard as she jerked her chin toward the door. "I heard the neighbors calling the police. It's time to go."

I shook my head a final time, and pulled against my brothers as I drew a breath that exploded in the back of my throat. Emmett and Jasper nearly lost their hold on me when I jerked against them and leaned to look the dying human in the face.

"You got off easy." I said with a deep growl, chuckling when the last of Chase's color drained from his face. "I only wish I'd had a chance to show you what pain can really feel like."

The man twitched, his eyes rolling in his head as a rattle built in his chest. He died as my siblings were guiding me outside through the door of the little house.

Somehow, we made the two blocks to Rosalie's car without stopping. Emmett and Jasper bundled me into the backseat, their hands never leaving my arms, while my sister left her jacket and the gun in the trunk. I felt waves of calm coming from Jasper, but grunted with the effort that it took to fight them off.

"We can't leave yet," I protested as Rosalie slid behind the wheel and moved to start the ignition. My voice was hoarse with thirst and the emotions that had begun to surface. "What if Bella comes back?"

"Oh, God, Edward, she can't be that delusional," my sister said with a sharp hiss, her eyes flashing angrily as she stared at me in the rear view mirror. "Then again, I had to force her to give me the box of bullets and her gloves. If she's boneheaded enough to come back, I say let the cops arrest her."

"NO!" I roared, flailing in an attempt to get away from my brothers' grasps.

Rosalie's expression faltered when she saw my desperation. She turned, reaching over the seat to touch my face lightly with her fingers. "All right, Edward! I didn't mean it. It's okay."

I froze when I saw the plea in her eyes, and held very still, breathing deeply and letting Jasper's soothing waves wash over me.

"We'll stay here," my sister continued, her voice quieter when she saw that I had stopped fighting. "We can see Chase's house. If the girl comes back, we'll be able to see her."

We sat silently for a few minutes longer, watching the police cruisers scream by and the officers running for the house with weapons drawn. It wasn't until the police began talking about setting up a roadblock that Rosalie started the car. We saw nothing of Bella or her borrowed car.

"Where did you leave your car, E?" Jasper asked quietly as we turned onto a side street.

"On the next block," I replied, my voice hardly above a whisper as I handed him my keys. "You'll have to drive, Jasper. I- I don't think I should-

"I know," Jasper cut in gently. "I'll follow you, Rose."
Rosalie nodded, her eyes moving over us in the mirror before they met mine. "I'm assuming you'll want to drive past the mother's house."

"No," I said gruffly, though every part of me was screaming to do just that. "I- I can't be anywhere near her right now. I need to be in the woods. Somewhere. God, anywhere, just not near them."

I closed my eyes again when I saw the distress and understanding in my sister's eyes. We all knew that my control was too tenuous to be near humans for the immediate future. That was particularly true when it came to Bella Swan.

Rosalie paused to let Jasper out, waiting until he pulled up behind us in my car before moving again. Emmett let go of my arm, but stayed beside me in the backseat while I pulled out my phone. I saw several missed calls and voicemails, all from Bella save one. Carlisle.

I turned to look at my brother. "Call Carlisle, would you, Em? I don't want to talk right now."

Emmett nodded and then narrowed his eyes at me. "What do you want me to tell them?"

"Tell them whatever you want," I replied, rubbing my knuckles over my forehead. "Tell them the truth."

Emmett's quiet voice calmed me as he spoke to Carlisle, and I typed a message to Bella.

When you are able, pls reply. Tell me you are on your way to or at Renee's.

It was twenty minutes before my phone chimed again with a message from Bella.

I'm at your hotel. What happened to him? Where are you?

My fingers moved rapidly in reply.

Chase is gone. Go to Renee's. We may not be back tonight.

I paused a moment after hitting send, and then composed another, single word message.

Please.

My phone rang almost at once. I sent the call to voicemail before turning the ringer off and sticking it in my pocket. I let my fingers run over the notebook that sat behind the phone, and then turned my unseeing eyes out the window.

aDc

It was fully dark when we stopped driving. The lack of streetlights and the sound of water made me faintly curious, and I looked around me with real interest for the first time since leaving Vallejo.

"Where are we?" I asked dully.

Rosalie turned to eye me over the seat, appraising me sharply and frowning. "The campground near Black Butte Lake. We parked here a few months ago when we all went hunting in the Mendocino Forest. I figured you could use the run."

She raised an eyebrow in challenge when I didn't reply. "Come on, pretty boy. If you can't get it together enough to win a foot race, Emmett's going to mock you for the next hundred years."

The four of us flew over the rolling hills, running parallel to the creek that fed the lake until we
entered the forest itself and the trees closed over our heads. We were silent as we ran, and I went a step further, deliberately closing my mind against the others' thoughts. I gave myself up to silence and motion, easily outstripping everyone despite Rosalie's playful taunting.

The scent of game drew us south, and we fell into hunting formation as we closed in on a herd of elk, our instincts pushing us in ways we never questioned. We fed without restraint, each of us still hungry for the blood and meat we had left behind in Vallejo. I opened the throat of a bull with my teeth and groaned loudly when the hot gush of blood hit my mouth. A moment later, I dropped the carcass to chase down another bull, and then a third. The frenzy abated only after I had finished my fourth, though I felt my fingers twitching for more.

"What's it like?" I asked Jasper afterward, as we scattered our kills.

"The blood you mean, from the humans?" He pursed his lips when I nodded.

Jasper was quiet a long time. I had begun to think he would not answer when he cleared his throat and looked at me, his eyes blazing gold with fresh blood. "You know that I've been alone for many years of this existence. I've never had a mate. There were times when the solitude wore on me. When I wanted something different.

"When I fed on humans, none of that mattered." He turned his eyes away, but I saw him swallow as he struggled to find the words. "There's nothing like it. Nothing... better. It's all consuming. There's only blood and heat, and the sound of their hearts as they die."

We returned to the cars as the sky began to grow grey, signaling the coming dawn and an end to our night of hiding and hunting.

"Edward." Emmett's voice was low as he approached me. "In Chase's house, when you told him that you would have shown him how pain felt... did you mean it?"

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair roughly. "Yes, I meant it at the time. Right now... I'm not sure anymore. I think that... I might have torn him apart if I had been alone and gotten to him first.

"That's why I asked you and the others to come with me," I said, my eyes trained on Emmett's, hoping he would understand. "And why I'm grateful you agreed. I wasn't sure I'd be able to control myself."

I sensed Rosalie and Jasper behind me and knew they were listening closely.

"Today, when we were with Chase, I thought about the night when I was changed. The night Alice was taken." I swallowed hard, and felt my lips curling away from my teeth. "I wanted to do the same things to Chase that my sire did to me. I wanted to break him, the way I was broken. To kill him slowly and watch his suffering. And when I smelled and saw that blood, I wanted it. I've never felt anything like that before. It didn't matter that Bella was there and could see me. If you hadn't been there, I would have killed Chase. I... I'm fairly sure I would have killed them both."

"It doesn't matter, Edward," Emmett said with quiet confidence. "You'll never know if you were capable of killing Chase or not. The Swan girl blew all of your plans out of the water and now Chase is dead. Whatever you wanted to do to him, or to her, was in the moment, and that moment is gone. You'll never get it back."

My brothers and I were silent as we climbed into the cars. We watched Rosalie retrieve her jacket.
and the bundle holding the gun and Bella's gloves from the trunk and dash toward the lake. There was a crunch as she crushed the gun followed by soft splashes as she hurled the pieces into the deep water along with the bullets.

"She's burning her jacket with the towel and gloves," Jasper said, running his fingers loosely over the steering wheel.

"I know," I murmured. "Emmett's just thinking that the jacket was one her favorites. It seems I'll be spending a small fortune to help her get over the loss."

Jasper's dry chuckle made my lips twitch.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa. O.O

Thank you for reading, reviewing, tweeting, PMing, etc. - we appreciate you so much.

The next chapter will be Bella's.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You're way too young to be broken.
You're way too young to fall apart.
You're way too young to play these games
But you better start
"I'm Not The One" - 30H!3

Renee and Phil were watching a rerun of that afternoon's baseball game when I stumbled into their living room. The look on my face startled them both so much that they leapt off the couch and to their feet.

"Bella, what the matter?" Renee demanded, rushing around the coffee table and grasping my arms with both hands. "Did something happen?"

The disturbing image of my fingers pulling the gun's trigger and Jimmy's body hitting his kitchen floor flashed through my mind with shocking clarity. I could barely feel my lips moving as words spilled out of my mouth in an emotionless tone.

"I almost got hit by this... this car on the road. I spun onto the shoulder but it almost-"

"Oh!" gasped Renee, grasping my arms even tighter. "Are you all right?"

I nodded numbly. "The car didn't hit me but I was scared..."

"Oh sweetheart, I'm so relieved that nothing happened." Renee finally let go of my arms and pulled me against her. I closed my eyes, burying my face into her shoulder, feeling her fluffy angora sweater against my skin. I inhaled deeply, and the comforting scent of her Burberry perfume reminded me of our shopping trip only a few days before. For some reason, I felt incredibly safe.

Phil came to stand beside us awkwardly. "Bella, don't worry about the car. We're just happy you weren't hurt," he said in a serious, yet kind voice. I pulled away from my mother and welcomed his supportive hug as well.

"But nothing happened to the car," I said again. "When I saw how fast the other car was coming, I panicked and turned onto the shoulder. It didn't even scrape the paint, I promise."

Phil nodded, patting my back gently. "Okay, honey. It's all right. One thing I don't like about Cali is all of the jerks hogging the streets."

Renee giggled nervously and I managed a tight smile.
"Sweetheart, do you want some hot chocolate or maybe some chamomile tea? It'll calm you a bit," Renee fussed as I swept my sweaty hair away from my eyes.

"No, I'm just going to take a bath," I replied, realizing that I had to be completely alone before falling apart.

"All right, but you're not skipping out on dinner," Renee warned as I began walking towards the guestroom. "I'll bring you a plate later."

"Okay... thanks, Mom," I mumbled, trying to keep my legs from wobbling as I focused on my destination.

A sudden flash on the TV screen caught my eye as I reached the door, and I paused as a local news station interrupted the baseball game. My stomach fell and I felt cold all over as I processed the news anchor's words.

"We're interrupting this broadcast with news from our affiliate in Vallejo. Vallejo Police are reporting that a home invasion occurred earlier this evening in a neighborhood outside of the downtown area, resulting in the death of one person. Neighbors around the home involved reported hearing multiple shots fired. Police are not releasing any information about the victim at this time, other than that he is a white male, and appears to have been a victim of foul play."

"Oh, my God," I heard Renee mutter before I screwed my eyes shut and walked away as quietly as possible.

Jimmy was dead. Edward and his sister had told me as much but... hearing it from someone so far removed from my life made it so much more real.

Once inside the guestroom, I pried my cell phone from the backpack I had slung over my shoulder and checked it for messages. There were none apart from the last one Edward had sent when he had begged me to come straight to Renee's. Breathing shakily, I sank onto the bed, staring at his name on the little screen.

*He must be furious,* I thought, cringing at the memory of his face the last time I saw him. His beautifully sharp jaw line was clenched and his lips were pulled over his white teeth as a frightening growl tore through his throat.

But the scariest part was the purely animalistic look in his eyes. It had been shocking and totally overwhelming. I had never seen Edward look or act so differently than the young boy I had become used to. Gone were his grace and polite manners.

Suddenly it was hard to imagine he had ever been human. For a split second in that kitchen, surrounded by Jimmy's blood on the slippery floor, I had been truly afraid of dying; if not from the gun Jimmy had wrenched from my hands, then from Edward's uncontrollable bloodlust. Edward's warning had been true – in that moment, he had been dangerous.

For the first time in a very long time, I cared about my safety. How ironic was that?

aDc

After soaking in the bathtub for half an hour, I pulled on my pajamas and crawled into bed, huddling under the ivory bedspread. Renee brought me a plate of potato salad, cornbread, and fried chicken that I devoured, much to her delight. It surprised me how famished I was until I realized I couldn't recall the last time I had eaten before making the trip to Vallejo.
My fingers ached to send Edward another message but I stopped myself, knowing he probably wouldn't appreciate it if he were even able to get the message. I regretted betraying his trust and putting us both in danger. But I didn't regret my actions. My heart slammed painfully in my ribcage as I remembered the confrontation with Jimmy, and I found myself trembling violently, but I didn't regret pulling the trigger and I knew I never would. Because of my actions, his girlfriend's daughter wouldn't suffer now. That vile man would never take advantage of another little girl. I had saved a child. Maybe more than one.

Perhaps it had been incredibly selfish of me to put Edward and his siblings in danger of discovery, but I knew that somewhere, a child was safe now, because of me. That had to count for something.

aDc

I didn't really know where I was... but Jimmy was standing behind me. Jimmy and another man. It took me a moment longer to recognize him. It was the man from Seattle who had stalked me in Post Alley near the SU campus. As I took a step away from Jimmy's sickening grin, the other man closed in on my other side. My back was pressed against a white brick wall.

"Hey there," the grubby man from Seattle leered at me. "Are you lost, baby?"

Jimmy chuckled, raising a hand to sweep back my hair.

Panic flooded through me.

"Get your hands off me!" I ordered but they just kept inching closer...

My body jerked on the bed, startling me awake with a gasp. Rolling over, I reached for my phone on the bedside table. I almost dialed Edward's number but my fingers froze on the keys.

What are you thinking? He's not going to want to talk to me. Are you really so selfish to think that after all the ways you've let him down, that gorgeous boy will still comfort you because of a nightmare?

Dropping the phone, I sank back down on the pillow feeling disgusted with myself.

I couldn't sleep at all after the nightmare. My eyes snapped open before it was even light outside. The time on my phone read 4:45 A.M., but I got out of bed anyway, and stumbled toward the bathroom. I hurried through the shower, unwilling to let my mind wander for too long. After quickly drying myself, I pulled on a denim skirt and salmon-colored peasant top. Brushing my teeth and combing my tangled locks didn't take very long, so I quietly tiptoed from the guestroom to the living room.

I turned on the computer, lowering the sound so it wouldn't bother Renee and Phil as they slept. I saw that I had received a new email from Ali_pixy a few hours before, and opened it immediately to read.

To: Bells_forever
From: Ali_pixy

Hi :) What's up? I'm risking getting into trouble for being online so late... I hope you appreciate that... just kidding... Good thing my phone has internet on it 'cause everyone's already asleep and the foster lady does night checks. Hope you're doing okay. When are you going back to your dad's?

I chewed my lip as I responded:

To: Ali_pixy
From: Bells_forever

Hey. Glad you're feeling better. I'm leaving tomorrow morning.

Quickly, I logged out of my email and onto the trauma support site to see if I could get a swifter reply from Ali_pixy. Thankfully, she was online.

Bells_forever: Hey!

Ali_pixy: Hey, why are you up so early?

Bells_forever: Just can't sleep... bad dream.

Ali_pixy: Really? I'm sorry :(

Bells_forever: I've always had them. No big deal.

Ali_pixy: May I ask what they're about?

Bells_forever: Just this man hurting me.

My stomach twisted as the images from Jimmy's kitchen tried to crowd my mind. I wanted desperately to change the subject.

Ali_pixy: You've always had those dreams? From when you were little?

Bells_forever: Yeah. So I was wondering... what's your real name?

Ali_pixy: Where is that coming from?

Bells_forever: Will you tell me? What's your real name?

Ali_pixy: Why would you ask me that? That's not really any of your business. I don't even know your real name.

Bells_forever: Yes, you do. Or you almost do. It's Bella. My dad calls me Bells.

Ali_pixy: And... so? I don't understand why this is so important all of a sudden, or why you're giving me a hard time...

I could sense she was becoming irritated and defensive but I pushed on. It was time I found out exactly who she was and if she had any link to Edward. If she did, Edward needed to know.

Bells_forever: I just have this weird feeling that you're not telling me the truth. And maybe I might be able to help you.

Ali_pixy: Help me? That's sorta dumb. You can't help me when I'm the system.

Bells_forever: That's just it, Ali. I don't believe that you're in the system. I don't believe that you're anywhere. But I've been thinking that you might know the guy I met at the music store in Forks.

Ali_pixy: Yeah, so that's crazy! I've been in foster care for years, Bells. You know that.

Bells_forever: I know that's what you've told me. But I don't believe you. I'm sorry but a lot of stuff just isn't adding up, not with what I know from Edward.

Ali_pixy: Edward?
My heart drummed with anticipation.

Bells_forever: Yeah. That's his name, the guy I met at the music store. His name is Edward and he told me about himself and where he's from.

Ali_pixy: That has nothing to do with me, Bells.

Bells_forever: I think it does. His name is Edward, just like your brother. He's from Chicago. His parents died in an accident, Ali, just like yours.

Weak rays of sunlight began peeking in through the living room window blinds. Ali_pixy didn't reply for a long moment so I continued, unyielding in my quest to get some answers.

Bells_forever: Edward plays the piano. He told me he has a sister who is a year younger than he is. She was kidnapped after his parents died. Her name's Mary but she goes by her middle name, Alice. His name is Edward Masen, Ali.

When Ali_pixy responded, I almost doubled over on the couch.

Ali_pixy: Oh my god.

Frantically, I typed...

Bells_forever: You're Edward's sister, aren't you?

Ali_pixy: Is this some kind of joke? Because... that's really not funny, Bella.

Bells_forever: NO. I am not joking. This boy is real, and I honestly think he is your brother. Just tell me if I'm right. Is your brother's name Edward Masen?

Ali_pixy: Yes.

Bells_forever: Oh god. Alice? Is your real name is Alice?

Ali_pixy: Yes.

Bells_forever: What happened? Why have you been lying? Why did you say that you're in foster care?

Ali_pixy: I lied because I can't tell you where I really am. It's not safe.

I breathed in slowly, trying to control my worry and excitement as I kept typing.

Bells_forever: What if I gave you Edward's phone number? Could you tell him where you are?

I thought about adding that he had been searching for her for years but decided against it.

Ali_pixy: I don't know... it's not safe for anyone. I don't know what to do.

Bells_forever: PLEASE, Alice. Just take his number and call him. Can I give it to you?

Ali_pixy: Yes, please.

She didn't say anything else so I typed in Edward's cell phone number and waited for her to reply.

Ali_pixy: Thank you, Bella. You have no idea how grateful I am. I don't know what to say.
I was standing in the guest room listening to Rosalie's crystal clear, very irritated voice. I had dialed Edward's cell and winced when she picked up the call.

"Hello?" I whispered into the phone. "Rosalie? This is Bella."

"I'm not an idiot. You're the first number on his speed dial."

That caught me by surprise and I uttered without thinking, "I am?" before quickly moving on. "Um... is he there?"

Rosalie gave an exasperated sigh. "Yes. But Edward still isn't feeling well enough to talk to you, Bella."

I remembered Edward's lapse in control and the ruby tint in his irises at Jimmy's that had been proof of his bloodlust.

My cheeks burned with shame. "Oh... okay. But I really need him to know that..."

"What is it, Bella?" Rosalie's voice was cold.

I took a deep breath and let it out shakily. "I found Edward's sister, Alice. I have her phone number right here, and I want to give it to him."

There was brief silence. Rosalie's voice was surprisingly quiet when she demanded, "What the hell are you talking about?"

I almost flinched at her harshness but plowed ahead. "I've been chatting with a girl I met online for two months now. At first, I wasn't sure it was the same person. But the more I talked to them both, the more I realized there were so many similarities and now I know she's Edward's sister. She told me herself that she is Alice, the girl who was kidnapped."

"Please, Rosalie, just give him the number if he doesn't want to talk to me. He deserves to know."

"This had better not be a prank, Bella. Not after everything you put my brother through," Rosalie's voice dropped even lower and I felt a chill when I heard the clear threat in her words.

"It's not, I swear!"

"Has it ever occurred to you that maybe Edward was a lot better off before you came along and screwed up his whole world? He could have snapped last night. He very nearly did! But I guess that's what you always hoped would happen, right? That he'd lose control and kill the human, and do your dirty work for you."

Despite my guilt and embarrassment, Rosalie's accusations enraged me. "Edward followed me there by his own choice, Rosalie! I warned him a dozen times that I wouldn't let Jimmy off easy and Edward knew I meant every word. Don't act like I set him up."
Rosalie hissed at my words but I couldn’t resist adding, "You should know by now that I don’t take threats sitting down."

Suddenly, a deep voice interrupted Rosalie's ranting, and I heard her murmuring angrily in the background.

"Bella? This is Emmett."

I rubbed a hand over my eyes, relieved to hear a much calmer voice. "Umm... hi, Emmett."

"Is there something you need me to tell Edward?" he offered politely. I managed a tiny smile, thankful that it seemed at least one of the Cullens was willing to speak to me.

"Yes. Would you please give him this number?" I murmured the cell phone number Alice had sent me in our last message. "It’s important, Emmett. That's Alice's number. She’s... she can tell him where she is. Tell him to call her as soon as possible. I promise you, this is not joke."

"Jesus," he said softly. "Of course, Bella, I'll tell him."

"Emmett?" My voice sounded very small all of a sudden.

"Yeah?"

"I am sorry."

I held my breath, anticipating another tongue-lashing. Instead, Emmett's response was very gentle.

"I know, kid. He just really cares about you."

Chapter End Notes

We know what you are thinking. FINALLY, ALICE! Aaaand breathe.

Thank you SO much for reading, reviewing, tweeting, PMing, etc.

The next chapter will be Edward's.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The easy part is taking yourself in
It's wartime every time
A shot away
"Small Time Shoot 'em Up" – Massive Attack

I was struggling. My body finally understood the smell of human blood, and it hungered, no matter how I tried to distract myself.

It was shortly before sunrise by the time we returned to the hotel in Sacramento, and I chewed my lip at the thought of going inside. I knew that sleeping humans filled the rooms, their skins deliciously warm and fragrant in slumber. Even concealed underground in the parking garage and inside the car, my throat tightened with thirst. I sat still after Jasper parked the car and closed my eyes in an effort to calm myself. Pulling my notebook from my pocket, I traced the cover with my thumbs, drawing soothing circles over the smooth leather.

Jasper made no sound for a long moment before shifting minutely in his seat. "Is it too much for you? I can drive back out to the woods, Edward, if-"

"It's fine," I interrupted quietly. Swallowing hard, I opened my eyes to meet Jasper's gaze. "I have to go in there at some point… I can't just hide out in the woods all day."

"Yes, you can," he argued. "Spend as much time as you want out there."

I knew better. The last thing I wanted was to be left alone. In my weakened state, my impulse control was shaky at best. I was dangerous to humans. I was particularly dangerous to Bella.

Go find her. There is nothing to stop you, the dark voice in my head said quietly.

I blew out a breath and ran my hands over my head. "I need to get online and look at the Vallejo police reports. I need to… you guys need to help me call Bella and make sure she's okay."

"You can do that anywhere, Edward," Jasper said. "We can check out right now and bring your things down from the room. You don't need to go back in to the hotel at all."

"Avoidance is only going to make it worse, I think." I snorted humorlessly. "Besides, unless I became an exchange student over Spring Break or developed a case of mono, I have to show my face in school next week. The sooner I can get over this the better, Jas. The last thing I want to be worrying about is taking a bite out of my biology lab partner."
"Rosalie would kill you," Jasper replied with a chuckle, glancing in the rear view mirror. "She and Em are waiting for us by the elevators. Let's see if we can make it upstairs without any accidents."

He popped the door and gave me a pointed but kind look. "You may want to hold your breath. Our one advantage at this time of the day is that most of the humans are sleeping and not walking around."

We met the others by the elevators and I was inexplicably touched when Rosalie stepped forward and slipped her hand in mine. I kept my eyes down, but the gentle pressure of my sister's fingers on mine told me she was aware of my difficulty. Emmett and Jasper stayed close and were watchful, but let me board the elevator unassisted. The doors closed before anyone spoke.

"How are you holding up?" Emmett asked casually.

"He's wearing a shirt full of bullet holes and not breathing, Em," Rosalie replied dryly. "How do you think he's doing?"

"Let's get him upstairs before you start interrogating him," Jasper said. "He's doing pretty well, all things considered."

"On the plus side, he's stopped acting like a rabid dog," Emmett replied, giving a mock growl. "I thought for sure one of us was going to have to muzzle him somehow."

"I'm right here, you ass," I murmured out of the side of my mouth, making them laugh. "I haven't gone deaf."

The elevator doors opened and the four of us turned down the hall, pausing at my door while I pulled my phone and key card from my pocket. I finally took a breath when the card reader flashed green, and opened the door. I realized my mistake a second later when the scent of orange blossoms and freesia slammed in to me. Everything in my body responded immediately and I froze with my hand on the doorknob.

Jesus. A low groan escaped me before I stopped breathing again.

It had been over twenty-four hours since Bella had lain on the hotel bed with me. The heady, floral notes of her skin and hair had faded slightly, mixing with the hundreds of human scents filling the air. But for me, Bella's scent was exponentially stronger than almost any other was. It had become even more so following my intense bloodlust in James Chase's house.

I hadn't had the chance to close the door when my phone chimed. I looked down to see Bella's name on the screen before Rosalie's sure hand plucked the phone from mine. In a flash, Jasper had turned me around and was moving me down the hall. I focused on his cool hand against my neck, and on getting away from that luscious, unbearable scent. Emmett's thoughts reassured me that he would pack my computer and clothes as he and my sister slipped into the room. And I realized that left Rosalie to answer Bella's call.

Oh, hell.

Jasper and I entered his room and made our way to the balcony. My sister's sharp, low voice melted into the breeze that blew around us and I clamped my mind closed as Jasper slid the door shut.

"This is going to get better, right?" I muttered. "Tell me that I'm not going to be like this forever."

I turned and felt my face fall as I took in my brother's grim expression. Jasper held his hands up in a placating gesture when I began pacing. I groaned in frustration when I felt him push a wave of calm
toward me.

"It'll get easier, Edward. Right now, you're over sensitized. Give it a day or two to improve. You didn't taste Chase's blood, so you have an advantage; you don't have to start over by going back to the animal blood."

My body shuddered at the memory of that thick salt and copper smell, and I swore under my breath as I continued pacing.

"You can't be near that girl for a while," Jasper continued, calmly meeting my glare when my head snapped in his direction. "I'm not sure what your plans are now that her... problem has been resolved. Especially since the two of you didn't exactly part on the best of terms."

I rubbed the knuckle of my thumb over my forehead as a sharp pain radiated through my chest. He was right. With Chase dead, Bella no longer had a reason to maintain ties with me.

"I should accompany her back to Washington, if she'll let me..." I trailed off weakly when Jasper slowly shook his head.

"That's not possible, Edward. Getting into a car with any human right now would be dangerous for everyone. I know you're concerned about the Swan girl taking the trip alone, so Em and I can follow her in your car while you ride ahead with Rose."

"You need to take it easy around humans for a while longer, and the Swan girl in particular." Jasper's voice was quiet and certain. "If you're still this wired by the time we have to go back to school in Port Angeles, you'll need to take some more time off."

I nodded and turned away to watch the steadily brightening sky, knowing the sun would soon drive us inside. Dimly, I caught the sound of Emmett's deep voice speaking over Rosalie's angry murmurs. But I didn't listen, instead turning my thoughts to Bella and the events in Vallejo.

My chest tightened with anxiety when I recalled the scene in Chase's kitchen. The way Bella had cringed away from him. The sound of Chase's voice before he pulled the gun's trigger. The metallic pings that rang out when the bullets bounced off my back.

I felt a surge of bitter anger at Bella's deception. She had lied convincingly and often enough that I was no longer sure where the truth began and ended. Questions crowded my mind, making me long to confront her and demand answers.

How long had she been carrying a gun? Had she stolen it from her father? I didn't want to believe that she would endanger his job, but knew well how single-minded Bella could be.

What had she planned to do after killing Chase? We had talked more than once about her willingness to die rather than let Chase go unpunished, and I felt sick.

That feeling worsened when I questioned the time Bella and I had spent in my room, moving and sighing against each other. I ached with the memory of her soft, warm flesh under my hands and her sweet voice. But I wasn't sure that Bella's affections and words for me were real and sincere.

I felt the sting of remorse when I considered my own evasions. I had come clean to Bella about all of my secrets save one, and I told that lie over and over. My stomach twisted when I considered how reckless I had been to involve my brothers and sister in the drama. I was quite sure that no Cullen before me had ever willingly put the entire family at risk of discovery.

Now, being unable to see Bella or to make sure she was all right... it was almost too much. Bella had
escaped Vallejo without injury, but I was certain that the events in Chase's kitchen had affected her. She had wanted revenge against Chase. Shooting him and seeing him dying, however, were life altering moments. And to see me for what I really was, to realize how close I had come to losing control... Even if Bella hadn't quite believed that I was capable of killing her, she would have been terrified by my viciousness.

I pressed my lips tightly together when I considered that it had been nearly twelve hours since Bella and I had spoken. Despite my lingering resentment and distress, my need to confirm her safety was stronger. Purely out of reflex, I reached for my phone and grunted when I remembered that it was with Rosalie.

The sound of the balcony door sliding open caught my ear just as Jasper's hand came to rest on my shoulder.

"Come inside, Edward," he urged, guiding me away from the brightening sun.

It wasn't until the door shut behind us that I registered the ringing silence in the room. When I looked up, the raw emotion in Rosalie and Emmett's eyes shook me. Their faces were pale and drawn, and Emmett was standing behind my sister, his arms wrapped around her as if in support and comfort. My mind instantly went to the phone call that Rosalie had taken in my place.

"What happened?" I said immediately, stepping toward them without meaning to. "Is Bella all right? What did she say to you, Rose?"

My sister's lips moved to speak before she blinked, looking too stunned to continue. I looked to Emmett and found him looking equally shell shocked. As my alarm escalated, I opened my mind to their thoughts, anxious for information. I heard the name in their minds even as Emmett spoke it aloud.

Alice.

Alice.

"Alice."

"What's that?" My voice was low but loud in my ears.

"It's Alice, Edward," Emmett said gently, and I heard Jasper blow out a long breath. "Bella thinks that she found Alice."

All of my tangled emotions drained away. I stepped forward again, my jaw tightening when I realized Jasper was close by, guarding against any loss of my control. His caution was unnecessary. The anger, guilt, and resentment I had been struggling with disappeared in an instant, replaced by a naked need to understand.

I looked at the odd mix of excitement and anxiety in Emmett and Rosalie's faces, and swallowed hard, moving closer until we were only a foot apart.

"Tell me," I said.

Rosalie and Emmett's words were still echoing in my ears when I reached for my phone. Bella had found Alice. How? Why hadn't she told me before now?
Abruptly, I realized I didn't care just then about the how or when or who. I had a link, finally, to someone who claimed to know something about my sister. Someone who said she was Alice.

I started dialing the phone number Bella had given us. My movements were jerky and I realized I was breathing rapidly, my head and chest bursting with anticipation. With a gulp, I pushed down the hope and screaming, wordless joy threatening to erupt. I couldn't, wouldn't let myself feel anything close to happiness until I knew more.

It had to be Alice, had to be. Oh, God, Alice, please please please.

I jerked back in surprise when Rosalie's cool hand fell over mine, stilling my fingers. "What are you-?"

"Edward, wait a minute," she said gently, pleading for patience with her eyes.

I knew my face reflected the horror I felt. "Wait? God help me, Rose; wait for what? I've waited long enough and so has Alice!"

"We don't know whose number that is, Edward."

I could only gape at her, while Emmett gave a disgruntled murmur. "Are you saying Bella is lying? About this, of all things?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all," Rosalie argued, moving her hand to rest on my forearm. "However I might feel about the Swan girl, I'm sure she wouldn't deliberately hurt you. She's... rash, but I don't think she is cruel.

"What I am saying is that the Swan girl doesn't really know who she's been talking to. The person she spoke to told her they were Alice, but they could be anyone. This could be someone playing a nasty trick on a vulnerable young girl that they met online.

"You're the data guy, Edward – you know better than anyone how many predators there are out there, hiding behind sweet words and pretty masks."

My stomach sank as the truth in Rosalie's words registered. I looked to Emmett and Jasper, and my mood nosedived further when I saw the unhappy comprehension in their faces. There was pain in my sister's eyes when I turned to her again.

"I have to call." My voice was croaky with emotion, and her fingers pressed against my skin in sympathy. "This is the first thing I've heard about Alice since that night, five fucking years ago, Rose. I have to try-

"Of course," Rosalie interrupted very gently. "I just want you to be careful, Edward. Guard your heart. I know how hard it has been for you, not knowing where Alice has been. I don't want to see that pain get worse."

"None of us does, E," Emmett agreed. "Go ahead and call and we'll all deal with whatever comes next."

I nodded slowly, turning my attention back to my phone. The click of my fingers picking out numbers pierced the heavy silence, followed by long rings that unfurled as the call connected.

My brows knit together as the fifth ring cut off into a crackly pause. A quiet voice filled the void, driving dread into my head and frozen heart with one word.
"Speak."

The years that had passed since I was left behind in Chicago to die vanished. The walls of the hotel and all of the delicious, maddening human scents inside them disappeared. My brothers and sister were gone too, as was the warm, golden light pouring in through the sliding door and windows.

In their place were the dirty basement and the stink of mold and dampness and blood. The cold bit my skin and Alice's weeping echoed in my ears over my panting breaths and groans. Everything hurt. My whole body screamed in pain. I heard him, laughing so softly, and the menace in his beautiful voice was horribly alluring. His sweet scent filled my nose, choking me with the scent of cloves and green oak. I closed my eyes as he asked again and again if I would die for my sister. Darkness pressed over me, flattening me, stealing my breath.

Help me.

"Edward," a deep voice said close to my ear, making me shudder and gag, though there was nothing inside me to purge. "Come on, Edward, open your eyes."

My eyes snapped open, flicking around desperately in an effort to find my bearings. I felt strong hands on my shoulders and arms, and light and warmth surrounded me again. The sounds and smells of the hotel came flooding back, and the scents of my siblings as they moved around me.

"I'm not sure," Jasper was saying, concern clear in his voice. "Could he be in shock?"

"I'm okay," I said groggily. My tongue felt thick in my mouth and I shook my head to clear it. Looking to my right, I met Emmett's concerned stare.

"You, ah... you kind of zoned out on us for a minute there, E."

"That voice. It was... him. My sire. Oh, Jesus, it was him."

"We figured as much from your reaction," Rosalie said, drawing my eyes to her as she stood on my left.

"Where...? Where's my phone?" I became aware that Jasper was still speaking in the background. My awareness sharpened, driving away the awful smothering feeling that had overtaken me. "Christ, is he still on the line? What else did he say?"

Rose shook her head with a frown. "Jasper took your phone before you crushed it. There wasn't anyone there, Edward. It was a voicemail greeting."

"What?" My voice sounded small in my ears. My eyes burned and stung but could not weep and I felt crushed with disappointment. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure," Rosalie replied softly. "Jasper tried the number again after he took the phone from you and it was the same. No one is answering."

I pulled away from her and Emmett and walked to the window, rubbing my hands over the back of my neck in an effort to calm myself. The suspicions I had carried with me for five years were true or seemed to be. My sister was alive. My sire hadn't killed her. Where were they, the vampire and the girl he had stolen? Why was no one answering? Was he hurting her?

"I... I need to look up that number," I said rapidly. "If it's a landline, I can get the address. If it's a cell signal, I'll have to try something else-"
The sound of Jasper saying goodbye caught my attention and I turn to stare at him as he pulled my phone away from his ear. "Who are you talking to, Jas?"

"That was Carlisle," my brother replied, pushing another wave of calm toward me that I shook off. "I called him while you were out of it. We weren't sure what to do-"

I cut him off with a groan, scrubbing my face with my hands. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for," Jasper replied. "We've just never seen you like that before."

"What did Carlisle say?" Emmett asked, his eyes moving between Jasper and me.

"That it was probably a reaction similar to human PTSD – something like a flashback. He was relieved to hear that you came back to yourself relatively quickly. "Carlisle asked that you call him if you want to talk, but they'll be here in an hour or so if you'd rather wait."

My eyes widened. "What? Why would they -"

"Carlisle and Esme left Port Angeles after his shift ended last night," Emmett interrupted. "Carlisle told me their plans when I called him yesterday on our way out of Vallejo. I didn't tell you because I knew you'd be a pain in the ass about it."

"Jesus, Emmett," I growled out as I crossed the room. "I've told you before, I'm not fragile. You don't need to keep things from me."

I pulled my laptop out of my bag and carried it to the desk, powering it up to make the connection to the terminals in the Port Angeles house. I paged through the screens, my eyes moving quickly over the lines of information, and felt something like relief. Each minute I spent looking at lines of information left me feeling calmer. My anger and anxiety gradually cooled, and I felt more in control.

After a few minutes, Jasper came to sit by my side and I knew that Rosalie and Emmett were hovering close by.

"It's a landline, if you can believe the luck," I murmured for their benefit, clicking amongst several windows as my fingers flew over the keys. "The number is billed to a B. Puebla... and has been for the last thirty years."

"Is there an address?" Rosalie asked, her voice hardly more than a breath.

"It is a rural mailbox listing in Texas near the Louisiana border," I said, blinking at the screen before turning to them. "Near a town called Uncertain."

We were silent for several long moments. Jasper's eyes were bright with excitement when he voiced the words we were all thinking. "Let's go find your sister, Ed."

I nodded, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat. Emmett slapped my back and Rosalie bit her lip as she grinned, but I pushed back from the desk and stood, holding my phone.

"Excuse me for a second, guys." I stepped away, my hands moving over the screen as I walked to the window. There was so much I wanted to say in the message as I hit Send. But there was only one thing I needed to say.

Thank you, Bella.
You know what this means. Vampire family road trip!

Thank you so much for reading.

The next chapter will be Edward's.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's in this moment, hold on
When everything has come apart
It's in this moment, right now
When it can come together
"Fall in the Light" - Lori Carson

"We'll all go. It is the safest option as far as I am concerned." Carlisle's voice was kind but firm. "Given the lack of information we have about this phone number, there's no telling what we'll find there, if anything."

I shook my head stubbornly, trying to control my frustration. "Someone needs to make sure Bella gets back to Washington safely. All I'm asking is that one of you follow her for the drive."

"You're completely overreacting, Edward," Rosalie said as she rummaged through the clothes in my duffel bag. "You know that girl is more than capable of making the trip on her own."

"Actually, I don't know if Bella is capable, Rose, because I can't talk to her," I bit out angrily. "I'm not sure how she is or what she's feeling. I don't know if she's even remotely okay after last night. I am so screwed up right now that I'm afraid to hear her voice because it may make me want to kill her."

"Easy, Edward," Jasper murmured and I rolled my eyes when I felt him pushing waves of serenity over me.

"But it's true, Jasper," I argued more quietly. "You all may have forgotten that Bella is a human girl who went through something extraordinarily stressful last night. She doesn't trust her mother or her father, so she's going through whatever emotions have cropped up by herself. And the only creatures in the world that do know what she went through can't or won't discuss it with her."

"I'll make the trip," Esme said. She watched me calmly from her seat on the sofa while everyone's eyes turned on her. "No one has forgotten Bella's humanity, Edward; of that I am sure. Bella is certainly able to make the trip, just as Rosalie has said. But you're right, too. The girl has been through a great deal and may be more exhausted than she realizes. Keeping an eye on her as she travels is simple enough and seems like a good idea."

"Thank you," I said softly. The warmth in Esme's eyes made me feel, for just a moment, lighter and less frantic.

"The rest of you should travel with Edward," she said briskly. "I know flying would save time, but
it's pretty obvious that he can't be on a plane right now. I'm afraid you'll have to drive.

"I'll wait her until Bella is ready to leave for Washington and I'll follow her. Once she's back home, I can meet you near Uncertain or somewhere on the road. Once we know more, of course..."

After a long pause, Carlisle nodded, giving Esme and then me an encouraging smile. I rubbed a hand over my head and tried to return it as best I could.

"Do you know when Bella is planning to leave, Edward?" Esme's voice was soft, and I knew she was trying to avoid stressing me further.

"She mentioned leaving Saturday morning," I replied.

"Which means you'd better get over there today to keep an eye on her" Emmett said blithely. "When it comes to our boy here, Bella seems to enjoy jumping the gun."

I rolled my eyes at my brother. "Please, never use that idiom again with regard to Bella Swan."

In a flash, everyone was in motion, moving around the room as we prepared to leave. A cotton shirt hit me full in the face while I was packing my laptop and I glanced up to meet my sister's wry gaze. I shook my head when her mouth turned up on one side in a grin.

"There are four bullet holes in that shirt, Edward. You'd best change before some concerned citizen spots you and calls 911."

aDc

Esme crossed town toward the Dwyer's home while the rest of us drove south. Carlisle and I traveled in my car with my siblings following behind us. The morning lengthened as we moved through California, cutting a path southeast through the desert.

My phone chimed with the occasional message from Esme, confirming that Bella was still with her mother and stepfather. But there was no word from Bella herself. Grimly, I forced myself to acknowledge that it was less likely I would hear from her with each mile that slipped by. The pull in my chest toward her was as strong as ever, aching and raw, but for once, I was able to think past it. Thoughts of Alice made it easy to ignore the pull and everything else. I didn't let myself think about my sire.

"Has anything unusual come out in the media with regard to James Chase's death?" Carlisle asked as we crossed into Arizona.

"Only that witnesses heard shouting coming from Chase's house shortly before the sound of gunshots." I chewed my lip for a moment before continuing.

"Bella left behind a pair of sunglasses. But she was wearing gloves, which would have smudged any fingerprints, and the gloves and gun were destroyed.

"None of us will have left any prints," I said, gesturing to myself with one hand. "And that leaves the police with very little physical evidence to go on."

Carlisle was quiet for a moment before making his next observation. "They're starting to call the girl by her name."

"Some of them," I allowed. I could feel his eyes on me as I drove. "It started with Emmett and I've noticed it with Esme, too."
"This leaves Jasper, Rosalie, and me."

"I suspect Rosalie will be calling Bella 'the girl' well into the future."

Carlisle chuckled in agreement but said nothing else. My stomach knotted at his uncharacteristic silence. I was certain he had much to say about Bella, as well as the events in Vallejo and my loss of control. Though tempted, I couldn't bring myself to eavesdrop on his thoughts, and the words I could have used to broach the topic stuck in my throat.

I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that when Carlisle did speak, his quiet voice was like a shout.

"Where do you see your friendship with the Swan girl going, Edward?"

"I haven't any idea. I wasn't exaggerating earlier when I said that I haven't spoken to her since leaving Vallejo last night. My control has been too fragile."

"That should improve," Carlisle said reassuringly.

I blew out a long breath. "She told Emmett that she was sorry for the way things happened with Chase. Part of me is still so angry... but I understand why she needed to act once she knew Chase was in her grasp.

"That girl, as you call her... Bella," I murmured, "has turned everything that I know upside down, Carlisle. She dropped into my life and went off like a bomb. I'm not sure I could put it all back together again, or if I want to. Even if I never see her again."

"Now with this news about Alice... I don't know what to think. I'm concerned for Bella; don't misunderstand me, but... I can't think about anything but Alice right now." I swallowed as my voice cracked on my sister's name.

"That's understandable, of course," Carlisle said gently. "I can only imagine how shocked you must still feel coming upon this information so suddenly, and from such an unexpected source."

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the road as a means of controlling my emotions. Desperately, I tried not to get ahead of myself. We still knew so little. We had a hurried and disjointed story about journal entries and chat room friendships. A phone number that we now knew was attached to a rural mailbox. Satellite maps showing a vague shape that might be a dwelling near the mailbox. There was no telling what we would find near Uncertain, if we found anything at all.

"Edward, I have to ask you to consider your ability to control yourself around humans right now."

Carlisle's tone caught my attention. "Depending on what or who we encounter in Texas, you'll need to have your wits about you. That's particularly true if you don't feel confident about your level of control."

_You know what he's asking._ I ground my teeth and considered the meaning behind Carlisle's words. Given my frame of mind, how sure was I that I wouldn't kill my own sister?

aDc

We sped southeast, following dry stretches of highway through Arizona and New Mexico as the day wore on, stopping when the cars ran low on fuel. Though they did not speak of it, I knew that Jasper and Emmett had been trying the number in Uncertain without result.

We were stopped outside Amarillo when my phone chimed with a message from Bella. Though I
had been waiting all day for word from her, I hesitated to read it. I realized then that everything in me was waiting for her to walk away from our friendship. I expected nothing less, now that she knew what I really was. And I could almost hear Rosalie rolling her eyes at me as I pulled up the message.

*I hope you find her, Edward.*

My fingers moved swiftly in response and I felt my face turn down in a frown. *We have a possible address. We're on our way now.*

We were climbing back in the cars when my phone chimed again. I expected a message from Bella asking about where we were headed or if we had managed to reach anyone using the phone number. The words I read instead made me go quite still in surprise.

*I wouldn't change anything. But for what it's worth, I'm sorry.*

I let out a long sigh and ran my thumb over the screen. "I'm sorry too, Bella."

The terrain changed as we traveled southeast, becoming greener and wetter. It was fully dark when we neared Caddo Lake and the tiny city of Uncertain. Using the maps I had created, we rolled slowly along a narrow road that wound into a bayou. It took about thirty minutes to find the mailbox in the tall weeds. From there, we hiked on foot through a long, overgrown grove that would have been impenetrable to most humans.

We were quiet as we moved, communicating in low murmurs when necessary. A deep hush hung over the grove, broken by the sounds of animals and insects, and the gentle lap of lake water against the shore.

All around us was the rich, earthy smell of vegetation and water, and the trails of animals along the ground. The unmistakable scent of a vampire was laced throughout. I dropped into a hunting stance with a low growl, the scent of clove and green oak filling my nose. My sire had walked there.

Steeling myself, I opened my mind, listening hard for the thoughts of any creature concealed from us in the darkness. I felt relief and a burning disappointment when I heard only my family's watchful, listening thoughts.

"There," I breathed, nodding at spaces and shapes emerging from the gloom.

A clearing, distinct though overgrown, was perched on the lakeshore. A small building that was half-hidden underneath a massive cypress tree and veils of hanging moss. The dwelling was dark and quiet, seemingly uninhabited. But a buzz of electrical current was audible from a small transformer to the left of the structure, and the faint smell of rotting food stained the air. Appearances aside, someone had been there recently.

My sire's scent grew thicker as we neared the house, older trails crossing and overlapping with newer ones. We were two hundred meters from the low porch when a new smell sank into all of us. It was delicate and deliciously salty, like violets and caramel, and it stilled our steps as we breathed it in.

"Alice."

"Is that…?" Jasper murmured on my left and his eyes were wide when we looked at one another.

I could only nod in answer and swallow over the lump in my throat. The scent was fairly fresh, perhaps only a week or two old. If it could have, my heart would have burst under the emotions
storming through me.

She's been here.

My excitement wavered abruptly when my ears told me that it was too quiet. It dawned on me that one very important sound was missing, a sound I had been listening for without even realizing it: Alice's heartbeat. Its absence meant that she had been moved or, perhaps, that she had left on her own. Or that she was dead.

"No," I whispered. Before anyone could react, I threw myself forward, racing toward the little house. The sound of my Rosalie's gasp was in my ears as I stepped on to the porch, followed by a rush of movement as I wrenched the door off its hinges. It fell heavily onto the floor, rattling with the sound of broken deadbolts and chains.

I paused then, the others gathering around me as Alice's rich scent poured over us. It mixed with the clove and green oak notes of my sire and became something new. A luscious and bright scent that was unmistakably vampiric. It was Alice, amplified a hundredfold.

"Oh, God," Rosalie said as the thoughts of the others crowded into my head. They smelled it too.

I stared down at the door lying uselessly at my feet. My eyes flicked up and took in the heavily shuttered windows, and the thick, insulated walls. A low growl rolled through as a start realization hit me: the little house was a prison.

"Easy," Carlisle said softly, one hand on my shoulder, reminding me of our purpose. "Go easy, Edward."

I bit back a snarl as I stepped into the house, my eyes moving rapidly in the dark to see a little room with a kitchenette off to the right. My sister's smell was everywhere, embedded in the fabrics and surfaces of the furniture and appliances. There was a bed in one corner, and a sofa and chair in another. My hand rose to cover my mouth when I saw the sketchpads on the kitchen table, and the neat lines of charcoal pencils. My eyes moved over the sketches pinned to the walls and the books piled in corners.

The room spoke of overwhelming loneliness.

Five years. Had she been there all that time? Hidden in the middle of a swamp, with my sire for company? The thought of my incredibly social sister locked away from the world like a secret treasure was painful. Had there been no one with whom she could speak? No one to share in her secrets and laughter? No one to hold her hand or brush the dark hair out of her eyes?

"Oh, Alice," I said, and my voice was barely a sigh. "What did he do to you?"

And then I remembered: Bella. Alice had somehow found a way to communicate online, and she had crossed paths with Bella. My eyes darted around the room, looking for a computer or jacks, any kind of equipment to facilitate an internet connection. A flash of green by the sofa caught my eye and I was across the room in an instant. I stared down at the wireless router and its blinking service indicators but looked in vain for a computer.

Thirsty.

The whispered thought was so quiet; I might have missed it had the room not been so deadly silent. I froze, straining to hear more, the seconds spinning out around me. The others approached me soundlessly, their bodies strung tight with tension like mine, their eyes hard as they listened.
You can do it.

All at once, images hit me, each flashing for less than a second, blazing in my mind's eye like fireworks.

A white bathtub.

The robe hanging on a hook.

A shuttered window set high in the wall.

The door in the floor with a thick, rusted ring set in the center of one edge.

I was a blur of motion as I strode across the room toward the kitchen, the others following hastily behind me.

"What is it?" Carlisle murmured. "What are we looking for?"

"There's space underneath us," I replied, my jaw tight with agitation and fear. "There's someone here, maybe in that space. I can hear them."

We found the bathroom door next to the kitchen, and I recoiled slightly when it fell open. My sire's scent was thick in the little room, as was the Alice's. I heard a strange, whining noise of distress and realized too late that it coming from me.

Pushing ahead, I found the door in the floor by the toilet and pulled it open hastily, exposing a ladder that led down into the earth. I was down the ladder in a flash, the others following like shadows one after the other. We stood and looked down a long room that had been roughly carved out of the earth, lit with a single lamp at the far end.

She was sitting on a cot, a laptop at her side, her legs tucked under her as I had seen her do a million times growing up. Dimly, I registered her simple, dark clothing, and that her long hair was cropped short. It fell like a sleek little cap against her head, exaggerating her long eyes. Eyes that I knew so well, shining bright crimson and widening as they moved over my face.

The young girl I had known was still in the lines of a face that had slimmed and grown more mature. I realized with a pang that she was older now than I had been when I was changed -- I had been frozen at twenty-one, but she had gone on to top that age by several years.

"Alice," I breathed. Her bewildered thoughts were loud in my head, and my dead heart broke when I realized she wasn't sure that I was real.

Jasper's hand was on my arm then, cautioning me to use care and I felt calming waves pouring off him. I knew well the intense strength and unpredictable moods of newborn vampires, and my sister was no exception. She was more than a little dangerous in her current state, even if she didn't mean to be.

She was so still. My sister sat impossibly frozen and graceful, the lines of her body unmoved by fidgeting or breaths. Immovable, pale, and beautiful, like marble.

I moved so slowly and carefully, my eyes never leaving hers as they stared redly at me. My lips trembled when I smiled, and my voice was barely a croak when I spoke again. "Alice, sweetheart. I'm going to sit down on the cot."

She watched me silently as I moved, and the astonishment in her eyes grew when the mattress
dipped under my weight. The wonder in her thoughts made me ache.

"Yes, I'm real," I reassured her, reaching out carefully with one hand to brush the hair off her forehead. "Bella gave me the phone number early this morning. We got here as soon as we could."

"Bella. I… I wasn't sure she was telling the truth," my sister whispered, in a silvery voice like bells in winter air. "About knowing you, I mean. I didn't know what to think.

"I hoped so much that you had't killed you, back in Chicago. I had so many dreams over the years. Dreams where you were alive... and they were so real. It was like seeing you, seeing inside of you. I hoped that you were out there and okay."

I nodded, smiling at her as she struggled to find the words.

"I can't sleep anymore. But the dreams keep happening, though I'm awake. I thought maybe I was going crazy. Then when Bella told me that she thought that you were the boy in the bookstore, that her friend was my Edward... I had no idea what to do. I was afraid to call the number she gave me... afraid to pick up the phone when it rang."

Alice's face fell. "I'm sorry. I was afraid that if you did come… that I would hurt you."

I shook my head with a breathless chuckle. "You don't have to be afraid. I'm like you, Alice. We all are. You could hurt me because right now you're very strong. But never enough to keep me away."

Alice's hands crept up to cover her mouth as her face crumpled with emotion. Forgetting myself, I put my arms around her, moving far too quickly. I held my breath when she stiffened against me and saw Jasper take another step close as he worked to calm both Alice and me. And I didn't let go of my sister. I murmured quietly into her hair until she relaxed. When her hands crept around my waist, she squeezed hard enough to hurt me, but I didn't really feel it. Instead, I felt the weight of the last five years fall away.

"Is there anything you want to take with you?" I asked.

Alice looked around the little room, her face empty of expression before she shook her head. "The only thing I want is the laptop."

"Jasper's got it," I reminded her, inclining my head toward the door. "He carried it outside when we came upstairs."

Alice looked from the door to my face and her brows pulled together as she frowned. "They don't mind? About me, I mean? You have a new family, now-"

I returned her frown and gripped her hand tightly in both of mine. "They're here for you, Alice. They're as much family to you as I am."

One side of her mouth pulled up in a smile and she nodded slowly.

"Are you very thirsty?" I asked, and then huffed at my own stupidity. "What am I saying; of course you are. It's always like that during the first year."

"Yes. The last time I fed was two days ago. I can't go any longer than that," she said, and this time her eyes dropped to the floor.
"What's wrong?"

Alice took a long time to answer. When she did, her voice was pitched very low. "I've... I've been finding prey around the lake. I go out after dark and find them in their houses. I've been hiding them in the swamp after I've finished with them."

I swallowed, saddened by my sister's confession but not entirely surprised. My anger flared when I thought of Alice, abandoned as I had been, but without anyone to step in. "Where is he? Our sire?"

"Gone," she said hollowly, though her eyes gleamed with fierce gladness. She grew agitated and trembled with emotion. "He left me burning on the floor, just like he did you. I've been alone. I... I didn't know what to do, Edward."

"It's okay," I said, trying to soothe her. "Is that why you stayed here in the house? Even though you could have run off once he'd gone?"

"I didn't know where else to go. I didn't know where you were and I knew I couldn't go to Bella."

She winced and I tried not to cringe at the images in her head. Bella as prey. Bella dead. "I didn't want to hurt her."

I nodded and nudged her toward the open door. "You did the right thing. We can explain everything we know to you, and show you how to hunt other prey. The thirst will lessen with time, I promise."

We walked outside to meet Jasper and Emmett on the porch, and walked with them back through the grove while the others went ahead. Alice and I kept our arms around each other while I tried to field her murmured questions.

Carlisle slid behind the wheel of my car and Jasper took the passenger seat, while Alice and I climbed into the backseat. Alice curled against my side, threading her arms around my waist when I pulled her close. Her head fell on my shoulder when I grunted at her force, but I smiled against her hair, closing my eyes as if in rest.

A soft creak of movement caught my ear, telling me that Jasper had turned in his seat to check on us. His voice was gentle, and held just the right amount of teasing. "You up for hunting some game, Mary Alice?"

"That sounds good," my sister replied, pausing a moment before she spoke again. "It's just Alice, by the way."

"You're not just anything, sweetheart," I told her, and smiled again as her quiet laughter filled the car.

Chapter End Notes

*peeks out from behind hands* Still with us? :)

Thank you so much for reading.

The next chapter will be Bella's.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

Chapter author: transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

Can you stay strong? Can you go on?
Kristy, are you doing okay?
A rose that won't bloom,
Winter's kept you.
Don't waste your whole life trying
To get back what was taken away.
Kristy, are you doing okay? - The Offspring

I lingered in my truck every morning before my first class, fingering my phone. Sometimes I would call or text Edward, without any luck. Other times, I would check for new messages, but there weren't any. As far as I could tell, Edward had moved on after my betrayal.

A sharp tapping on the driver's side window startled me and my head snapped up to see Mike gesturing for me to get out. It was then that I realized the first warning bell had already rung. Shoving the phone back inside my bag, I pulled it over my shoulder and popped the truck door open.

Mike closed the door for me as I stepped down. "Bella, we can't be late for that English quiz. Can I look at your notes real quick?"

I mustered a tiny smile in his direction, and walked beside him toward the school doors.

Like every other day, I found ways to distract myself from Alice and Edward, and anything to do with the mysterious Cullens. Angela and I gave a verbal presentation during Spanish class. During gym, Mike stood so close to me that I had accidentally tripped over his feet on two occasions and then almost fell against him as we played basketball. I welcomed all of the distractions because they helped me avoid thinking about what had happened in Sacramento.

When I had first arrived back in Forks, I had been unable to sit still for long and hoped desperately that Charlie hadn't noticed. I was constantly on the move, walking around, cleaning and cooking, or holding the phone in my hands, debating whether to call Edward or not.

The first few nights had been unbearable. I had repeat nightmares about shooting Jimmy, and another that was worse, where Edward knelt on the floor of Jimmy's kitchen, his irises glowing like bloody rubies. His gaze was hard and cold, and his beautiful mouth was edged with crimson. I woke with a scream and buried my face in my pillow to stop myself from waking Charlie. But I hadn't slept after that; the dream about Edward left me too disturbed.

Slowly, things got better and I started feeling calmer. I slowly became accustomed to the knowledge
that Jimmy was no longer living somewhere, existing, as I was hurting. He was dead. Gone, because of me. I hoped his death would make me feel liberated, but mostly I was overwhelmed. I wondered if, given enough time, I would truly feel the freedom I had always longed for.

Now, however, Angela was paying me a compliment as we had lunch. I was wearing a silver necklace with little blue forget-me-nots that Phil had given me with on my last day in Sacramento. I'd paired it with and a pale lavender blouse Renee had insisted I buy during one of our shopping trips.

"That's a gorgeous necklace, Bella," Angela had murmured, peering at the small flowers around my throat.

I had clutched the necklace as if suddenly realizing it was there. "Thanks. It's a gift from my step-dad."

"Oh he's a baseball player, right?"

I nodded, smiling at the genuine interest in Angela's eyes. I had missed her kindness during my time away.

She sighed, moving her salad around with her fork. "I'll bet you had fun shopping in Cali! I wish I could've gone with you."

I laughed. "Next time I insist you go in my place. I had to endure two whole shopping days with my mom while she dragged me to about fifteen stores on just one strip of boardwalk."

Angela chuckled gleefully. "I'll take that any day! Do you know what I did over break? Babysat the kids at my cousin's place while everyone else went sailing and ate barbeque."

Jessica took that moment to examine my outfit with skeptical eyes but I pretended not to notice. I kept my attention on Angela until Lauren said loudly, "Bella, where did you say you bought that outfit?"

Stifling a groan, I spared the blonde in question the vaguest of glances. "I'm not sure, Lauren. There were too many stores to count."

"Oh!" she replied in falsely disinterested tone. "Your shirt just looks too out of style to have been bought in California. Aren't they all about trends there? I haven't seen a collar like that since the nineties."

Angela rolled her eyes beside me. "It looks awesome on Bella, Lauren. That's all that matters."

"Sure does!" Mike interrupted suddenly, leaning across the table towards Angela and me. Jessica shot an icy glare in his direction and I stifled another groan.

Charlie called while I was getting in my truck at the end of the day to tell me that he had invited the Blacks and Clearwaters for dinner. I rushed home to prepare something other than leftovers, happy for another distraction and to catch up with my friends.

During dinner that evening, Jacob and Seth made it a point to describe all the details of Seth's ill-fated driving lesson during spring break.

"A deer came out of the woods just when I taking a curve," Seth told me with a strange note of pride in his voice. "I spun out on the shoulder but there was this log and we went sailing."
"Come on, Seth," Jacob interrupted, rolling his eyes. "It wasn't that action-packed."

Seth turned to glare at him indignantly. "There was a log."

"Yeah, but you didn't 'sail' over it. You rolled over it and damaged the car's undercarriage."

I looked from Jacob to Seth with concern. "You have to be careful on those winding roads, Seth. Logging trucks always take those turns fast."

Seth shrugged and smiled a goofy, self-assured grin. "I'm all right, Bells. I've got killer reflexes."

Jacob scoffed but Seth's comment reminded me of something Edward had once said about having quick reflexes, and I felt my smile slipping.

"Excuse me," I mumbled, rising from the living room floor where we had been eating spaghetti and watching TV. Picking up Seth and Jacob's empty plates, I rose to my feet. Jacob glanced up at me questioningly but I ignored his worried expression. When I entered the kitchen, I saw that Sue Clearwater had already started clearing the table. Charlie, Billy, and Harry were chatting on the porch, and Leah was perched against the counter, talking on the phone.

"Oh, Sue, you don't have to do that," I said, moving to take the dirty dishes from her and carrying them to the sink.

"It's no problem, Bella," Sue replied in her quiet tone. Eying Leah disapprovingly, she added, "We need to go now. It's getting late and Harry has a doctor's appointment tomorrow."

Jacob came to help me wash the dishes after the Clearwaters had left.

"So besides your adventures as Seth's designated driver, what have you been up to?"

Jacob smile tentatively. "I've gotten to know someone."

I dropped the sponge I was using to scrub plates and looked up at his face with interest. Jacob's expression was even more bashful than before and I immediately knew why.

"I knew it!" I exclaimed, unable to keep from grinning. "Sharon, right?"

Jacob groaned theatrically. "I knew you'd give me a hard time. We haven't gone out or anything. She went with Seth and me on one of our designated drives and I saw her at the beach last Friday."

I nodded, pleased at the news of Jacob befriending the pretty girl from the bonfire.

"She's Embry's half sister."

I started. "What? Why didn't Embry tell you?" That didn't seem like the kind of information long time friends would keep from each other, and Jacob had known Embry since the 3rd grade.

Jacob took the dish I held out to him, drying it absentmindedly with the dishtowel. "Sharon said Embry showed up to see her at the Makah rez a couple months ago, saying he was looking for his dad. I honestly don't know why he wouldn't tell Quil or me, even if it is a personal thing. I mean, we've always told each other stuff."

He met my gaze but dropped it quickly, seeming suddenly uncomfortable. I wondered if he was remembering the morning on the beach when I had told him my secret.

As a means of distraction, I asked, "Does Sharon know where Embry's dad is?"
"No. I didn’t know she and Embry had the same dad until she told me. He took off when she was twelve."

"Wait... so Sharon's mom won't tell her anything?"

Jacob shook his head sullenly. "Nope. Neither will Embry's mom; she won't talk about him at all. I guess the dude must've been a real jackass...

I mulled over his words. "And I take it Sharon asked you not to say anything to Embry about their dad?"

Jacob nodded.

I sighed. "Wow."

"I don't want him to get mad at me."

"Yeah."

"But I really like Sharon." Jacob's tone got softer as he spoke her name; his eyes lost some of their seriousness. "Too bad she doesn't come to La Push very often."

I gave him a hopeful smile as he continued talking. "A year after her dad left, Sharon's mom became too depressed. She couldn't stay at the Makah rez anymore, so they moved to Oregon. She and her family still live there... Sharon's really just visiting."

My smile fell. "Oh, Jake... she doesn't live here?"

Jacob laughed humorlessly. "I don't have much luck, do I? Why am I always attracted to unattainable girls?"

Though his grin was teasing, the look of disappointment in his eyes mirrored mine. Still, I made an effort to be optimistic for my best friend's sake. "Oregon's not that far."

As we talked, Jacob told me that Sharon was leaving at the end of the month. Her mother had just been promoted at work, and she wanted to take a trip to the east coast. Though Sharon had seen a little bit more of the world than Jacob had, she was very excited about visiting New York City and The Hamptons, as well as Boston and some smaller towns in Maine.

The next day, I drove down to La Push to spend the afternoon with Jacob and Sharon and she told us about her fascination with lighthouses.

"There's this one called Owl's Head," Sharon explained as the three of us walked from Jake's house down to First Beach. "There's a local story about two lovers that got trapped in their schooner during a storm and almost froze to death. The lighthouse keeper saved them when they floated to shore. Now it's owned by this Coast Guard family."

Her passion and intellect made me smile. Jacob seemed just as impressed but slightly intimidated, though he tried hard not to let it show. He met her enthusiasm with witty comments about how she'd have to send him a postcard so he would feel like he was there too.

Sharon and Jake were sweet together, but a little sad, too. Sharon seemed to like Jacob very much, but there was something guarded about her manner, too. I guessed it was because she knew she
would be leaving soon and didn't want to get in too deep.

I sat on the floor of Jacob's garage, watching Sharon hand him the tools he needed to fix the car Seth had damaged during his driving lesson. She tucked a stray strand of shiny ebony hair behind her ear as she waited for Jake to hand tools back and ask for others. For a second, her stare lingered on his form lying beneath the car before it ghosted away. She bit her bottom lip, looking unsure suddenly, as if she knew she had gotten too close.

Sharon's forlorn expression puzzled me because it reminded me of Edward. Or rather, it made me think back to the expressions that had played over his face during the drive to Sacramento and the conversations we'd shared, the jokes and quiet laughter, and our careful hand-holding.

I pushed the memories away forcefully when Sharon came to sit next to me. Edward was gone. And so were those moments we had shared.

Spring edged toward summer. Tyler had an end of the year party that I didn't attend. Angela and I went to see a movie in Port Angeles instead.

Charlie encouraged me to hang out with Angela, and we always had a nice time when we were together. But it never got easier to forget Edward. He was always in the back of my mind. Whether Angela and I were walking down the sidewalk towards the bookstore, our shoulders bumping in comradeship, or folding laundry in the living room while Charlie watched TV; my mind conjured up pictures of that boy's infuriatingly beautiful face. It was annoying, at best. At worst, it was unbearably sad.

One night in mid-May, I was sitting around a beach fire with Jacob, Seth, Embry, and Sharon roasting marshmallows and hot dogs when my phone buzzed in my pocket. The message was from an unknown number.

Hi Bella. It's Alice. How are you?

My stomach dropped.

"What's up?" Jacob asked as I rose from the piece of driftwood we were all sitting on.

"Nothing," I murmured, preoccupied with the text. "I'll be right back."

Making my way down towards the shore, my fingers quickly sent a reply.

Alice. Is it really you?

My phone beeped exactly two seconds later.

Unknown Caller Yes it's me. Edward found me. Thank you so much!

"Oh!" I exclaimed in a shocked whisper, covering my mouth with one hand before I shot off another message.

Are you all right? What happened?

My stomach turned as I wondered at the possibilities.

Unknown Caller Long story. Can I message you again?
My fingers frantically swept over the buttons.

*Of course! Whenever you want.* I hesitated a moment before adding, *Is Edward all right?*

"Bells!" The phone slipped from my hands as Jacob's voice boomed behind me. "Is everything okay?" he asked as I bent down to pick it up.

Discreetly, I checked to see if Alice had responded. She hadn't so I tucked the phone back in my pocket and turned to Jake. "Yeah, everything's fine."

**aDc**

I barely said goodnight to Charlie when I got home before I was racing up the stairs to my bedroom. My phone had buzzed during the drive home and I was itching to read the new text from Alice. It bothered me that I was so excited because I remembered my promise to myself to move on where Edward was concerned. *His sister, however, I thought, is not off limits.*

Plopping down on my patchwork quilt, I saved Alice's number in my phone's address book before I read the last message she had sent.

*Alice* He's fine. Helping me get better. Won't let me out of his sight :). He can be so annoyingly protective. But I need it right now. He misses you.

My throat tightened. I snapped the phone shut, not wanting to believe the words.

*Why would he miss me?* The question bounced around my head all night. I was certain that Alice was just being kind because I had helped reunite her with her brother. It just didn't seem logical that Edward would think of me with longing of any kind, not after what I had done. I had tricked him, put him and his family at risk... and I wasn't regretful. So why the hell would he miss me?

Even though I felt sure he didn't really think of me anymore, my unconscious mind played with the possibility of seeing Edward again... of being with him.

*The clearing was perfectly carved into the forest. It was spacious, round and symmetrical, and surrounded by Western Hemlocks and oaks. The grass was thick with tiny white, violet, and yellow wildflowers. I stood in the faint sunshine that streamed through the branches overhead, thinking about how familiar the place looked, though I was certain I had never been there before. I could hear the steady rhythm of water running somewhere close by. Treading through the grass, I followed the sound until a small brook came into view, just beyond the edge of the clearing. It was the most enchanting thing I had ever seen, its water flowing gently beneath fallen logs and around moss-covered stones.*

"Pretty, isn't it?"

*I spun around to see who had intruded upon my little moment of tranquility. My indignation caught in my throat as Edward stepped out of the shadow of the trees. He was casually dressed in jeans and a dove gray t-shirt with short-sleeves that outlined the contours of his chest and arms.*

"That's an understatement," I murmured, momentarily stunned by his strange colored eyes and the way they gleamed with a hint of mischief.

Edward smiled at me and the corners of his perfectly sinful lips curved up. In a flash, he was beside me, his cool hand brushing against mine. Shocked by his rapid movement, I found it difficult to speak as he laced his fingers through mine and tugged me closer.
"I agree, it is an understatement," he almost whispered. "Just like you."

"What do you mean l-like me?" I stammered embarrassingly, fighting against the urge to divert my gaze from his impenetrable one.

He raised the hand that wasn't holding mine, reaching to tuck a lock of my hair behind my ear. He dropped his hand right away, disappointing me. "Calling you pretty right now would be an understatement too. You're exquisite, Bella."

I raised an eyebrow skeptically and he bit back a chuckle.

"You never believe a word I say." Edward's tone was mocking, but there was also an undercurrent of accusation. I felt my face flush.

"Why are you here?" I demanded, masking my irritation and shame.

Edward's stare left mine and moved over the clearing carelessly. "I just hoped I'd find you here since today since it's sunny and warm."

I bit my lip as he stepped back. "Oh..."

Edward turned back to me with a weird little grin.

"What?"

"I was just thinking that I wish I could regain your trust."

Shaking my head, I muttered bitterly, "I don't trust anyone, Edward. Never have-"

"No," he cut in before I could apologize or say goodbye. "You started to trust me but then pulled away before I could tell you-"

"What?" Despite the tightness in my throat, my curiosity got the better of me.

Edward's expression became unbearably forlorn. I took a step closer, reaching one hand up to grasp his jaw between my fingers. The sharp line of skin was cold against my warm flesh. I had no idea where my bravery had come from, or how I had gone from trying to avoid the intensity of his stare to suddenly craving it.

"Tell me what?" I insisted.

"That you're mine."

Sinking back against the pillow, I brushed a stray tear that had fallen from my lashes. Though I had no idea what the dream or what Edward's last words had meant, I knew one thing for sure: I missed him. A longing unlike any I had ever felt tugged at my chest almost painfully. But I didn't know why.

Why did I feel so incredibly miserable without Edward near? Was I really that selfish? To miss him, and to desire his touch after everything that had happened? All the lies I had told him and Renee... the way I had made him believe that I trusted him while, all the while, I had been incapable of it.

"I wish we'd never met," I whispered to his absence as tears streamed down my cheeks. "I wish I'd
never involved you."

A sob shook my frame and I burrowed deeper beneath Grandma Swan's quilt, smelling lavender with notes of cinnamon in the soft fabric. Down the hall, Charlie's snoring paused and I held my breath, worried that my crying had woken him. When the snores started up again, I turned over on my side facing the wall, trying to stifle the rest of my emotions into my pillow.

aDc

Charlie's eyes bugged out a bit when came down for breakfast the next morning. "Bells... You look like hell."

I sighed, pulling my hair back with a butterfly clip. "Thanks, Dad," I muttered bitterly, going to the cupboard to get some cereal.

Charlie looked embarrassed when I turned around. "What I meant was you look tired, baby."

"Oh... Well, I had a bad dream."

I plopped down in the chair across from him, and Charlie's expression became even more concerned. He didn't seem to know what to say about my nightmares so he just nodded and continued eating his eggs and toast.

I was almost done with my cereal when he said, "You know, Mike's parents are looking for a part-time salesperson. Do you think you might be interested for the summer?"

I glanced up from my soggy Cheerios, surprised. "Oh. Yeah, maybe even longer if they need it." A part-time job at Newton's Outfitters sounded like the perfect way to keep my mind busy and away from disturbing Edward-associated thoughts.

Charlie nodded. "That sounds good. You should apply soon before the season starts picking up."

"Okay, I'll go fill out an application today."

There was silence as we finished eating. I was just gathering up our dirty dishes and taking them to the sink when Charlie scraped back his chair, lingering awkwardly near the window facing our front yard.

"Something wrong?" I asked, dumping the dishes in the sink.

"No... it's just..." Charlie hesitated and my stomach turned nervously. "I'm just worried that you're unhappy, Bells."

I cringed internally but fought to maintain an indifferent expression. "What do you mean?" I turned to pick up the sponge to scrub Charlie's plate and fork.

I heard Charlie sigh heavily behind me. "I don't know... I just worry that you're not having as much fun as you should at your age, Bells. Don't get me wrong, I'm incredibly grateful that you're not some out of control party kid, all right?"

I winced as I remembered getting drunk at the beach party at La Push. Charlie wouldn't feel very grateful if he knew about that.

"But you're always so alone, kiddo. I know I asked you this before, but do you think you and Jake could ever be more than friends?"
The spoon I was washing slipped from my fingers, landing with an audible clank in the sink. Still I kept my tone nonchalant. "No, Dad. Jake's my best friend but we're not like that. I think he likes someone else, anyway."

"What about that boy you met in Port Angeles?" Charlie prompted suddenly. The note of disapproval in his voice almost made me grin. "Do you still talk to him?"

Biting my lip, I deliberated for a second. Chances are, I'll never see or hear from Edward again so what does it matter if I lie?

"Umm... I haven't heard from him in awhile actually." I mumbled, confused as to why I had finally settled for telling Charlie the truth. But it wouldn't make any difference. Edward was long gone.

"Did you guys have a fight?"

"No, we're just not a good match. That's all."

"Why not?"

I raised one eyebrow, amazed that he was asking for details. My chest tightened as I answered reluctantly. "Someone like Edward doesn't belong with someone like me."

Charlie frowned, looking even more confused and slightly angry. "How can that be? I thought you guys had a lot in common."

I exhaled, giving up washing the dishes and turning to face him. "No, we don't, Dad. Edward is perfect and beautiful and he can have any girl he wants! So why the hell would he want a pathetic person like me?"

"What the hell does that mean?" Charlie thundered in response to my very real explanation. "If that kid can't see how perfect and beautiful you are, then he's just as stupid as he is blind. He'd be lucky to have you, Bella."

I laughed bitterly without thinking. "Oh yeah, Dad. He really hit the jackpot with me; someone broken and stunted, someone ruined inside... that's just what a guy like Edward wants!"

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I had gone too far. A deathly silence filled the kitchen and I bit down hard on my lip, twisting my hands nervously as Charlie's face drained of color. His brown eyes were huge and his throat worked as he swallowed.

"Bella..." he said slowly, looking dumbfounded. "What do you mean?"

"I..." I backtracked quickly. "I don't mean anything, Dad."

To my horror, Charlie's expression told me he wasn't going to let it slide. He took slow steps across the kitchen towards me, seeming careful yet determined. "Is there something I should know, honey?"

I rake a hand through my hair, feeling trapped. "Dad..."

"Honey, what's wrong?" Charlie wrapped his hands around my arms, steering my body around when I tried to move away.

"Dad, please... I don't feel good." My eyes stung and I felt dizzy with nausea. Charlie griped my arms even more firmly.

"Bella, just tell me. Did something happen at your mom's place? Or was it this kid, Edward? Did he
do something?"

"No!" I cried, pulling my arms free and covering my face with both hands. The walls felt like they were spinning and I leaned against the counter clumsily. "Edward didn't do anything and neither did Mom."

I choked before whispering, "It was all Jimmy's fault. Everything is his fault!"

A strange gurgling noise came out of me and I found myself sobbing into my hands. Even dead, I despised Jimmy. I thought about how I had lied to Edward and Renee, to Charlie and Jacob, even Angela, and I never hated Jimmy more. It was all that bastard's fault.

"Who's Jimmy?" Charlie's question interrupted my fury and I wiped fiercely at my cheeks, wanting to clean all the evidence of my weakness away. His voice was softer as he continued to press me. "Baby, please tell me. Who is Jimmy?"

I didn't know how to say the rest. My voice was as thin as paper and I forced myself to push out the words. "He's... he was Renee's boyfriend, back when I lived in California. When I was eight, he touched...."

I drew in a long breath, closing my eyes against the sick feeling in my stomach, and sure I was going to throw up all over Charlie and myself. But just as my knees started buckling, Charlie reached for me and I crumbled in his arms. "Dad, I'm so sorry! I couldn't-"

"Shh... Baby, calm down. Breathe now." I choked on another sob and Charlie's hands rubbed my back in a slow motion. "Easy, Bella."

My cheeks were sticky with tears but Charlie let me bury my face in his worn out plaid shirt, and I inhaled the smells of pine and tobacco that clung to it. The smell was comforting, bringing back memories of the fishing trips we had taken with Billy and Jacob when I was a kid. Back then, I had complained about having to go. But as I cried into my dad's shoulder, I wished I was five and Jacob was four, and all we cared about was hunting for sea glass on the beach.

aDc

Charlie was worried by my long crying jag and wanted to call Dr. Gerandy. Thankfully, I calmed down enough to convince him to let me drink some chamomile tea and take a nap instead. I trudged up stairs and crawled onto my bed. My head felt like a brick on my pillow and my eyes stung painfully. I was all too happy to close them and escape for a while.

"How could you be so irresponsible?"

My body jerked on the bed at the sound of Charlie's indignant voice booming up the stairs. I wasn't sure how long I had been asleep and looked blearily at the clock on the nightstand to see it was past noon.

"Oh..." I groaned, sitting up slowly and rubbing at my temples. There was a sharp pain in my neck and I realized I had fallen asleep crookedly on the mattress. And why was Charlie yelling?

Standing shakily, I tiptoed across the room and cracked open the door, listening intently as his voice lowered.

"No... she just said... I want to call the doctor but she's asleep now."

Pushing the door open wider, I tiptoed towards the stairs, lingering on the fourth step to listen to
Charlie as he spoke on the phone in the kitchen. I cringed when he said my mother's name. That was what I'd been dreading would happen the second I had confessed everything.

*But what can I do now?* I asked myself angrily. *I can't just run in there and rip the phone from his hands. It's too late...*

Charlie sounded on the verge of exploding when he spoke again. "You know, you're such a hypocrite, Renee! You go on and on about how I'm incapable of taking care of myself, let alone our daughter, when all you were the one who wasn't protecting her."

His accusation made tears spring to my eyes. I didn't want to imagine the shock and confusion on my mother's face as she stood in her house while my father told her my secret. Was she hurt? Did she feel betrayed?

"So help me, Renee," Charlie continued heatedly, "Anything she needs; counseling, medication, I'll get it for her. And don't you ever even suggest that I'm incompetent as a father because it's pretty obvious now who the poor parent is!"

He hung up, slamming the phone down violently. I quickly retreated up the stairs as a muffled ripping noise echoed from the kitchen. I had never heard my father cry before.

My phone almost slipped from my clammy fingers as I fumbled with it an hour later. The ringing pierced my ears like glass. But then it stopped and a smooth, slightly hesitant voice answered.

"Bella?"

I felt my lips form a tiny smile and I released the breath I had been holding. "Ed-Edward? Can we talk, please?"

Chapter End Notes

Hey, he picked up the phone that time, right? Before you guys get upset that Edward's been MIA, remember that Alice is a newborn. She needs to be away from humans for a while. And there's no way Edward would just leave her in such a vulnerable state - this is Edward we're talking about.

And how awesome is Charlie?

Thank you so so much for reading and sticking with us.

The next chapter will be Bella's.
Chapter 23

Thank you for reading. Sorry about the delay, friends - transitory07 had some health issues and we had to rearrange some chapters.

Chapter author: karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I say the time has come for decision
Better steer my boat for a reason
Lost the way I went over horizon
She went out of sight
The girl lost me a lifetime
"Assessment" - The Beta Band

Alice's laughter rang out behind me like a bell, making me smile. I glanced back to see her dashing nimbly through the trees with Jasper following close behind. It was cold and brilliantly sunny in the mountains, and we had been running for the better part of the day. We were far away from curious mortal eyes and free to be ourselves as we chased each other and played.

I slowed my pace to allow the others to run alongside me, and I saw in Alice's face the brilliant, happy girl I had grown up with. A feeling of rightness filled my chest as she called out for us to follow her higher, and the three of us climbed the sharp peaks effortlessly.

My sister had blossomed during our time in the mountains. She had grown to accept her new life and family, and to better understand the enormous strength and speed of her body. Her thirst was still intense, pushing her to feed every few days, but she took to hunting game with ease. Fortunately, her desire to stop killing humans outweighed her distaste for animal blood.

Finding Alice had filled the hole in my chest that had opened when she had disappeared. But an emptiness still lingered inside me, that longed for Bella.

aDc

After a few shaky first days, my sister settled into life as a member of the Cullen family. She had been rattled and deeply unsure of herself when we left the bayou in Texas. Despite my assurances, she doubted that my family would accept her, particularly when she realized that they were animal hunters. We tracked game until dawn on that first night, with Jasper and Emmett close by while Rosalie and Carlisle hung further back. Bit by bit, my words and the calming waves radiating from Jasper put Alice at ease.

We talked quietly as the cars traveled northwest, filling in the gaps that stretched over the years when Alice had been missing. She didn't want to talk about our sire, the vampire called Beni, or about her time in captivity. But her thoughts, of course, flowed unchecked and I was unable to hide my distress as I overheard them.
"Edward, what's wrong? You look like your brain is going to explode."

"It's nothing," I reassured her and then sighed when she narrowed her eyes at me. "Well, not nothing."

"And that's not at all cryptic."

I rolled my eyes at her sarcasm and pulled in a deep breath. "So... it turns out that some vampires have a little extra super in their superhuman powers."

I went on to explain my unusual ability, expecting my words to be met with skepticism if not outright disbelief. Instead, Alice simply listened and her great, crimson eyes grew wide with awe. At my suggestion, Jasper chimed in too, detailing the way he could absorb and control the emotions of others. Understanding dawned on Alice's face as he spoke and there was a knowing glint in her eye.

"That explains it then," she said quietly.

I frowned at her words and rubbed a hand over my head. "Explains what?"

"Well, a couple of things, actually. Now I understand why I feel so damned calm all of a sudden." She raised an eyebrow at Jasper. "You've been zapping me with some kind of stoner vibe, haven't you."

The sound of laughter filled the car and I caught Carlisle's amused glance in the rear view mirror. "I like her, Edward," he thought, his eyes glowing.

"My apologies, Alice," Jasper said with a sheepish grin. "I generally don't... zap people I've just met. But you're a newborn and keeping you on the calmer side has its benefits."

"It is a nice change from the way I've been feeling," Alice admitted. She took my hand in hers and gave it a bone creaking squeeze that I knew was meant to be gentle. "I'm still so thirsty. But... I'm not as scared. Or angry. Though, with all due respect to you, Jasper, I'm sure there are many reasons that I feel so different."

Jasper's mouth lifted on one side in agreement. "After five years of being holed up in that house, I completely agree."

"What about the other thing you were thinking about," I prompted. Alice's half-formed thoughts had intrigued me when I caught them and I knew the others would be as well. "You think you have a gift, too?"

"Er... whoah. That's a bit creepy." Alice's eyes popped as she realized just how well I could hear her inner monologue. "And yes, I think there's something... different. Before I was changed, my dreams were so vivid that they seemed real. Well, I think they were real because I was seeing things that were happening."

"At first I thought that I was just finally going crazy. You know, from being in that house for so long, with him watching me." Her eyes were dark when she turned them toward me and I used my free hand to pull her closer, rubbing her shoulder in comfort. "The dreams I had when I was human were nearly always about you, Edward. You were so still and beautiful in them... impossibly so. I thought it was just because I missed you so much. There was something about your eyes, too, that I didn't understand. Now that I see you, you look just the same as you did in my dream, and you have those yellow eyes. I wonder if this thing I can do was happening even then and I just didn't realize it."

Now that I don't sleep, it's as if I have waking dreams. I'm almost sure I can see things before they
happen. Or maybe I'm seeing them as they happen."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it." Alice's face creased with a frown as she considered her words, and my mind filled with images that amazed and confounded me. "I don't try to see anything. It just happens."

"What happens to you, Alice?" My voice was hushed and I could feel Jasper and Carlisle's attention on us.

"It's as if my eyes close, even though I know they're open. I stop seeing what is in front of me and instead I see something else completely... someone else. I see everything around them and what they're doing or where they're going.

"I-I-I saw him. Beni," she stammered, her eyes firing with a rage I felt in myself before Jasper sent a long wave of calm washing over us both. Alice's voice was dull when she continued. "He was smashing the equipment he used to watch me. He was burning photos of me. So many photos... he must have been taking them for years without my knowing. He was wiping out all that time that he had stolen from me."

"I saw you too, Edward. In the woods, running sometimes." A smile lit my sister's beautiful face. "Sitting at a terminal even more often. Sometimes you were driving or writing in a little book. There was a girl too, with long brown hair and dark eyes."

"Bella," I whispered. Alice's eyes grew wide with shock and then understanding. Oh, god, she can really see things. I shook my head in wonder, unsure what to think.

"Once... you were running in the street. And you looked really frightened and angry." Alice shook her head sadly. "I wished I could help. I just didn't know how."

A heavy silence met Alice's words. But a storm of collected thoughts swirled furiously in my head, until I forced my mind to close a bit, so that I could focus and really think.

"Prescience, perhaps," Carlisle said softly. "I've known a few seers over the centuries, but it is a rare gift, much like Edward's."

"Is it unusual for siblings to be gifted in this way?" Jasper wondered.

Carlisle shook his head thoughtfully. "I couldn't say. The gifts you three have are not entirely common in our kind. Two gifted members in a single coven like ours are a rare thing, never mind three.

"I've known very few siblings who were turned," he continued, glancing at Alice and me again in the mirror. "And of the few, only Edward and Alice have been gifted."

We continued west, stopping occasionally to refuel the cars as we made our way north through the great prairies and grasslands of Oklahoma and Kansas, and into Colorado.

Alice told me about the lonely girl called Bells that she had befriended on the support site, and the relationship they had created through messaging. In return, I told her a little about Bella, the real girl who had exchanged her secret for mine and then asked my help to kill a man.
"The vision I had of you running," Alice said knowingly. "That was the night the man, Chase, was killed. You were trying to reach her before anything happened."

I nodded, feeling resigned more than angry. "The things you see are the truth, Alice. Whether they are the future or the present, or even the past, I think you have no reason to doubt that they are real."

"I just wish I could control it," she said ruefully. "Especially now that I know they are real."

"You may be able to in time," Carlisle said. "After the newborn wildness has quieted and your mind is less frantic. It took Edward a little while before he understood his own gift, and how to control it, insofar as he is able."

As the day and miles passed, I realized that my compulsion to be near Bella had resurfaced with a new intensity. All through the nearly frantic trip from California to Texas, I had been able to distract myself by focusing on finding Alice. Now, with my sister finally safe and found, my body and mind were grinding with need to go to the human girl.

To compound the issue, my phone and Carlisle's chimed occasionally with messages from Esme as she slowly tracked Bella from Sacramento back to Forks. I felt Alice's keen eyes on me as I read the texts, but no one mentioned them.

Night had fallen when one particular message put a grin on Carlisle's face. "Bella's passing through Hoquiam; she should be back in Forks in about two hours."

Alice turned to me for an explanation. "Esme agreed to shadow Bella on the ride from her mother's in Sacramento back to Forks. It's a long ride for a human, and I thought it would be smart to give her an escort... even if she didn't realize she had one."

Alice narrowed her eyes at me and chuckled. "Still taking care of everyone, I see."

"Bella's rather, er, special," Jasper said dryly. "She has a tendency to get herself into trouble. Bit of a walking disaster for a human. Edward's compulsions toward protecting her are warranted."

"I understand." Alice's smile was kind. "I'd really like to tell Bella how grateful I am for her help."

"She knows, sweetheart." I ran my thumb soothingly over the smooth skin of Alice's hand. "And you will, when you can. Hopefully Bella knows how grateful to her we all are."

"But if we're not going to Washington now..." Alice trailed off in confusion.

"Esme is going to meet us at a house we have in Montana," Carlisle said. "It's a lovely place on the Wyoming border. We took Edward there when he was a newborn until he got a better handle on his thirst."

"Lots and lots of room to run." I smiled. "And lots of game to hunt. Wait until Emmett shows you how to hunt bear. You'll love it."

The Cullens accepted Alice just as they had me, with an intense combination of affection and support. While I hadn't doubted that they would, I still felt a surge of pride when I watched them with her. Carlisle and Esme answered her questions and concerns, giving her information she needed and craved. Emmett was the one that teased and roughhoused with her, and who laughed when she
accidentally uprooted trees or hurt one of us. Rosalie bought Alice clothes and boots to replace the ones that Beni had given to her, and they indulged in some long overdue girly pampering. And Jasper showed Alice how to fight and defend herself, whooping in delight when she threw Emmett across a clearing.

My sister had always been a sweet and sunny girl, with enormous energy and optimism. She was receptive to the family's attentions, but her long captivity before being changed left its mark. In the beginning, she seemed stunned by our kindness and my dead heart cracked when I thought how long she had starved for contact. The intensity of her newborn emotions frequently overwhelmed her, and she sought me out when they became too much to bear. We retreated to the woods, running and talking until her heavy head and heart had cleared.

One evening, we had left the house at sunset, five pairs of concerned eyes following us out the door. We ran deep into the night, stopping to hunt elk before continuing on. At last, we found a waterfall in a remote corner of one of the national parks, and sat beside it to watch the dawn light the sky.

"I can't believe you looked for me the whole time I was missing, Edward."

"I can't believe you would believe that I had stopped, Alice."

"I didn't believe it. I... I just didn't know if you were alive. Beni told me you had died that night in Chicago. I'm so glad he was wrong." She drew her fingers through the tall grass around us. "And they really helped you while you looked? Your family?"

"Our family, Alice. And yes, they helped me all the time. They had been waiting to meet you since the day I told them about you."

Alice smiled and nodded, and I knew that if she could have, her face would have flushed with pleasure. "Esme says that they'll be leaving in a few days."

"She and Carlisle have to go back to work," I replied. "To keep up the human facade. Rosalie and Emmett are going to back to school as well. They're already over a week late getting back from spring break, but it won't make much difference."

"What about Jasper? Isn't he leaving too?" Alice's face fell as she put the pieces together. "He's staying here to help you with me, isn't he?"

I nodded solemnly, unwilling to lie to her. "Yes. I've never done this before, Alice, and I'm still young myself. Jasper has been around lots of newborns, including me. Plus, his mood zaps, as you like to call them, made it easier for me to get through the newborn phase."

What I didn't tell Alice was that there was another, so far unspoken reason for Jasper staying on with us. Almost from the moment we had found her, I sensed something changing in my brother. He tried hard to hide it, not only from me and Alice, but from himself. Jasper, the warrior of the family, was developing a deep attachment to my sister. I was sure he sensed my understanding, but so far he had remained silent. I knew that, whatever his feelings for Alice, Jasper would stand with us as she came into her own during this first year. So I also kept silent, waiting for Jasper to be ready to confess his feelings.

"But that's not right. Now I'll be disrupting both of your lives," Alice protested sadly.

"Jasper wants to do it," I assured her. "He knows I won't leave you, but the others can't leave Port Angeles just yet-"

"Just yet?" Alice squeaked. "What does that mean?"
"After the school year ends, Rosalie and Emmett will come back here, too. At least for part of the
time. Carlisle and Esme will visit when they can."

"Oh, God, I don't like that. I really don't like being such a bother, Edward. How will Carlisle and
Esme explain why you and Jasper didn't go back to school? Oh, and Jasper will be missing
graduation!"

I burst out laughing and stuck my finger in her ribs, making her squeak. "Jasper's a grown man,
Alice; he graduated from high school before our dad was even born. And the official story is that
Jasper and I optioned to move to London with Carlisle's parent in order to go to school there. All of
this is just for appearances sake."

I stopped laughing, however, when Alice's spoke next. "Don't you miss Bella?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, Edward. You know exactly what I mean."

And of course, I did.

"Will you tell me about her?" Alice shook her head when I opened my mouth to protest that I already
had. "No, sweetie. I don't need her bio, or to hear about the things that I could find out from any her
friends at school. I want to know the Bella that you know. The girl that you think about every time
you have a quiet moment. The girl that calls and texts you every few days and that you never
answer. I want to hear about the girl that you would dream about if you could sleep, Edward."

I chewed my lip for a moment before I stood and offered Alice my hand. "You're a little scary, you
know. And smug."

"You forgot older than you, now," she said, swinging our joined hands together gently.

"Smug bordering on insufferable." I snorted when Alice snarled lightly. "But since you asked me
nicely instead of ripping me to pieces, who am I to refuse?"

I talked the entire way back to the house and by the time we got there, the sun was up. Alice had
been quiet for a long time. It was a relief to have finally told her and to unburden myself. Her pensive
expression, however, made me uneasy.

"Why didn't you say something about this before? About the way she makes you feel?" My sister
kept her eyes on the ground as she spoke, as if unsure of her words. "Does the mating urge
embarrass you?"

"No," I said slowly. "My inability to control what I feel is a bit humiliating. The desire and the need
to be near Bella; they just do not stop. They never will stop, even if she decides she doesn't want me
or if she moves away. The urge will draw me to her, over and over, no matter if I want it or not.
Even now, while I'm here with you and Jas, I'm fighting the urge to go to her."

I frowned and stopped walking. "But what really scares me is that I think she could ask me nearly
anything... and I wouldn't be able to refuse."

aDc

The house was quiet after Carlisle and the others went back to Port Angeles. I missed them, but I
knew that life was simpler with just Alice, Jasper, and me. We toured the mountains and woods
around us every day, hunting and exploring, and talking, always talking.
Alice was understandably fascinated by my ability to hear thoughts and Jasper's powers as an empath. As she grew to understand how we experienced and used our gifts, she grew more comfortable with her own. With time, it became clear that my sister was indeed a seer, and able to predict events that had not yet occurred.

As the weeks passed, Bella's calls and texts tapered off. As much as I dreaded her stopping entirely, I couldn't bring myself to answer them. There was so much we needed to say to each other, and I felt strongly that we needed to say them in person. But how could we have those desperately needed conversations when I couldn't count on anything beyond the next few moments?

I felt myself withdraw slightly, and turned inward with my thoughts and insecurities about my friendship with Bella. My continued quietness concerned Alice and Jasper, despite my reassurances that I was all right. The concern I heard in their thoughts rubbed at my already frayed nerves and I began closing my mind more and more often. Unfortunately, that meant that I never saw Alice's questions about Bella coming.

"Edward, would it be all right with you if I called Bella?"

We were walking toward the waterfall we had found a few weeks before. I saw Jasper frown slightly as he looked toward us, though he stayed silent.

My compulsion, always humming inside me, leapt painfully at the thought of hearing Bella's voice. The rush of anger that followed shocked me with its intensity. "No. That would not be all right, Alice."

The expression that came over Alice's face was one I knew well, and one that she wore when she was preparing to argue. But I couldn't bring myself to even listen; the emotions I felt were too raw. I turned in the direction we'd come and made for the house, ignoring Alice's calls to come back. The sound of Jasper's voice soothing her told me she was more than safe if I left her alone for a little while.

Back at the house, I sat at the piano for a long time and used the music to soften my sharp edges. It was hours later and I was calmer when Alice slipped onto the piano bench to sit at my side.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Edward," she said quietly.

I let my hands go still on the keys though I couldn't bring myself to look at her. "I know. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"Why don't you go back to Washington for a little while? I think you need to see Bella."

"I can't leave, Alice."

"Yes, you can. Jasper can handle me at this point and that would be give you time to see her for a few days and then come back here."

"That's the problem, Alice. It wouldn't be a few days," I said sadly. "This mating urge isn't something I can turn off. If I see Bella, I won't want to come back. Not even for you."

My sister's face grew solemn as she absorbed my words and her voice was small when she spoke again. "I see. Maybe I could come with you, then. You and Jasper are always telling me how well I'm doing."

I shook my head immediately and sighed when her face fell. "It's just too dangerous, Alice. Don't misunderstand me; you are doing beautifully. You're much farther along at this point in your first
year than I was."

Alice scoffed and I hastened to reassure her further. "At this rate, you won't need to hide up here for the full year. You'll still need one of us with you when you are near humans, which is to be expected. But as far as going to Forks right now... it's too soon and it would be incredibly difficult for you."

"Then you should go and leave me behind."

"Absolutely not."

"But why?" Alice demanded. "There's no reason for you to be stuck out here babysitting me. For once, Edward, do something to make yourself happy."

"I'm doing that right now," I replied calmly. "I mean it when I say that the Cullens are my family now. But you are the only thing I have left from the life I used to know, Alice, and you were gone for five years. I just got you back. Can you blame me for not wanting to leave you just yet?"

"No," Alice whispered. "And I'm so glad you're here to help me with this. Having you and Jasper, and the others... I can't thank you enough. But I don't like to think that you're unhappy, Edward. You miss Bella, I know it."

Her expression was so forlorn, I sighed and grabbed her hand. "Yes, I do miss her. I want to see her, very badly. But I'm not entirely unhappy, honestly."

I put my hands back on the keys and played a song I'd been turning over in my head, just idle, pretty notes without real shape yet.

"Would you let me call her?" Alice asked. "Or just send a text message? I think she needs to hear from us, Edward. And since you're too damned stubborn to call her yourself-"

"Okay, yes," I said with a groan. She was so eager as she pulled her phone from her pocket, that I couldn't help chuckling while I gave her Bella's number.

"Just don't do anything weird, Alice, or promise her things that you can't back up. I mean it. I know you want to thank her for helping us, but she deserves to live her own life, too, without our making it any more complicated than it might already be."

Alice nodded solemnly and I changed the music, playing the pieces she had loved most when we were growing up. She and Bella exchanged several messages while I played, moving from Alice's songs on to our mother's favorites after a while. By the time Jasper joined us, Alice's mood had lifted and she was ready to hunt. She gave me a soft smile and murmured her thanks before leading the way outside.

aDc

Alice and Jasper were fight training the next morning when my phone rang and I saw Bella's name on the screen. I hesitated for a long moment before picking up the call. My longing was intense enough without having heard Bella's voice for nearly two months; I knew that hearing it now would make things that much more difficult for me. But I couldn't stop myself from answering. I didn't want to stop myself.

I heard enough in the second before I spoke to know that I had made the right decision. Bella's breathing was rapid and unsteady, and I knew that if we were in the same room, her heart would be pounding with distress.
My free hand curled into a fist and I forced myself to control the alarm rising in my chest. "Bella?"

"Ed-Edward? Can we talk, please?"

Chapter End Notes

Seems like Alice is coming along nicely, no? :) And she's certainly keeping Edward and Jasper on their toes.

Thank you so much for reading.

The next chapter should be Bella's. We hope to update this coming week, but please bear with us while transitory07 recovers from her health issues. She says she's feeling much better!

If you donated for the Fandom 4NKH cause, you should have (or should shortly) received your compilation. Hope you enjoy the outtake, Hidden! We'll also be posting in July, once we have the go ahead from the cause organizers to do so.

If you enjoy non-canon stories, make sure you check out the Non-Canon Awards - some of my favorites have been nominated. My slashy o/s, All Over Again, is there, too, and thanks to whomever nominated me! http://thenon-canonawards.blogspot.com.au/p/voting.html
And pops stayed the same and your mom moved away.
How many of our parents seem to make it anyway?
We're just fumbling through the grey,
Trying to find a heart that's not walking away.
Turn the lights down low, walk these halls alone.
We can feel so far from so close.
Like ships in the night, you keep passing me by.
Just wasting time, trying to prove who's right.
"Ships in the Night" - Matt Kearney

Settling back against my pillow, I breathed a shaky sigh of relief that Edward had answered his phone. For a moment, I was so fascinated by the silky tone of his voice that I almost missed his question.

"Sorry, what?"

"What's wrong, Bella?"

I cleared my throat and wiped away the remaining moisture on my cheeks. "I told Charlie... about Jimmy."

There was a short pause. The he asked very softly, "Are you okay?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest. I didn't mean to tell him. It just slipped out and then I couldn't stop crying-" I paused, choking back a sob.

"Okay, sweet-" Edward cut himself off abruptly before saying, "Bella, stay calm, okay? Can you do that for me please?"

"Uh-huh." I sighed, wondering if he was going to call me "sweetheart" before realizing it was probably a mistake. The possibility of that was excruciating. I waited until my breathing was steady again before speaking. "I've ruined everything, haven't I?"

Edward was silent on the other line and I gripped the phone tighter against my ear. "Edward, I don't expect you to believe a word I say or forgive me for lying to you. But I want you to know that I wish I had never gotten you involved."

I heard Edward sigh quietly and continued anyway. "I wish we'd never met, honestly, because then I wouldn't have hurt you like I did. I should've done it all myself and I don't blame you for not wanting
"Bella, what the hell are you talking about?"

The cutting note in his voice shut me up right away.

"If we'd never met, you would've found James and killed him on your own, right?" Edward demanded. "Then you would've killed yourself to avoid going to prison."

I nodded, mutely, stunned by his furious tone. Of course, he couldn't see me nod so I was forced to speak, though my voice came out very small. "Right..."

Edward sighed again, and sounded incredibly frustrated. "So how is that better than if I hadn't helped you?"

"I don't know, Edward," I replied honestly. "I don't know what to say."

"Bella, just tell me one thing."

"Anything." Fresh warm tears were threatening to spill from my eyes.

"Were you lying when you said you loved me?"

My shoulders tensed at his words. I let them sag, feeling suddenly exhausted. "No. I meant it."

"But?" he prompted, knowing there was a catch.

"But putting an end to Jimmy was more important," I admitted miserably.

Edward didn't respond and I let the tears fall freely down my cheeks. "I'm sorry-"

"Don't."

I ignored him even as he cut me off. "I'm sorry, Edward! If I was different... if I was a different person, Edward, someone noble and forgiving, maybe I'd be good enough for you. I can't change the fact that Jimmy left me angry and ashamed and hurt. No matter what I do, I can't change that!"

"Okay, Bella, please breathe."

I sunk further beneath the quilt, sighing heavily. "I'm sorry..."

"I know, Bella. Please stop apologizing. I didn't mean to upset you but I was angry too, okay?" He sounded like he was trying to persuade me to be reasonable. "You said a lot of things in Sacramento, and now I have to wonder if they were true."

"I understand," I said feebly, feeling thoroughly ashamed.

"So just tell me now if it was true or not... please." His voice hardened a little when he added, "You owe me at least that."

There were no sounds coming from downstairs because Charlie had left for work shortly after his heated conversation with Renee. I wasn't worried about him overhearing.

"It was true, Edward. I meant it when I told you that I love you."

There was a minute of silence. My heartbeat gradually slowed. Then Edward asked gently what
Charlie had said when I had told him my secret.

"He wanted to call the doctor," I responded somberly. "Then he called my mom and started yelling at her."

Edward said tentatively, "Well, you can't blame him for being upset."

I exhaled a shuddering breath. "I know."

"He's probably in shock, Bella. I'm sure he has no idea what to do."

"Yeah."

"Alice is here," he said, switching topics without warning. "And we both want you to know how grateful we are to you for helping us find each other."

I froze for a moment, unsure of what to say. Edward, however, wasn't finished. "I know we've both sent messages to say thank you. But I wanted you to hear me say it. Thank you, Bella."

"You're welcome," I murmured, feeling my face flush at the soft sincerity in his voice.

"Alice says she misses you and is thinking about you."

Hearing those words brought a tiny smile to my lips. "Really?"

"Yes. She wants to know if she can message you again later."

I chuckled awkwardly. "Charlie's Internet is crap, I'm afraid, but chat and messaging always seem to work."

"I'll tell her that. Though, I could always send Emmett over there and he can install something decent-"

"Don't even think about it, rich boy."

I laughed more easily now, hopeful that we were falling back into the carefree banter from earlier months. I could almost picture Edward's teasing crooked smile when he said, "Just offering."

The mention of Alice, however, called a lot of questions into my head.

"Edward, what happened when you found Alice?" My tone was serious again and I sat up in bed, paying close attention.

"We found her in a house near a town called Uncertain in east Texas."

"Uncertain? Isn't that pretentious?" Edward's chuckle from the other end was short and captivating.

"I guess you could say that, though we hardly saw the town at all, to be honest. So it's pretty appropriate." His tone sobered as he continued. "Alice was abandoned by the vampire who changed her... and me."

My eyes widened. "Alice was b-bitten? By the same vampire?"

"Yeah," Edward replied grimly. "The vampire, Beni, she called him, lost control of his bloodlust. He fed on her and then left her for dead... alone."
I heard Edward's swallow at the other end of the line.

"Edward, I..." I trailed off, uncertain how to finish. His pain was obvious in his voice, and I wanted to console him somehow.

"She's fine now," he said swiftly. "After the transformation, she had to hunt on her own, but we're teaching her our lifestyle and she's been doing really well."

I briefly wondered why Edward didn't just say that Alice had been hunting humans. Was it possible that after all the horrible things we had both witnessed, he was still trying to sugarcoat things to protect me? *Ridiculous boy. Why would he do that?*

"That's good to hear," I said truthfully. "I'm glad Alice is safe."

Edward continued hesitantly, "Yes, though she needs some time to... get used to the thirst."

"You mean she needs time to learn to control it?" I pressed for clarification, though I was sure that was what he meant. I just wanted to hear him say it.

"You don't make it easy, do you?" He sounded disgruntled. "Yes, she needs some time to learn how to manage the thirst. Jasper and I take her hunting every couple of days. The other night she took down two deer and a grizzly, though she complained about the sour taste of 'smelly, disease-infected fur balls.'"

The sound of Edward's musical laugh echoed through the phone and I smiled involuntarily. "I still can't imagine it."

"What?"

"Hunting," I mused, lying back against the quilt. "Taking down a grizzly with no weapons, it sounds so... unbelievable. But then..."

I trailed off, remembering the unnatural invincibility of Edward's body as he hovered over me in Jimmy's kitchen bullets bounced harmlessly off his back. The memory disturbed me, but it also ignited a strange feeling of admiration and desire in me. I found myself wondering just how strong Edward was.

"I don't want you to imagine us hunting," Edward said disapprovingly, bringing me back to the moment.

"Oh Edward," I sighed. "I think I've seen scarier things."

"I'm sure you have," he answered grimly.

I knew at once that he was thinking of the way he had lost control on the night Jimmy had died. "Edward, I didn't mean-"

"I have to go now, Bella."

"Oh!" I sat up, startled by his abruptness. I was stunned by his next words and the hesitation I heard in his voice.

"Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Y-yeah... of course you can!" I hoped he couldn't tell how ridiculously excited I was at the prospect of talking to him again. *How embarrassing.*
"All right. Take care of yourself, Bella."

"Yeah, you too, Edward." My chest twisted painfully as I hung up.

aDc

Charlie watched me like a hawk during dinner that night. He insisted on bringing pizza so I didn't have to cook, though I had found a recipe for shepherd's pie in Grandma Swan's old cookbook and was eager to try it. I didn't put up much of a fight when I saw the caring look in my father's eyes. It struck me that he was still worried about me.

"Bells?" Charlie said during a commercial break. We were eating in the living room, while Charlie watched a baseball game and I thumbed through a new copy of The Beautiful and the Damned.

"Yeah, Dad?"

Charlie hesitated and then muted the volume on the TV. He turned to gaze at me from his armchair, and I suppressed a groan when I saw his troubled expression.

"Bells, I was wondering if you'd like to talk to someone other than your mom and me. About what happened to you, I mean."

My eyes widened and I straightened in my seat on the couch. He couldn't actually mean….

"Talk to someone, like who?"

Charlie frowned. "A psychologist, Bella. Dr. Gerandy suggested one and I think it might be a good idea-"

"No," I said at once.

"Just go to one session."

"Dad, I'm not going to talk about my life to some stranger!" I exclaimed, throwing the book down on the coffee table.

"A psychologist is someone who can help you-"

"Help me?" Without meaning to, I raised my voice. "Talking to a therapist won't help, Dad. To do that, we'd all have to go back in time and erase what happened when I was eight!"

"Bella, just stop it," Charlie interrupted sternly. "There's no erasing anything and we both know it. It would do you good to talk about what happened."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "I don't want to talk about it, Dad! I just want to forget everything."

Charlie's frown deepened and his tone was even more grim. "Right, because you've done such a great job at forgetting it up until now? I'm not stupid, Bella. I didn't know about what had happened to you in California, but I did know you were unhappy. You don't have many friends, you hardly eat, and you hardly go out. You have bad dreams almost every night. That's not normal behavior, baby, and don't you dare tell me that it is."

The retort I had been about to make died on my lips. "Y-you knew about the bad dreams?"

Charlie sighed, dropping his gaze to the remote in his hand. "I always thought you'd tell me when you were ready."
My stomach twisted painfully and I looked down at my hands in my lap.

"Honey, I know I'm not good at this parenting thing," Charlie continued softly. "But-

"You're fine, Dad," I mumbled shamefully.

When I looked up and met his gaze across the tiny living room, his eyes had taken on a sudden hardness. "Fine doesn't cut it! And fine isn't good enough. You need to work on this stuff and so do I."

His voice wavered with unexpected emotion as he spoke. "We... we need to make sure you're happy and have a good life."

I fingered the hem of my shirt awkwardly. "My life is fine."

"You deserve better than 'fine', baby."

We were silent for a long moment and it was only when Charlie turned the volume on the TV back on that I spoke. "Okay."

Charlie's head snapped back in my direction. "Okay?"

"I'll go... I'll go to counseling."

aDc

Charlie called the counselor, Carmen Delgado, the next day to set up an appointment. As the day of the appointment approached, however, I grew more troubled and anxious.

Charlie was worried about my state of mind and hoped that I would be able to work out some of the trauma I had experienced with Jimmy. I knew, however, that I couldn't be completely honest with Carmen about some of the important things in my life. I couldn't tell her that the boy I thought I loved was, in fact, not human. I couldn't tell her that he was a mind-reading vampire with superhuman strength and speed, otherworldly good looks, and a suppressed craving for human blood. If I say those things, I'll be sent to an asylum for sure.

The best I could do was keep as close to the truth as possible, and even that filled me with a dreadful unease. Could I tell Carmen how I really felt, then and now? Could she really help me? Could I tell her what had happened in Sacramento while still protecting Edward and the Cullens?

I hadn't dared tell Edward about the counseling during the short talks we managed to have every few days. But Charlie seemed to think my seeing Carmen was the best thing, and Renee had expressed her agreement when we spoke a few days before.

My chest tightened when I recalled the afternoon my mother had phoned after my shift at Newton's. I had been working there a week and Mike was overly excited about his parents hiring me. I wondered if he was grateful for the extra help, or if his excitement was something that Angela referred to as his "ridiculous schoolboy crush." For Mike's sake, I hoped it wasn't the latter because it made things awkward between Jessica and me. She kept showing up at the store for no reason other than to make sure Mike hadn't asked me out yet.

Jessica had been paying one of her visits to Newton's when Renee called me.

"Hi, Mom," I murmured from behind the counter, hoping Mrs. Newton wouldn't come out of the office and accuse me of moping on the job. Mike was restocking the camping aisle, and pretending
to listen to Jessica babble about a movie that she was dying to see.

"Hey, honey, how are you?" Renee's voice sounded a bit off and I heard a note of false cheer.

"I'm at work now, Mom. Can I call you back when I get home? I should be done here around 4:30."
I glanced at the clock on the wall behind me.

"Oh, of course! I forgot you got a job. How's that going?"

"It's fine. Nothing special, but it's not bad or anything."

"That's great, honey. Well, I'll call you back at 5:30," she promised. "That should give you time to get home from work."

"Sure thing, Mom. Talk to you soon."

I hung up just as Mrs. Newton walked back out on the floor. Luckily, she was too busy eyeballing Jessica and Mike to notice that I hadn't been working. In very short order, Jessica was sent on her way and Mike and I were busy restocking not only the camping aisle but the hunting aisle, too. I decided to let Mike deal with the handguns and rifles.

Mike and I were busy for the rest of the afternoon, but I still managed to spend a lot of time worrying about Renee's call. My mom and I had spoken several times since the night I had spilled my secret, and every call was awkward and emotional, with neither of us knowing what to say.

After work, I went home and distracted myself by making Grandma Swan's shepherd's pie. I liked the soothing rhythms of chopping, measuring, and mixing because they untangled my thoughts. I had finished browning the meat when Renee called me back.

"Hi, Mom," I said, bringing the potatoes to the table to peel and chop while I talked.

"Hey, honey. Is this still a good time to talk?"

My hands slowed in their action when I heard the hesitation in my mother's voice. "Sure, I'm just making dinner. What's on your mind?"

"Your father told me that you agreed to see a counselor. And I know... I know how hard that must be for you, because you are so private." She sighed, and I heard a slight shake when she exhaled. "I just wanted to tell you that I think it's a really good idea for you to talk to someone."

I said nothing for a moment. Instead, I watched my hands slice the potatoes and drop them into the pot of waiting water. "You think so?"

"Yes, Bella, I do. Your dad and I... well, we don't want you to keep everything inside any more. You should talk about what happened to you. I know you can't talk about it with us, but-"

"Mom, I don't want to talk about it with anyone," I grumbled and got to my feet. Moving quickly, I carried the pot of potatoes and water to the stove, slamming it down on a burner and setting it to boil. "It isn't just you or Dad, or anyone else. I think it's a bad idea to-"

"I'm sorry, baby." Renee's voice was quiet when she interrupted me. "I should have known what he was doing."

My breath caught and I froze, my heart thumping in my chest. I swallowed hard against the tears that
were burning my eyes and throat. I am so sick of crying all the time.

"I didn't do my job to protect you and I want you to know how sorry I am. If I could take it all back, I would in a heartbeat." Little sniffles told me Renee was crying and I closed my eyes as I struggled to control my emotions.

"There's nothing I can do to make up for what happened back then. But your dad and I, and Phil... we want to help make this better. And talking about the things that happened will help you, I know it."

"Thanks, Mom," I croaked out. "I hope you're right."

"I want you to be happy again, Bella. I would really like to see that, someday."

aDc

Carmen's warm smile lit up her brown eyes. She made me a cup of chamomile tea with honey and sat in a chair across from mine while she told me a little about herself. I watched her, and listened to her clear, gentle voice. I didn't understand how, but she made me feel like I was talking to someone familiar, though we had met only ten minutes before.

"Since we're getting to know each other, Bella, I thought maybe you could tell me a little about yourself."

"Sure," I said slowly. "To be fair, I think I should tell you that my coming here was my Dad's idea."

Carmen nodded and sipped her tea. "Okay, I appreciate your honesty. Most of the people I talk to don't want to be here in the beginning. My advice to anyone new to counseling is always the same: come to three sessions before you make a final decision about continuing."

I blew out a long breath and tried not to make a face. "Three sessions, huh?"

"Don't look so disheartened," Carmen said with a kind laugh. "Look at it this way: you've already got one down just by being here today."

aDc

I spent a long time sitting out in the parking lot in my truck after my session with Carmen ended. I hadn't said anything very revealing to Carmen, though the idea that I could have made my stomach knot so tightly it hurt to breathe. Just as I was considering calling Charlie, my phone rang and Edward's name flashed over the screen.

"Edward?"

"Hi, Bella. Alice... she said you were having a hard time today. I was worried. Are you all right?"

"Alice, said that, huh?" I laughed weakly through my surprise. "Does she do that a lot?"

"More and more," Edward admitted. "It's a little weird. Okay, it's a lot weird. It's something that she can do now, a lot like the, er, extras that Jasper and I have. It seems that my sister is a bit of a fortune teller and we're just going to have to get used to it."

"You guys are a little scary, you know," I murmured and managed to smile when Edward chuckled in agreement.
Many of you have expressed your annoyance with Edward for being MIA. That was a nod to NM canon, of course. Now that he and Bella have spoken, we're sure you'll have some more opinions you'd like to share. :)

Thank you so much for reading.

The next chapter will be Bella's. We hope to update next week, but please bear with us while transitory07 continues her recovery.
Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. This chapter was ready to go yesterday but FFn was not. Booo.

Chapter authors: transitory07 and karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I am the loser, can you love me just as?
I am the broken, can you mend me just as?
Hold me in your arms.
"In Your Arms" - Jason Zerbin

Carmen rushed into the office, shrugging out of her cream leather jacket. "I'm sorry I'm late," she declared, setting her purse on the desk against the wall and grabbing a notebook and pen. "There's this workshop I go to on Wednesdays in Tacoma."

I smiled gently, staring at the rip in my jeans. It was time I went shopping. "It's fine."

Carmen sat down in the armchair across from me, smiling warmly as she always did during out our sessions. Sometimes her unconditional kindness was infuriating.

"How are you feeling today?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Well, has something happened this week to make you unsure of your feelings?"

Frustrated, I swept a lock of hair behind my ear. In the past two months, Edward and I had been communicating back and forth through email and the occasional phone conversation. I looked forward to hearing his honeyed voice but it always left me longing to see him in the end. I had told Carmen what I could about Edward during one of our earlier sessions. And I had told her how intelligent and sweet he was, and how he made me feel special even though I clearly wasn't.

"I miss him," I said quietly.

Carmen cocked her head. "Who?"

"Edward. He said he's out of town now. I don't know when he's coming back. We talk sometimes on the phone."

"And what do you think of these conversations?" Carmen asked curiously.

A tiny smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. "They're the best part of my day."

"Well, that's nice!"

I ignored Carmen's wide genuine grin, however. "I told Edward I love him. He didn't say it back."
There was a pause and I continued. "I'm not expecting him to say it back but I've said it twice already. Once was just after I had told him about being molested. I told him that I know I'm unworthy but that I wish I was because I love him."

"And what did Edward say?"

My eyes misted over. "He kissed me."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes. I liked it very much."

"And what did Edward say regarding the abuse?"

An image of Edward and I standing on the pier in Port Angeles flashed through my mind, his hands gripping the wooden railing and breaking it when I told him about Jimmy touching my private parts...

I breathed in slowly. "He was upset and angry."

Carmen tapped her pen against the notepad in her hands. "Angry at you?"

"No... at Jimmy. He said he doesn't like it when I say that I'm damaged."

Carmen smiled softly. "I think that's very considerate and understanding of Edward. It seems from what you've shared with me, that he really cares about you."

I didn't respond. It seemed ludicrous that Edward would love me back. But then, what of those kisses we had shared? The shivering, mind-blowing caresses? And, most of all, his protective and caring attitude? Why was always asking me what I was thinking without volunteering secrets of his own?

"Perhaps it would be wise to find out how Edward feels before getting in any deeper," Carmen suggested.

I almost laughed. If only she knew how deep in I already was!

"But I already told him," I argued pathetically. "And he didn't say he loved me back. Doesn't that already prove he doesn't feel the same?"

Carmen's dark eyes were gentle when I looked up. "Not necessarily. Sometimes actions do speak louder than words. Would you say he's been a good friend to you?"

I nodded. "Definitely."

"And he makes you happy?"

"Yes, but he also makes me sad because I'm not good enough!"

Carmen leaned forward, uncrossing her legs. "Bella, you have to stop listening to these distorted thoughts in your head that keep saying you're not good enough. Edward thinks you are and so do I."

She was gazing at me intently and I squirmed, wanting to run suddenly from the room. I mumbled, "But I can't sleep with him."

Carmen frowned. "Would you repeat that? I don't understand..."
I exhaled sharply, fidgeting on the couch. "I can't give Edward what every normal person can! As much as I want to and dream about being intimate with him, I'm terrified because I know I can't do it. And why would he want to be with someone who's such an emotional wreck?"

My eyes stung and I leaned back against the cushions. Carmen did the same in her chair. Her expression was patient and nonjudgmental.

"Bella, there's no such thing as 'normal'. People aren't having as much sex as they say they are I can assure you. The media greatly exaggerates things."

"But everyone can do it," I interrupt feverishly. "Have sex… that's what I mean."

Carmen shook her head again. "Bella, that's not true. Do you know why?"

I glanced away towards the painting on the wall.

"One out of every four people has been sexually molested in some way or other. That means that most of the population on this planet has gone through something similar to you."

I didn't answer, not even when she said, "You're not the only one with these fears and insecurities."

Of course, I knew other kids had been molested as well. In my mind, that didn't make things any more fair or easier.

After a long moment, Carmen asked mildly, "When Edward touches you, how do you feel?"

Without looking at her, I said, "He makes me feel safe. It... feels good when he touches me."

My heart twisted longingly as the memory of me sitting in Edward's lap as he kissed my lips and throat returned with all its sweetness. I would have given anything to relive that moment. "But I'm afraid of going further."

"That's understandable."

"I'm afraid that if we don't, though, he won't want me anymore."

It had already been too long. Not only did Edward not say 'I love you' back, but we hadn't physically touched each other since our stay in California either. I had no idea what he wanted to do with our relationship, if we even had one, and it was frustrating.

"Bella," Carmen's voice drifted firmly across the short distance between our selected seats. "If Edward breaks up with you because he's tired of waiting for sex, then he doesn't deserve your love and respect. You didn't ask to be abused. This isn't your fault."

A tear rolled down my cheek as I sat in my truck in the parking lot that afternoon. Then my eyes were blurry with about twenty of them, and pretty soon, a sob escaped my throat.

I buried my face in my hands, trying to hide my shame from anyone passing by. The phone in the front pocket of my purse buzzed.

Pulling it out, I glanced briefly at the name on the screen.

Alice.
I ignored it.

His lips were wintry and delicious against my tongue. The only problem was that he pulled away.

"I want you," I blurted out embarrassingly, taking a step forward as he backed up against the trunk of a young spruce.

His mouth turned up slightly in a half smile, though his eyes remained dark and even a little chilling.

"I want you too but not here, sweetheart."

My cheeks flushed. "I didn't mean we should-

Edward grabbed my hand, pulling me ferociously towards an embankment of moss and fallen trees.

"Follow me."

I stumbled beside him, trying to not trip on anything. "That's kinda hard to do when you're moving so fast!" I exclaimed, out of breath as we cut through the damp leaves.

He halted suddenly, jerking my arm. I cried out in pain and he glanced down apologetically.

"I'm sorry." He lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss on the inside of my wrist. "You're right. There's a better way we can get there without my hurting you."

"Which is?"

My heart beat unsteadily as Edward flashed a mischievous grin. In one swift, barely perceptible motion, he swept me up into his arms. Then he started running.

Except it felt like flying... I couldn't even hear the sound of his feet on the ground as he tore through the forest, holding me tightly against his chest. Blue Jays and cardinals watched us curiously from the tops of the hemlocks and the air was heavy with the fresh scent of rain.

Edward came to a full stop in front of an adorable cabin standing between two cedars. There was a rocking chair on the porch, a swing, and a little round table off to the side where a vase of yellow and white daisies sat. Edward set me down, and took my hand when my knees buckled.

We walked slowly to the door. He unlocked it wordlessly. The sweet smell of honeysuckle hit me as we stepped inside the warm space. But I barely register ed my surroundings as Edward shut the door and spun me around, pressing my body against door.

"Now this is where I want to make love to you, Miss Swan," he whispered in my ear before dropping his lips to the skin beneath and licking down my neck slowly.

I shivered. "This is nice," I murmured, threading my fingers through his hair.

"Just nice?"

Edward gripped my waist with both hands and hoisted my body up so I could wrap my legs around his midsection. I pressed my mouth eagerly against his.

Edward carried me to the bedroom, my arms locked around his neck and my nails sliding on the indestructible skin of his nape as he groaned in my mouth.

As I broke off our kiss, I couldn't help grinning at the spark of lust in his topaz eyes.
"You like torturing me?" He demanded, setting me down carefully on top of the quilt covering the beautiful vintage bed.

The smile didn't fall from my lips. "I thought you enjoyed that kind of... torture."

His grin mirrored mine as he leaned forward and buried his face in my neck, his hand slipping under my shirt. It was the first time he had touched my breasts... and his touch felt extraordinarily good.

I wanted to stay in the dream, dwelling on the make-believe feel of Edward's cool hands unhooking my bra and teasing my breasts, his fingers circling my nipples.

Unfortunately, my alarm clock tore me away from the dream with its shrill wail. I lay in the dim morning light, gazing dazedly up at the ceiling.

It's almost September, I remembered.

My birthday was only a few weeks away.

"Why does she look like that?" Alice murmured. She frowned slightly as she watched the Jeep swing around in a circle before Emmett parked it.

I poked her gently with my elbow to make her smile. "She's a little surprised by our appearance, from what I understand. She thinks we look a bit... feral."

"Oh," Alice replied faintly. I chuckled when she glanced first at Jasper and me, and then looked down at herself before running her hands over her hair.

"Don't mind Rose." Jasper grinned and deliberately shook his head to make his hair even wilder. "She hasn't had to go off underground for a few years and she forgets that the last thing you need out here are designer duds.

"Besides, E's got the worst hair among the three of us – she'll be all over him like a hound on a squirrel."

Alice tried to control her snorting giggles but only laughed harder when she looked at the crazy mess of hair on my head. She was leaning against me and holding her sides when Rosalie and Emmett got out of the car and made their way over to us.

"What the hell have you guys been doing with yourselves? I know it's rugged up here, but dressing like lumberjacks isn't a requirement."

Rosalie assessed us critically, taking in our plain boots, jeans, and shirts before turning her attention to our heads. As predicted, her eyes flew immediately to my hair and she scowled when I pulled a black knit hat from my pocket and slid it over my head.

"Well, well, well," Emmett said, his eyes twinkling. "Looks like there was a three-for-one sale on flannel shirts in town. Have you three been hunting wabbits?"

"Don't worry, Emmett." Alice's voice and face were grave as she faced him. "I saved you a couple of bears."

My brother had time to raise one eyebrow at her before she wheeled around and dashed into the trees.
with Jasper and I following. Almost immediately, I heard the sound of two additional pairs of flashing feet behind us. Rosalie chuckled as she fell in step beside Alice.

"Show us your stuff, newborn," she said with a wide smile, her hair streaming out behind her in the wind.

Alice winked and leaped high into the air before bounding ahead. "Try to keep up!"

Alice led us to the hidden waterfall after we had finished hunting, telling Rosalie and Emmett shyly that the place had become a favorite of hers. We sat together to talk and share news, all of us looking forward to Esme and Carlisle's arrival later in the week. Between the charades of the human jobs and school, it would mark the first time that the whole family would be reunited since bringing Alice to Montana.

"There's a rumor going around the school that you impregnated some human girl, Jasper." Rosalie wrinkled her nose in laughter when Jasper's mouth fell open. "Apparently you were then sent away to military school."

"It's true," Emmett agreed. "Although some are now saying that the girl is a brunette from the area and Edward is the transgressor. Carlisle packed you off to prep school on the East Coast when the truth was discovered."

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. "Really? That's the best they could come up with?"

"Well it's your own fault," Emmett said. "You took Bella out to eat in Port Angeles; you had to know someone was going to notice."

I didn't bother to look up. "I bought her a sandwich, Em. And some pie. Hardly a whirlwind romance."

Naturally, Alice needed to know more and turned to me eagerly. "Did you and Bella go on a date?"

"Not exactly," I said and raised my face to look at her earnestly. "It was more of a getting-to-know-you type of thing than a date."

Her wide amber eyes looked disappointed. "Are you sure it wasn't a date?"

"Edward outed himself as a vampire and the Swan girl asked him to help her kill someone, Alice," Rosalie said quietly. She gave me a small, comforting smile. "I'm pretty sure that qualifies as more of a getting-to-know-you type of thing."

We were quiet for a little while, though I could both see and hear Alice fretting. We had talked about the online conversations she had shared with Bella, and I knew she was thinking about them too.

"Bella does like you, Edward," she said. "She told me so herself when we were messaging."

"She's told me too," I replied. I still hadn't found the courage to tell anyone that Bella had declared that she loved me… or that she had admitted that killing James Chase had been more important to her than our feelings.

"What about you, Edward?" Alice asked gently. "Do you have feelings for Bella?"

I blew out a long breath and looked at the faces around me. "I don't know, honestly. I care about her,
very much. And I... I think I would be drawn to her even outside of the mating urge."

"Really?" Jasper was intrigued.

"I was watching her even before I realized there was something else pushing me toward her. She was on the street that day, when I went to buy music in Forks... it was as if everything else around me faded away slightly when I looked at her."

I shook my head. "But I can't discount the mating urge entirely, because it's always there, coloring everything. I want to be near Bella, regardless of what happens when we're actually together."

"What does that mean?" Alice asked after a pause.

"Well, we haven't spent very much time together. And the time that we have hasn't exactly been your typical girl-meets-boy kind of thing."

"That's Edward for 'we fight like cats and dogs in between murder plots'," Rosalie quipped.

There was a beat of silence before everyone burst out laughing. Alice looked as uncertain as she did amused, which was not uncommon when she spent time with Rosalie and Emmett; she wasn't accustomed to their barbs and largely affectionate teasing.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked finally, narrowing my eyes at the haughty blonde. "Can't you give Bella a break for a change?"

Rosalie rolled her eyes at me. "Oh, come on, you know it's true. You did hatch a plot to murder someone; well, the Swan girl did, at any rate. And even you can't deny that most of the time you've spent together has been in some kind of fight or another."

Alice cocked her head at me and looked somber. "Is that true? Do you really fight all the time?"

"Fairly often," I admitted. "Granted, we used to fight about how to deal with the man who had abused Bella. Now that Chase is gone, it could be different. Or it could be..." I trailed off uncertainly.

"It could be that you would just fight about something else," Jasper offered.

"Right. I hope that's not true. And there were times before Chase's death when we didn't fight."

"Yeah, one time in particular," Emmett said, his teasing smirk making Alice's eyes widen knowingly.

The warning on my lips died when a torrent of memories filled my head. Whispers and soft breaths filled with longing lit a cold fire in my body and I realized the voices were Bella's and my own. I was hearing us through Emmett's memories. He had been in the hotel that afternoon when Bella and I had lay in my bed, and his perfect memory played back each sigh and gasp with gut-wrenching clarity.

Oh, God. All of the effort I had spent over the months to control my thoughts of Bella crumbled to dust. Before I could stop myself, my own memories came crashing forward. I remembered the way Bella had felt under my hands and lips, and the taste of her skin. I felt the rush of her breath and blood beneath her skin, and her soft limbs curling around me. She had been so warm and so terrifyingly vulnerable that afternoon when she kissed me. The recklessness she showed when she knowingly pushed me closer to the edge of my control had told me even then that she placed no value on her own life.

My head swam with desire. I was hard, and my whole body was trembling almost violently with need. Jesus. I bit my lip and drove my fingers deep into the log beneath my legs.
A sharp gasp broke through the fog of desire. And Jasper's thoughts flew through my head, filling it with a lust as intense as my own - for my sister. The protective growl that began in my chest stuttered and died when I forced myself to listen beyond Jasper's yearning. Because I heard the love he felt for Alice, too, and knew that it was powerful and pure.

I looked up and caught an expression very much like pain on Jasper's face before he tore off into the woods without a word. I swore loudly as the others cried out in surprise.

Alice stood at once, and was already beginning to run when I caught her arm and held her back. She squirmed in my grip and wrenched her arm away before hissing angrily. "Let me go, Edward!"

"Alice, stop!" My voice was low and urgent, and caught my sister's attention immediately. I glared at her meaningfully for a moment before putting my hands on her again and pursing my lips at her injured expression.

"I need you to listen to me, Al. It's important that you stay here with Rose and Em. It's quiet up here away from the humans, but you need to be near someone, especially without Jas here to smooth out your moods. We need you to keep that in mind at all times.

"I'll bring him back. We've been putting off having a conversation anyway."

Alice nodded once, her eyes softening with concern, while Rosalie and Emmett came to flank her on either side. I gave them all a reassuring smile and then sprinted into the woods after my brother.

It was several hours before Jasper was ready to stop. He ran hard for a long time, sprinting as fast as he could manage, before his steps became more measured. I could have easily outrun him, but kept my distance, allowing him to race through his unpredictable mood. I also closed my mind to the thoughts he was still battling desperately to control, waiting until he was ready to speak.

The sun was low in the sky and we were deep in the mountains of northwestern Montana when he finally allowed me to pull alongside him.

"We'll be in Canada soon if we keep heading north," I said casually.

Jasper did not answer and his face remained impassive. But his steps gradually slowed, until we had stopped to stand together in the snow above a massive glacier. We watched the setting sun, neither of us speaking until the sky had turned a rich purple.

"Talk to me, Jas."

He shook his head and cast his eyes down before he answered. "What is there to say, E? You know what I was thinking today. What I was feeling. It's obvious from your reaction that you knew I felt like this. You were just too much of a gentleman to say anything."

He heaved a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. "I wish I could say the same for myself as far as being a gentleman. Feeling the intensity of your desire for Bella today… I lost control. I had to get out of there before I pushed all of my feelings out on to the rest of you. Edward, I can't imagine what you think of me."

"I think that you love my sister, Jas," I said slowly. "I think that you felt the mating bond for the first time. If anyone knows what that's like, it's me."

I felt his gaze on me and smiled ruefully. "At least you had the good sense to fall in love with one of
"I do love her, Edward." Jasper's expression was serious when I turned to look at him, but his eyes were shining. "There's been nothing in my life that has ever come close to the way I feel about Alice. I... I had no idea it would be like this."

I frowned. "I don't understand why you thought you needed to hide it from me, Jas."

He sighed and shook his head. "When I realized what was happening to me... for the first time in a very long time, I had no idea what to do. Alice... you sister... she's not herself, E, not really. You know that. She's having an easier go of being a newborn because we're here to help her, and she has that funky gift in her head. But she's still all about thirst. I can't just tell her how I feel and expect her to be able to process it. They would just be words... she can't register a mating bond now even if she feels it."

I nodded but shoved my hands in my pockets as I thought about my next words. "That's true, I'll give you that. There is more there, though. She cares about you Jas."

"As a brother and protector," he argued quietly. "You know her thoughts and I know her emotions; can you honestly tell me she's felt anything beyond kinship for me?"

"Not until tonight," I said, and watched his eyes widen. "Alice was concerned when you ran off, more so than either of you realize. And while there was nothing romantic in her thoughts... there was deeper emotion tied to them. Alice may not be capable of feeling the bond yet. But I'm sure she will, once she's had a chance to get past the thirst she's feeling right now."

It rained as we ran the last hundred miles to the big house where Alice and the others were waiting. Even without listening to Jasper's thoughts, I could sense that he had more questions on his mind.

"Edward... I know you're holding something back. Something about Bella. I can feel it whenever her name comes up and it was really obvious today. You gave me a hard time earlier about hiding things. None of us can hear the way you do, so you have to be up front. What is it you're not saying?"

I didn't answer right away, and couldn't meet his eyes when I did. "Bella said she loved me. And then, when I pushed her, she admitted that it was more important to her that Chase be killed."

A pause followed as Jasper absorbed my words and his expression was concerned when I looked at him. "Do you believe her? About being in love with you."

"I believe that she thinks she does." I licked my lips and said more softly, "I hope she does."

We slowed to a walk and said nothing for a few miles before I spoke again. "I wonder sometimes if what she feels is about this," I said, gesturing to my face and body with my hands. "The vampire and the glamour, and not what's underneath them. Not... me."

Jasper looked at me curiously. "Does Bella know what's underneath, as you say?"

"Some of it. But it's not exactly easy to show her, if you know what I mean. And that's certainly my fault at this point... I've been running wild up here, instead of being back in Washington trying to get to know her better."

"You didn't have much of a choice on that one, E." Jasper shrugged when I nodded at him. "Yeah,
you could have left Alice here with me and she would have been okay, given time. But that's not you."

"I couldn't stay away," I murmured. "But I couldn't bring Alice there, either. Choosing to stay here with her was both the easiest and hardest thing to do. If I'm lucky, then Bella will know that, too."

Jasper's expression was strangely proud as he looked at me, a smile spreading over his lips. "Hard as it might have been to leave Bella behind, having you here was good for Alice... and you."

I couldn't help returning the smile, though mine was subdued, in part because I needed Jasper's advice.

When we were five miles from the house and I had begun to pick up my siblings' stray thoughts, I stopped and laid my hand on Jasper's arm to get his attention.

"Jas, Bella's birthday is in September. I'd like to go back to see her. I need to know if you think ... is that too soon for Alice to leave here?"

Chapter End Notes

Looks like the cat's out of the bag, eh, Jasper? And the kids are doing a lot more talking... now they just need to do it with each other.

Thank you for reading.

The next chapter will be split.

I submitted a one-shot to the the Pick a Pic Challenge 2012, which opens for public voting on July 8. Stories are still being posted, and there is a wonderful array of stories with all kinds of pairings. Read, review, and vote for your favorites, and make sure to look at the beautiful banners that were submitted - maybe you'll be inspired to write something of your own. http://pickapic.twificpics.com/, http://www.fanfiction.net/pickapicchallenge
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. And thanks for hanging in there with us!

Chapter authors: transitory07

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I think I’ll be brave, starting with you
But I’ll fall away if you tell me to
I’d rather be wrong than hope that I’m right
Because I can’t go on with this all inside
“Brave” - Tawgs Salter

“Bella, Jake’s here!”

I was spraying my neck with a light lavender scent and braiding my hair in the bathroom when Charlie shouted from downstairs. “I’ll be right there!”

Jacob and I were going to see a movie in Port Angeles. It was the first time I’d gone out in a long time. For weeks, my time had been occupied by work and household chores, though Charlie had gotten into the habit of doing his own laundry since I had gotten a job. He even tried to cook one night, with disastrous results. If I hadn’t come down the stairs when I had, the ravioli would have burned to a crisp.

My phone vibrated in my purse as I ran out the door to Jacob’s Rabbit, but I ignored it until we were already on the road.

“Hopefully this one won’t end with the bad guy still alive and planning another killing,” I muttered, pulling out my phone and glancing at the name on the screen.

Alice.

My heart sank a little. It had been so long since Edward had called me.

“Umm, I think this movie has ghosts in it,” Jacob said as he drove.

“Great. Ghosts are not as scary as live murderers.”

“You think so?”

“Hmm....”

Alice’s text made my eyebrows wrinkle in confusion.

Bella, big news! Something awesome is about to happen!

I sent her a reply, letting her know I was with a friend and couldn’t call her at the moment. My
apology didn’t seem to alter the excitement pouring out of her message though. There were exclamation marks at the end of every sentence.

*Okay but please text me tonight!!! Trust me, it will make you happy!!*

My stomach twisted in anticipation of Alice’s “big” news.

*Is it bad or good?* I wondered nervously.

aDc

On the wide screen in front of us, a little boy was being sucked into a vortex that had materialized on the ceiling next to a shadowy demon with a gaping mouth. Jacob and I, however, were only partially present while watching the film. He teased me once when I jumped in my seat. Mostly, his flint-colored eyes were far away, and his brows were crinkled in a worried kind of frown. My own thoughts kept jumping between Alice’s unexpected text and the unmanageable longing I felt for Edward. Had something happened to him or to her again?

*Oh my gosh! What if her old sire came back to claim her and Edward or another Cullen got hurt, trying to protect Alice?* To keep myself calm and not allow my ludicrous ideas to rattle me, I brought a hand to my throat and started fidgeting with my charm necklace.

Jacob leaned toward me at that moment. “Don’t worry, Bells,” he whispered. “The kid’s going to be all right. That priest dude’s on his way?”

“What?” I gasped before realizing that he was referring to the movie. I sighed and sank back in my seat. “Oh right.”

The rest of the film was a blur of screams and frightening images that would have been more frightening if I had been paying attention.

Afterwards, we stopped at Macdonald’s for a late and unhealthy dinner.

“Jake, are you all right?” I asked as we sat down on one of the sticky booths with our food. He had ordered the double quarter pounder and was eagerly digging into it. Go figure.

“Great, Bells,” he said between huge bites. “Why?”

I stirred my Sprite disinterestedly. “You just looked... distracted when we were watching the movie.”

Jacob got quiet.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk-”

“It’s Sharon,” he blurted out, interrupting me.

My eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean? Is this is about Embry’s father? But Sharon’s gone back to Oregon, hasn’t she?”

Jacob sighed, setting his burger down and wiping his hands with a napkin. “Yeah but something weird happened while she was still here.”

I frowned. “What?”

An uncomfortable frown fell over Jacob’s face. “I invited Sharon to come over for dinner one night. Everything was fine until Billy saw her.”
“What do you mean?” I stopped stirring my drink and leaned forward.

“Sharon wanted to help set the table so that’s what we were doing. My dad was in his room, okay. He wheeled himself into the kitchen, started saying hi to her, but then stopped and just stared like he was frozen or something. It was so weird.”

I didn’t know how to respond.

“Sharon was frozen too, just holding this plate and staring back at my dad.”

“Do you think they know each other?” I asked finally.

Jacob scowled. “Things just got weirder after that. They were both so quiet while we ate. I was telling Billy about Sharon’s hobbies and stuff to try to get her to say something but Billy just kept nodding and staring at his plate and Sharon never looked up either. When I gave up, Billy asked Sharon her mom’s name—Sharon suddenly looked angry or something. ‘Marina. That’s my mother’s name,’ she said, ‘You know that.’ Then she excused herself and left. It was really awkward with me and Billy after that.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “She just got up and left?”

“Well, she said, ‘Sorry, Jake, but I have to go home now. It’s getting late.’ She didn’t even let me drive her back home. Just said she would catch a ride with Embry in the morning.”

Jacob picked his up his burger. “Maybe I should’ve driven her anyway. That way I could’ve asked her what the hell was going on,” he muttered before taking a bite.

I pondered Jacob’s reasons for not asking his father about his strange reaction to Sharon’s visit. Jacob wasn’t really hesitant when it came to asking personal questions.

“Are you going to ask Billy...?” I prompted slowly.

“I did ask,” Jacob mumbled, finishing the last of his burger. I took the opportunity to start nibbling on my chicken tenders and fries.

“I asked him why he asked about Sharon’s mom. He said he used to know a girl from the Makah rez named Marina. He said Sharon looks a lot like her so he was curious. That’s all.”

“But then…” I mused. “Sharon’s reaction? She looked angry?”

“Yeah,” Jacob exhaled. “I don’t know what it meant. I don’t know if I should mention it to her when we talk again on the phone or if it will only make her mad and I kinda don’t want that...” He trailed off and a tiny smile tugged at my lips.

“You’re head over heels in ‘lurrve’, I teased.

Jacob balled up his napkin, throwing it at my tray.

“Shut up, Swan.”

But he didn’t deny it.

As soon as Jacob dropped me off at Charlie’s house, I rushed upstairs to my room to reply to Alice’s confusing message.
What's going on, Alice?

My heartbeat raced as I sat cross-legged on top of my bed, holding my cell phone with clammy hands. Luckily, Alice’s reply was swift.

We’re coming home! For your birthday!

A soft gasp escaped my lips. They were coming back to Washington? Edward was coming back?

I didn’t know how to answer her, so I just clamped my phone shut and lay down, letting my breathing and heartbeat slow gradually. My birthday was only two weeks away. In two weeks, I would see Edward’s devastatingly handsome face.

Am I ready? I wondered. But in that moment, I knew it was all I’d ever want... forever. No matter how confusing, cryptic, and downright frustrating that angelic boy could be, I would always want to lay eyes on him. He drove me crazy and made me angry with myself as well as him. But when he was near me, I felt safe and even happy... as long as weren’t fighting about something important or scary. It was strange.

Earlier I had teased Jacob about being head over heels in love. That was only because I now knew what it was like.

ADe

School began a week after I’d received Alice’s message. Angela and I went shopping for notebooks, pens, binders, and even matching floral print backpacks that made Jessica’s eyebrows rise enviously when we walked across the parking lot together. It might’ve been dorky but I thought it was cute too.

Mike and Jessica seemed to be going out but that didn’t stop him from glaring when Tyler wished me a happy birthday at lunch. I smiled awkwardly, reminding Tyler that he was a little early – my birth date was actually September 19th not 13th.

“Oh, my bad,” Tyler replied in an embarrassed tone, shrugging his shoulders and drawing Lauren’s glance. “Well, that’s even better ‘cause now I have time to get you a present.”

“Oh, no, Tyler,” I protested quickly, feeling Lauren’s fiery gaze on me. “You don’t have to do that. That’s what parents are for, right?” I giggled uncomfortably. “To give us unnecessary gifts?”

Angela rolled her eyes from her spot across from me. “C’mon, Bella. You have to expect presents on your birthday!”

“Yeah,” Tyler chimed in. “Like I can get us tickets to this All Time Low concert in Seattle. What do you say, Bella? We could have dinner-”

Mercifully, my cell phone buzzed in my sweater pocket and I reached for it, apologizing to Tyler as I examined the text.

Edward.

My heart almost jumped out of my chest.

“Umm... excuse me,” I said, rising from the table. “I have to go to the restroom.”

Slinging my purse over my shoulder and picking up my tray to dump in the trash, I tried my best to keep the excitement from showing on my face as I moved away from my classmates.
In the girls’ restroom, I leaned over the sink, to read Edward’s message.

Bella, Alice, Jasper, and I are coming home tomorrow. We’ll be in Port Angeles by sunset. I’ll call you around seven o’clock, if that’s okay. I hope you’re smiling right now... I’ve missed you. Really.

I sighed, gazing at my reflection in the foggy mirror. My heart wouldn’t stop racing. My fingers were moving to type a reply when I snapped my phone shut. Just because Edward was coming back didn’t mean he was within my reach. Maybe he was just alerting me of his return out of courtesy.

Oh, don’t be an idiot! A sickeningly optimistic voice shouted in my head. Edward is letting you know he’s coming back because he obviously wants to see you.

But why would he want to see me? So we could argue some more? Did he need another dose of pain? Both his and mine? He couldn’t be so masochistic, surely! What sane person would want that? I was some piece of work and Edward knew it all too well. He shouldn’t want to see me.

aDc

I was just coming out of the shower the next night when my phone buzzed from its place on my bedside table. Still in my towel, I sank down on the mattress.

Reaching for the phone, I murmured hesitantly, “Hello?”

“How are you, Bella?”

I swallowed. “Fine, Edward. How are you?”

He sounded a lot more relaxed than I felt, which was infuriating and yet intriguing because of the smile that I was almost certain was on his face as he spoke.

“Much better now that we’re home. Being out in the wild gets tiring when all your clothes are ruined in just three hunting trips.

I smiled in spite of myself. It felt as if that same involuntary pull that drew me toward Edward’s curious, magnetic personality was making a comeback after the months we had spent apart. The frightened part of me didn’t want to like it, but the braver part wanted to fight a little harder to be deserving of his affection. I didn’t quite know from where that strong Bella had emerged.

“Gee... haven’t you heard of a washer and dryer, Edward?” I teased, touching the back of my neck where a blush was forming.

His throaty chuckle on the other line was surprisingly sensual.

“I’m afraid that wasn’t enough. My favorite grey shirt was ripped to shreds by a particularly irritated grizzly, and there were more burrs in my hair than the best overpaid stylists in Seattle could get out.”

I bit my lip, struggling to block the image of Edward in a torn button-down shirt, his arms exposed, and his strong chest muscles glinted in the dim forest sun. I imagined that his beautiful copper hair was more rebellious than usual, too.

Oh... Edward. I groaned internally, slipping beneath the quilt as my legs trembled slightly. Why do you do this to me?

I was aware that my free hand had begun a slow path down my stomach under the towel, and that was disconcerting and thrilling at the same time. Damned stupid, handsome vampire!
“Bella, did you hear me?” The source of my wandering mind asked in a concerned tone.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I asked how you’re enjoying the work at the Newton’s store.”

“Oh!” I remembered that I had mentioned my new job to Edward during one of our occasional phone conversations. “It’s fine. Nothing new. It’s kind of boring, actually. But I need the money for college tuition, you know? Charlie’s not getting any richer....” I wondered why I was babbling all of a sudden.

“Well, I could--” he began and stopped abruptly.

“You could what?” I prompted, writhing against the sensation between my legs that just kept getting warmer and weirder every time a new image of Edward’s face popped in my head.

“Never mind. What I meant was I could suggest some colleges that aren’t very pricey but that you might be interested in visiting.”

Somehow, I thought he might have been about to lend me money. The idea was absurd but kind enough to fit his personality. My stomach twisted. He was too selfless, too good for me. At once, my body cooled.

“Th-that’d be nice,” I stammered. “But I might just end up going to Seattle U.”

“I see. And have you thought of a major yet?”

I rested my cheek on my pillow. “Hmm... maybe I’d like to study English Literature or journalism.”

“Sounds like you.” There was a definite smile in his voice, I was sure.

“You think?” I asked, a grin tugging at my lips.

“Sure! I can see you winning a Pulitzer, making it on the New York Times Bestseller list.”

“I hope you can imagine me rolling my eyes right now.”

“I can but you shouldn’t. You’re an intuitive, unique person, Bella. Others should get the chance to see what I see when I look at you.”

My heart seemed to skip a beat and I asked nervously, “Which is what, exactly?”

His next words were tender and hesitant. “Someone that we don’t come across every day. Someone who I’d wait a lifetime for, just to see smile, just to hold in my arms.”

I couldn’t respond due to the tightness in my throat.

“Bella, I know you might not believe me, though I think it’s terribly obvious and you’re obviously not stupid so--”

“Don’t say it,” I whispered as a tear slid down my cheek, wetting the pillowcase. I wanted to hear him say those sweet scary words more than anything else. But I couldn’t bear it.

There was a pause. “Why not?” I could hear pain and resentment in his voice.

I told him the truth because it was the only thing I could say at that moment. At that moment in our
rocky relationship, lying was pointless.

“Because I want it so badly, it makes me sick.”

He exhaled loudly. “Believe me, I feel the same thing. It’s like a grinding, isn’t it? Inside?”

I gnawed on my bottom lip. “Hmm... yeah.”

“Why don’t we just give in, sweetheart?”

I swallowed a sob. “Don’t... don’t call me sweetheart.”

“I’ve wanted to call you that for months!”

“Well, don’t.”

“You like it, Bella.” He was sure of it.

Sighing, I slid further beneath my blankets. “Edward, the thought of us together is nothing short of a fairy tale, not reality... not my reality.”

“Then don’t think!” he insisted and I could envision him raking a hand through his hair in frustration. “Just let me see you. We’ll go as slow as you want. I swear... whatever and however you want.”

The idea still sounded ridiculous but I couldn’t resist taunting him once more. “I don’t recall you being comfortable going slow.”

“For you, I’d do anything. I think I’ve proven that already.” There was a tightness in his words that made my eyes narrow.

“Nothing was against your will, Edward.”

“I beg to differ.”

“What?” I sat up abruptly in my bed.

“I didn’t have a choice,” he murmured calmly. “Not when you dominated every one of my senses. Not when I couldn’t turn off this... desire, this mating urge, even when I was furious at the things you did. And then you went behind my back, putting yourself in danger and I really had to--”

“Wait a second,” I cut in. “I explained to you why I went to Jimmy’s house. You knew from the very beginning, before we even left for Sacramento, why I wanted to kill him. So why are you having to bring it up?”

Edward actually growled. “Because you’re acting like killing another person is no big deal! Like you just went rollerblading without a helmet or something.”

My face burned but this time not from embarrassment. “It wasn’t any old thing! It wasn’t even about what happened to me, Edward, not entirely. I wanted to kill Jimmy because of that little girl you saw at his house too. He would’ve assaulted her, and then another little kid after that, and another, until that disgusting pervert breathed his last breath. So forgive me if I think a child’s innocence is more important than whatever feelings we might or might not have for each another.”

I was crying openly. “That little girl was more important than you and me, so don’t act like I’m this selfish bitch for misleading you so I could protect her future.”
I exhaled a shuddering breath and rubbed fiercely at the trails of tears cascading down my face.

Edward was silent for so long, I thought he had hung up. Then he whispered, “You’re right. I apologize.”

I struggled to contain my anger enough to reply in a steady tone. “And you can tell Rosalie that too.”

Edward sighed softly. “I’m really sorry, Bella. I won’t bring it up again. You can trust me.”

I settled back beneath the quilt’s warmth. “I know.”

“You know what?”

“That I can trust you, Edward.”

“Really?” He didn’t believe me. I couldn’t blame him.

“Yes. It boggles the mind but I do. With some things.”

“And what, pray tell, are those special things?” He was teasing me gently.

“I... I just know you’ll take care of me if I let you.”

“I really wish you would. I enjoy taking care of you.”

“Mmm…” And then a thousand scenes in which Edward ‘took care of me’ drifted into my thoughts, none of them exactly decent. It didn’t help that I was lying in bed, naked.

“Bella.”

“I want to see you,” I blurted out before he said anything else.

“When?” I fumbled with the edge of the quilt. “Umm... I work every day except for Sunday. I get off work during the week at five-thirty.”

“Want to make it Sunday, then? In the morning?”

My lips formed a small smile. “Just like old times?”

“Just like old times,” he repeated kindly.

“All right.”

“I’ll pick you up then.”

“Fine.” I was too overcome with fatigue to argue.

“Good night, Bella.”

I fell asleep with the phone still clutched in my hand, the memory of his voice playing in my ears like an old-fashioned record.

Chapter End Notes
A/N

He's baaaack.

Thank you for reading and your patience. This story is beginning to wind down.

The next chapter will be Edward's.

Hidden, the A Dove's Cry outtake that I wrote for the Fandom For No Kid Hungry compilation has been posted. Details on my profile.

I've submitted an entry to the Twilight Mix 'N' Match Contest. The entries are all non-canon pairings, so if that's your thing, go read, there are some gems! Entries will be posted up until 8/18 and voting starts on 8/19.
http://www.fanfiction.net/u/4081613/Twilight_Mix_N_Match_Contest
http://mixnmatchcontest.blogspot.com/

I've also been writing a lot of slash. Come Back To Me was named 2nd Place Judges Choice in the Pick a Pic Challenge 2012. Blue Notes was awarded 3rd Place in the SWW Christmas In My Hometown Contest. I about lost my mind. :)
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. And thanks for hanging in there with us!

Chapter authors: karenec

Disclaimer: We do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A single tear can be
Every part of me
One drop can wash me down
One drop can clear me out
"Ever Rest" - UNKLE

"Home sweet home," I murmured as we approached the Port Angeles house

I meant it. I felt comforted when I looked at the big, white house, though my days in it were numbered. My family was there, my piano, and the books and music I counted among the material possessions that I valued.

Bella was part of the attraction as well. To me, the distance between us sometimes felt like nothing, regardless of the number of miles; the mating urge inside me effectively erased those spaces. Now, however, I was only fifty-odd miles from Forks. It felt good to know that my feet could take me to her father's little house in just a few minutes.

"How does it feel to be back?"

Glancing at Alice's wide amber-colored eyes, I saw her nervousness. Understanding that she hadn't had a real home to come home to in such a long time made me sad, but I hid it with a smile. My sister didn't need my sorrow; she needed reassurance.

"It feels good and even better that you are here. You have no idea how excited Esme and the others are to welcome you into this house."

Alice's grin lit her whole face. When she turned to look out the car window, Jasper's eyes caught mine in the rear view mirror; his smile was nearly as bright.

He opened the garage doors under the house as we got closer and steered the car smoothly into a free space. Alice moved to exit as soon as the engine cut off, but I held out a hand to stop her.

"Wait until the doors have closed," I said quietly, giving her an encouraging nod as she slowly sat back.

When I made it clear that I wanted to return to Port Angeles, the family had discussed Alice's reintroduction to the humans' world extensively. Jasper and I knew my sister's behavior patterns well and our combined abilities helped her to maintain a high level of control most of the time. She was only six months into her first year, however, and unpredictable, no matter how controlled she
appeared. The family agreed to err on the side of caution as often as possible, and work as a team to ensure that nothing upset the delicate balance.

Alice's voice was small when she spoke. "Will I… can I smell them from here?"

"We'll have to be careful," Jasper said gently. "This house is remote enough to make it unlikely you'll smell the humans. That's one reason Esme chose this location. But there's always the possibility that the wind could shift just the right way or a human could get close to the house."

Alice's eyes flashed from Jasper's to mine.

"Sometimes we get hikers in the woods nearby. But I'm listening for them," I said, tapping my temple with a smile. "Jas is doing his part to zonk you out, too. You've gained a lot of control, Alice, and everyone is going to do their part to help you. Try not to worry about it too much."

"Am I going to have to stay inside all the time?"

Jasper turned around in his seat. "No. We're at the edge of the Olympic National Forest. There's a mountain range, and miles and miles of forests to run and hunt. Plenty of space for a crazy newborn like you to keep out of trouble."

"We'll take you hunting after we all clean up a bit." I looked down at the flannel shirt and jeans I had been wearing for a month. "I'm sure Rose has stocked up on things for everyone."

Rosalie's voice was perfectly audible from the house above us. "Of course I have. You may as well burn the things you have on; they're hopeless anyway."

Alice rolled her eyes with a smile. "What's the point of changing clothes if we're just going to be running around in the woods anyway?"

"All part of the disguise, Alice," Jasper said. "Keeping up appearances is more for the humans than for us. You'll get used to it soon enough."

"Esme's had enough of our dawdling, by the way," I said, opening my door. "She's just decided that she'll come down here herself if she doesn't see us in the next sixty seconds."

aDc

After night had fallen, the others went hunting in Olympic Park while I stayed behind. I knew Alice was in good hands, but couldn't help feeling anxious at the separation. Carlisle found me at the edge of the woods where I was fighting the urge to follow the others' scent trails.

"Is this the first time you've let her go off without you?" His large eyes were sympathetic.

"Not quite. She and Jas hunted alone sometimes toward the end of our stay in Montana." I smiled and rubbed my thumb over my forehead as we walked among the trees. "He knows how to handle Alice if she starts to slip. Emmett, Rose, and Esme are with them, too; she should be okay."

"Yet you seem… concerned. Is it difficult to let her go, after all this time?"

"In a way, yes. I got used to looking for her when she was missing. And now I'm used to looking out for her."

"Alice needs looking out for right now."

"Yes. But she needs to learn how to function on her own, too." I felt my face turn down in a deep
frown. "I need to let her do that, as well. My sister had one jailer already… I don't want to take over
that role."

Carlisle's expression was one of shock. He reached out to lay a hand on my shoulder. "You could
never be that man, Edward. Alice certainly doesn't think that either."

I shook my head slowly and smiled. "I can assure that she does think of me that way from time to
time, though not in anger. She's even joked about it with Bella. Her thoughts are fleeting… I'm not
sure I would have heard them if I wasn't paying such close attention."

"You've been required to listen to Alice's thoughts more carefully. You had no control over the
situation."

"True. I can strive to listen less now, however, given that she is doing so well and you are all here to
help." I covered Carlisle's hand with my own briefly. "Thank you for that."

"Alice is part of this family, Edward," he said, squeezing my shoulder once before we dropped our
hands. "She's one of us now."

We headed into the Park at a light run, moving southeast into the mountains and in the opposite
direction from the others. The glow of Seattle's lights was on the horizon when we stopped.

"Have you decided what to do about the Swan girl?" Carlisle asked after a little while.

"Only that I'd like to see her again," I admitted. "You know that I've been working to accept the
decisions she made in Sacramento."

"You must. There's nothing that can be done at this point."

"Yes, I know. It doesn't matter at any rate because this thing inside me keeps pushing me toward her.
I… I've developed feelings for her."

Carlisle's voice was very quiet. "I see."

"Bella and I have spent very little time around each other that wasn't overshadowed by James Chase.
Now that he's gone, I'd like to see if there's something meaningful between us. Something that is just
about us and not about her past."

He was looking at me searchingly when I met his gaze. "Have you considered what to do if she is
not ready to begin moving past her experiences? It is not unusual for humans or even our own kind
to have difficulty letting go of traumatic experiences."

"Well, I'm certainly evidence of that," I replied lightly.

Carlisle's face fell. "That's not at all what I meant."

"I know. But it's true. I coped with my own trauma by burying myself in data and looking for my
sister." I pulled the little black notebook from my pocket and ran my fingers over the weathered
cover. "It worked, up to a point. I stayed mostly sane, even when I was making you all crazy."

"You got what you needed from it."

"Yes, I haven't written in the notebook since finding Alice." I smiled and slid it back in my pocket. "I
hope that Bella is coping better than I did, or at least feeling that she's healing."

"Her parents know about the abuse, and I suspect her father will have persuaded her to follow up
with someone from outside of the family."

"What will you do if she is not following up?"

This was a worrying thought I'd had many times since James Chase's death. I pulled at my lips with my fingers for a moment before answering.

"Then it might be wise for me to leave Bella alone. For her own sake. She's very young and still has so many experiences left ahead of her that will shape her life. Perhaps she needs that life as much as she needs time to heal."

"Can you do that?" Carlisle asked, his brow puckering. "Force yourself to leave her alone?"

"I don't know. I'll try if it comes to that."

His eyes flashed with understanding and grew sad. "You'd leave us."

"Only if I had to, Carlisle. And certainly not forever. To be honest, I have no idea what will happen."

"Is Alice able to help?"

"Not very much. There are still too many variables at play and she is too easily distracted to see clearly. She knows only that I need to see Bella, so we've made plans to see one another in a few days."

"How do you feel about that?"

"The same way I feel any time I have to see Bella," I said with a dry laugh. "Nervous in every possible way. Like my head is about burst. I can't wait and I'm more than a little terrified."

Carlisle's lips twitched. He didn't speak, but his thought was clear and made me smile shyly.

"People will say that you're in love."

aDc

In the end, Alice spent most of her time in the park; being outside and farther away from the city made her feel more secure. She and Jasper returned to the house regularly, and the family members took turns hunting and running with them.

The day before I was to meet Bella, Alice and I went exploring in the Hoh rainforest. The falling rain soaked us as we walked amongst the trees, waiting for Jasper to join us. I couldn't help smiling as I watched her. The confident, bubbly girl I grew up with was back, shining through the glamorous vampire façade.

"I'm glad you came out here with me today. Believe it or not, I've missed you," she teased. "I got used to you sticking by my side all the time, you know."

"All you ever have to do is ask," I reassured her. "You know I'm here for you."

"I know. The same goes for you. You don't have to wait for an invitation, you know."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "You're right. I hadn't thought about it that way. I wanted to give you some space. Give myself some space, too, I suppose."
"You've been so understanding, Edward," she said softly. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. I
know you need to start spending time with Bella again, too. I can see that you're excited about
tomorrow." She shot me a smile that I couldn't quite interpret.

"What's that face for? Are you… seeing anything about what happens when I see her tomorrow?"

"I didn't make a face. Why do you bother asking, anyway? If you really wanted to, you could just
pick the thoughts out of my head."

"And if you really wanted to, Alice, you could just tell me what's going to happen when I see Bella
again tomorrow."

She burst out laughing and slung an arm around my neck. "My sight is unpredictable, you know that.
I haven't seen anything about your date."

"It's not a date," I said wryly. "It's more of a peacekeeping mission. The last few conversations Bella
and I had didn't go very well. I've been sticking to text messages this week so that we could avoid
any other blow-ups. Perhaps tomorrow she and I can figure out where to go from here."

"You will. Just remember not to hold back."

"Hold back?"

"Be honest. Don't coddle her, Edward. I know you feel the need to protect her, but you don't have to
do that anymore. She's safe now."

I watched my sister for a long moment. "Yes, Bella's safe from Chase. She's not safe from herself,
however."

Alice's expression softened and she laid her head against my shoulder. "I'm sure you're right. That's
up to Bella to fix, though, not you. All you can do is be there for her if that's what she wants."

"Is that you talking?" I bent to peer into her face, making her laugh. "Or is that the seer?"

"Maybe a little of both."

aDc

A sense of déjà vu came over me when I pulled up to the Swan house the next day. Once again,
there was no sign of Bella's father or his police cruiser, and her monstrous red truck was parked in
the same spot in the driveway. Bella was even sitting on the porch swing, though this time she
walked down to meet me as I got out of the car.

She was dressed casually in jeans and a lightweight blue sweater that flattered her coloring. Her long
hair fell loosely over her shoulders, and I could see where the summer sun had lightened some of the
strands. She looked more rested than I remembered, and her skin glowed with a light tan. Her dark
eyes, however, were cautious as they watched me, and almost shy.

As I stood, struggling to find words, Bella smiled and her cheeks shaded that delicious pink that I
had missed so much. In the next moment, her sweet scent rushed over me, rich and heavy, making
my nostrils flare.

_Oh, god… how could I have forgotten how strongly this affects me?_

My body responded a once. I felt myself get hard and bit my tongue to keep from growling.
Swallowing, I held my breath, while my pupils dilated and my chest grew tight with desire. Bella's brow wrinkled slightly, her eyes filling with concern. I forced my mouth to stretch into what I hoped was a reassuring smile and took a careful step backward, holding my hands up when her face fell.

"I'm sorry. It's been a while," I murmured. "I need a few minutes to get used to your scent."

Understanding dawned on her face. "Oh, gosh, I forgot. Are you okay? Should I go back on to the porch?"

"I'm all right."

Being unable to breathe made talking impossible, but there was no getting around the problem: I needed a little time to readjust to that luscious, human smell. Looking around, I smiled when the porch swing caught my eye.

"Could we sit down for a few minutes?" I asked through my teeth.

"Of course," she exclaimed and gestured toward the stairs.

Once we were seated, I allowed myself tiny sips of air to let Bella's scent gradually into my system. I looked up to find her watching me closely, her hands balled into fists in her lap.

"I'm sorry about this," I got out. "I should have anticipated some kind of reaction-"

Bella hastened to interrupt me, shaking her head. "It's okay, Edward. I didn't think of it either. I, uh, guess I was just looking forward to seeing you."

Seeing her muttering with embarrassment, I reached out to tap her fingers with mine. The sensation of her skin against mine and that strange current of energy were explosive. Our hands flinched apart before we reached forward again, our smiles both bashful and brave, and slowly twined our fingers together. Bella's skin was soft and exquisitely hot, making me swallow a groan of pleasure.

"Feeling any better?" she asked and I exhaled in a long rush.

"Yes, thank you. I'll be fine to drive in a few minutes. If you'll let me, I'd like to buy you some lunch in Port Angeles."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know. But I thought that would make it easy to talk. We could try that little place we went to once before, and go for a walk on the shore if you feel like it."

I gave her a cheeky smile before pulling my keys from my pocket with my free hand as we stood. "The weather forecast is calling for clouds all afternoon. I should be safe from outing myself."

"Good to know, Edward. Good to know."

aDc

Bella and I chatted on the trip back to Port Angeles, slowly at first, and then more easily as we began to relax and open up. I rolled the car windows down, and she gathered her hair in her hand to keep it from blowing around while we talked. We kept things fairly light, touching on her work at the sporting goods store, her return to school, and her studies and classmates.
I asked after her family, though the need to tread carefully became clear almost at once. Whatever progress Bella had made in dealing with her past, it was clear from her clipped answers and jerky body language that it continued to be a difficult topic among her family. I let her shift the focus onto my family, knowing from experience that pushing her to talk to me was not wise.

"Do you think it would be safe for me to meet Alice?" Bella's expression was hopeful. "I know she hasn't been, um, turned for very long, but I really would like to get a chance to know her. If you think it would be safe, I mean."

"She's looking forward to meeting you," I replied. "If you don't mind, I'd like to do something for your birthday and introduce the two of you then. I'd like you to meet the rest of my family, actually."

Bella's eyes were wide when I glanced at her, and her cheeks burned brightly with spots of color.

"As in your parents?" she said, gulping audibly.

"Well, yes. You met my brothers and Rose in Sacramento, and you've spoken to them on the phone, but you haven't met Carlisle or Esme yet. I thought we could do something, all together."

"Oh, I don't know, Edward," she muttered. "I don't want you to put yourself out."

I cut in gently. "We wouldn't be. We won't do anything fancy. Some music and conversation, maybe even a little cake. It'll be fun."

"None of you eat cake."

"True, but you do. We'd all be pleased to help someone celebrate a birthday again."

She continued to look doubtful as we pulled into the cafe's parking lot. I swallowed my disappointment as I eased into a space, and gave her a smile when I switched off the ignition.

"Think about it, okay, Bella? I came back to help you celebrate your birthday; let's have some fun doing that."

"All right" she said, looking embarrassed but pleased. "You're pretty stubborn when you want to be."

"You really are the last person to be lecturing anyone for being stubborn."

She looked torn between pouting and smiling. She kept it up all the way into the cafe and as we sat down, scowling when I laughed quietly. She kept up the conversation, however, continuing to ask questions after ordering lunch for herself and two coffees.

I warmed my hands on the coffee cup as she ate, and realized that things seemed easier between us. There were still moments of awkwardness and we occasionally misunderstood each other. Overall, however, the talk was easy and without strain, at least when we weren't discussing anything too serious.

We walked on the Olympic Discovery Trail after lunch, looking out at the harbor. Bella told me about the college applications she was slowly collecting, though she had not made any final decisions. She told me about her young Quileute friend, Jacob, and his tentative summer romance with a girl from a neighboring reservation.

She grinned when I took a black ball cap from my pocket and pulled it on, and then peered up at the sky with a knowing look. When my phone chimed in my pocket, I laughed, guessing correctly at the
impish text from my meddlesome sister.

*Overcast all day. Trade in your hat for an umbrella.*

"Does Alice do that often?" Bella asked with wide eyes after I showed her the message.

"Not consistently," I replied. "But we believe that's only because she hasn't learned how to control her ability yet. Once she can, I have a feeling it will be difficult to prevent her from seeing everything."

"Life at your house must be really interesting."

"You have no idea. It's only going to get weirder when we're all finally settled in and sharing the space."

Curiosity piqued by my sister's text, I checked the sky again and frowned. "I think Alice may be right about needing an umbrella; we should probably get back to the car before we get caught in the rain."

We turned back toward town, though I thought I caught a look of disappointment in Bella's eyes. When our hands brushed against one another, it seemed natural to weave my fingers around hers again. I swallowed a sigh of pleasure at the feeling of her warm skin, and caught her looking at our joined hands with a soft smile.

aDc

The rain began to fall in earnest as we pulled onto route 101. Bella was quieter on the ride back to Forks and spent a long time watching the drops gathering on the car window. We were about halfway through the trip when she turned to me with a curious look.

"How do you feel, Edward? With the windows sealed and my being... so close?"

"I've been better," I admitted. "But I've been worse too. It's just bearable at this point. Talking helps."

"How so?"

"It distracts me. Gives me something else to focus on, I suppose."

She shook her head sadly. "And I've been sitting over here woolgathering the whole time. Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't see the point," I replied. "This urge... the way you smell... I have some control over the way I react if I'm careful. I don't need coddling."

"I didn't say you did."

"I know. I meant that there are some pieces of this friendship that are my responsibility more than yours."

A frown marred her pretty face. "That's not fair."

"That's reality," I said calmly. "I'm in no physical danger from you, Bella. We both know that the same cannot be said when the tables are turned."

"I'm not afraid of you."
"That's your choice. I certainly don't want you to be."

"Where is all this coming from?"

I felt my stomach sink when she folded her arms over her chest and glowered at me. As well as the afternoon had been going, she had turned on a dime once again.

"You brought it up, Bella. I was just answering honestly."

"And trying to protect me in the process. I don't need coddling, either, Edward. I know what you are."

I licked my lips and drove for a couple of miles in silence while the tension in the car increased. Bella fidgeted in the seat beside me, and I heard her inhale more than once as if she wanted to say something and then changed her mind.

"I don't want to fight with you," I said quietly. "Before I came back to Washington, we had a conversation about your choice to pursue James Chase."

"I remember. You gave me a hard time, again." Her voice was stiff, but I kept my eyes on the road.

"Yes, I questioned your decision. Again. You explained your reasoning and I promised you that I wouldn't bring it up again."

"What does that have to do-?"

"I need you to do the same when it comes to... the way I am," I said in a low voice. "When it comes to my being dangerous and wanting to control the danger as much as possible, I need you to trust that I know what I'm doing."

"I-I do trust you," she stammered.

"Not enough. Particularly when it comes to what I am. Some of the decisions I make are aimed toward keeping you safe. Others are aimed toward sparing you discomfort."

"You don't have to-"

I cut her off gently. "And still others are aimed toward sparing me discomfort."

Bella's face was pale when I glanced at her, but she nodded and tried to smile. The smile grew wider when I took her hand in mine.

"Thanks for today," Bella said as we stood on the porch at her father's house. We were a bit wet from the rain, and her scent was especially strong and delicious. "I had a nice time."

"Me too. I'd like to do it again sometime. Before your birthday, I mean."

Her eyes shone before they flicked away and then back to my face. "I'm working after school every day. But I could meet you for dinner, maybe."
"Perfect." I stepped forward and took hold of her right hand, using the knuckles of my free hand to caress her cheek. "Please think about your birthday as well."

She grinned and ducked her head shyly. "I have. And you're right; I should let you do... something... to celebrate if that's what you want to do."

"Thank you, Bella. I promise that it will not be over the top."

"Then I promise to try to keep my cool then when it turns out to be nothing but."

She looked up at me again, stepping forward another step so that I was able to thread my arms around her.

"You're being so cooperative," I said with a smile, leaning forward slowly. "What happened to the real Bella Swan?"

I brushed my lips against hers, interrupting her retort. The intensity of her smell and the softness of her lips were incredible. Neither of us moved for a long moment, and then I pulled back slightly before kissing her again. Her eyes fluttered closed and she slowly ran her hands up over my back and shoulders.

I pulled her closer, remembering at the last moment to be gentle, and carefully opened my mouth over hers. Her lips parted and she sighed as she slid her fingers into my hair. She tasted so, so good. The explosion of heat as our mouths moved together sent my head and body soaring.

We stood there on Bella's porch for some time, kissing and touching, and drawing each other close. Our breaths and murmured words mixed and filled the air as the rain fell and the afternoon grew cooler. When I finally pulled away, she shivered delicately.

"You should go inside soon," I told her, putting more space between us to warm her up.

"I know… Charlie will be home in a couple of hours." She gave me a rueful smile and shrugged. "I need to think about starting dinner."

"I'd like to meet him sometime. Your father, I mean."

"You would?" Bella's eyes were wide.

"Of course. If we're going to keep on seeing each other, it's only right that you introduce the two of us."

She blushed to the roots of her hair and I realized with an unpleasant jolt that we might not be on the same page.

"If you'd like to keep on seeing each other, of course," I said carefully. "This, considering how we've passed the last half hour or so, I think is possible."

Bella let out a snort and shook her head at me. "Definitely more than possible. You know I like you. And I don't, um, kiss just anyone."

"That's nice to know." I laughed and took her hands in mine again before leaning over to kiss her, chastely this time, though even her lightest touch affected me.

"I more than like you, you know," I said, raising a hand to run one finger across her cheek.

"Yeah?"
"Yeah. But you don't make it very easy."

She grimaced and squeezed my fingers with her own. "I know. You're not exactly the easiest guy in the world to be around either."

"I'm extremely aware of that. So what do we do about it, Bella?"

"I honestly have no idea. Can't we just… can't we just keep doing what we've been doing?"

"I'd like to," I agreed. "I'd like to give this a chance and see if we can make it work. I have to know that we're going somewhere with this… not spinning our wheels and reliving the same arguments over and over."

Immediately, her face pulled down in a scowl. Breathing deeply, I lifted my hand to touch her chin with my fingers.

"Like right now, Bella. You're already arming yourself for battle and you don't even know what I have to say. I can't always be on my guard, trying to avoid saying the wrong thing to you."

Her voice was stiff but controlled when she spoke. "What are you trying to say then?"

"Before I came back to Forks, I told you that I wouldn't bring James Chase up again, whatever my feelings might be. That was a compromise, Bella. I need to know that you are willing to make those kinds of choices. To compromise from time to time so that we can move forward."

Her dark eyes narrowed slightly, the suspicion in them making my chest ache.

"Compromising means settling, you know. You're asking me to settle, even if it's not the best thing for me?"

"I'm asking you to agree to make mutual concessions if that's what needs to happen. People in relationships have to agree to disagree sometimes, Bella; otherwise the relationships fall apart."

"Even if one of the 'people' involved is not actually a human?"

Her tone was teasing, but the smile on my face felt wrong; that core difference between us was the thing I worried about the most.

"I'm sorry," she said, her remorse plain. "I didn't mean to-"

"It's all right. We are different, right down to our DNA… if that's what I even have anymore. Bella, I don't know if what we have between us is going anywhere. I'm sure you'd agree that our chances aren't good."

"I don't agree," she said lightly, her frowning deepening.

I laughed softly. "That doesn't surprise me. I don't know where this is going to go. But I'm willing to keep trying if I know you are too."

"Of course I am, Edward."

"Well, good," I said.

Keeping her hand in mine, I turned toward to go, looking back when I got to the stairs.

"Would it be all right if I came over in a day or two? I'd like to see you after you finish working, if
your schedule will allow."

"Well, we could study together," she said thoughtfully. "And if you don't mind the smell of human food, we can talk while I make dinner. I'll, um, introduce you to my dad."

My smile felt huge. "That sounds perfect."

Chapter End Notes

Reunited and it feels so goooooood. And they're talking!

Thank you for reading and your patience. I apologize for not getting review replies out. Life just got away from me!

The next chapter will be Edward's. It's birthday party time!

My slash entry to the Twilight Mix 'N' Match Contest, Sweet Medicine, tied for 5th Place Voters' Choice - I was SO excited! The entries were all non-canon pairings, and there were some gems!

I have an entry in the Slash/Backslash 4.0 contest, which is open for both fic and art submissions until 9/17. There are some gorgeous entries already, so be sure to swing by the LiveJournal and read if you're a slash fan. http://slashbackslash.livejournal.com/
Chapter 28

Chief Swan's mustache proved to be a barometer of his mood. It reflected every smile and frown, and twitched when he was agitated. Unfortunately, for me, his mustache twitched on a near constant basis whenever I visited the Swan household.

Bella made good on her promise to introduce me to her father two days after our lunch in Port Angeles. In fact, Chief Swan answered the door when I knocked.

"You must be Edward Cullen." He eyeballed me through the screen door, scanning my face and the schoolbag slung over my shoulder with a pair of disconcertingly familiar brown eyes.

"It's nice to meet you, Chief Swan," I said with a friendly smile. "I offered to help Bella study tonight… if that's all right with you, of course."

The mustache twitched, but whatever he planned to say was cut off when Bella spoke from behind him.

"Dad. I told you Edward was coming over."

Chief Swan stared at me for a second longer before nodding toward the screen door. "Come on in, then, Edward."

He stepped back to accept my handshake, his mustache twitching ominously again, when our hands met. He shrugged off my apology for my cold hand, instead squeezing it with pressure that might have been too firm for a human boy.

Bella smiled shyly when I turned toward her and I couldn't help returning it even as I struggled to control my body's response to her.

"Hey," she said. "I was just finishing making dinner-"

Her father cut in abruptly, crossing his arms over his chest. "You joining us, I take it, Edward?"

"No, sir. My family had an early dinner tonight." The flush that colored Bella's face at my lie made
me want to laugh. "I'll just wait until you two have finished. I don't mind waiting."

Chief Swan's eyes narrowed but he seemed to accept my response as the three of us moved further into the house.

I watched Bella and her father closely as they interacted. As I had suspected, Bella was more like her father in terms of personality than she was her mother. Father and daughter were taciturn and reserved to the point of seeming shy, though they seemed fairly comfortable with each other.

I also listened with my ears and with my mind, and was startled to realize that unlike his daughter, Chief Swan's thoughts were audible. Before I could close my mind, I knew too much. I knew that the man was unrelentingly loving and concerned for his daughter. That Jacob Black was the only boy he deemed fit to share her life. That his ex-wife continued to be a disappointment when it came to their daughter's care. That Bella had been seeing a therapist on a weekly basis almost since returning from Sacramento.

I stiffened as the wall of information hit me and felt my expression freeze on my face.

"Are you all right?" Bella asked, looking at me curiously. "You look like a goose crossed your grave."

I managed a smile and nodded, feeling Chief Swan's eyes on me as she waved me toward the kitchen table. "It's nothing. Just remembered that I forgot to email one of my class assignments, but I can do that after I get home tonight."

"You go to school in Port Angeles, Edward?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow at his daughter's noise of protest. "Bella. You wanted us to meet each other. I can ask the boy some questions, can't I?"

"Of course, sir," I said, smiling at them both as I sat down. "I had to take a leave from school last spring and I've been out of the country until just recently. I'm in the process now of catching up on the schoolwork I missed so I can graduate this December."

"You get good grades normally? I hope so if you're here to help my daughter with her homework."

"Yes, sir, I do pretty well. I had a 3.9 GPA before I had to leave last semester."

We chatted as Bella made their dinner, her father watchful as the lies slipped easily past my lips. When father and daughter sat down to eat, I excused myself, going outside to sit on the porch swing.

I smiled to realize that the soft human sounds behind me were comforting as they mixed with sound of the wind in the trees around me. I heard Chief Swan's deep rumble followed by Bella's sweet tones, the scrape of forks on plates, and the rush of running water in the sink, all achingly familiar and yet strange.

"What are you doing out here?"

The sound of Bella's voice pulled me from my musings, and I looked up to find her watching me with a furrowed brow.

"Just thinking." I replied, smiling when she sat by my side. "Trying to give you and your father a little privacy."

"You could hear every word, couldn't you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I'm afraid so. I tried not to listen, however, so cut me some slack."
"Fair enough. Do you still want to help me study?" She shrugged apologetically. "I know it's not very exciting, but I really do need to pass my classes if I want to graduate."

"Of course; I told you I'd help you," I reminded her as we got to our feet. "I have what amounts to an eidetic memory now, so I should be able to make myself useful."

"Do you remember everything?"

"In excruciating detail."

We worked on her Spanish vocabulary assignment at the kitchen table while Chief Swan wandered in and out regularly. I watched his mustache twitch from the corner of my eye and felt disappointment at his disapproval. Bella, however, did nothing to hide her feelings as her eyes moved between her father and me. Her expression became more disgruntled and her sighs grew more exasperated until I leaned forward and caught her eye.

"He's just concerned for you," I whispered. "Any father would feel the same way about their daughter."

"What do you mean?" she asked with a frown.

"Put yourself in his shoes. Your pretty, teenage daughter invites a guy that you've never met into your home. The guy is from another town, is older, and may or may not have been involved in some kind of pregnancy scandal last spring."

Her mouth dropped open as her face reddened.

"We heard rumors, too, even in Montana," I said. "You forget that Rosalie and Emmett continued to go to school through the spring while Jasper and I were away; their hearing is just as sharp as mine. What's more, there's no way that same rumor didn't make it back to Forks in some form or another."

"If it did, I never heard it, I swear," she said staunchly.

"I believe you. I'm also sure your father heard about the rumor and others when he looked into my family."

"No, I… he… damn. You're probably right."

She looked so upset; I nudged her with my elbow. "Don't worry about it, Bella. He's your dad and he loves you. I'm glad he's looking out for you."

"I know. He means well."

She scrubbed her face with her hands before dropping them on the table. Then she grew still. Her face emptied of expression for a moment before her eyes grew very large, staring at me with an intensity that was confusing.

"What's wrong?" I murmured, unsure what could have caused her reaction.

"Can you… can you hear what Charlie is thinking?" she asked in a small voice.

I licked my lips and reached for her hand before answering, relieved when she didn't pull away. Her expression, however, became more and more horrified as my silence lengthened.

"Yes. I can hear him." The color drained from her face and I continued hastily. "I haven't been listening. As soon as I realized what was happening, I closed my mind."
"You didn't hear anything?" she persisted, drawing her hand back and pressing it against her chin.

"A very little," I admitted, sighing when she screwed her eyes closed.

"What exactly did you hear?" she pressed, her voice tight.

"It's nine o'clock," Chief Swan said from the doorway. Bella's eyes popped open and she seemed to cringe. Her father's brow furrowed as he took in her expression. "Everything… okay?"

"Yeah, Dad," she said with forced lightness. "Is there something you need or-?"

His mustache twitched. "I'm sure Edward's parents would like to see him home before it gets too late. Isn't that right, Edward?"

"Yes, sir," I replied immediately. I felt a pang of regret when Bella glared at me, though I continued speaking to Chief Swan. "You're right; my parents will be happy to see me off the road before eleven."

He grunted in approval as I put my notebook and phone back in my bag, and his eyes were slightly softer when I stood. Bella, on the other hand, looked tense and unhappy, even when I caught her eye and gave her a smile.

"It was nice to meet you, sir," I said.

"Be careful driving now, Edward."

"I'll just walk him out, Dad," Bella piped up before nearly dragging me out of the kitchen. "I'll be right back!"

We made a beeline through the house and outside until I tugged her hand firmly to slow her steps. She came to a stop on the porch and wheeled around to face me, her face still pale. From inside, Chief Swan's slow steps made their way toward us, too.

"Your father will be at the door in about ten seconds," I murmured.

"Just tell me what you heard, Edward." Her voice was low and urgent.

"We can't do this right now."

"Just tell me."

"Not now."

"Yes, now!" she said with a hiss.

"Bella," I said very quietly while drawing my hand from hers. "Now is not the time."

Her lips tightened with her desire to argue, and I felt my frustration rising. Before I was forced to turn away, however, her eyes flicked over my shoulder toward the door, and I knew that Chief Swan was watching.

"I'd like to help you study again tomorrow." I made sure to use a normal tone of voice so he could hear me, and stepped carefully around Bella with an easy smile.

I heard her swallow hard and lick her lips. The strain in her smile was evident when she turned to watch me go. "Okay, I'd like that. I'll, um, call you or text you. Thanks for your help, tonight,
When I opened my mouth to answer, Chief Swan cleared his throat and I could almost hear that mustache twitch. I raised my hand in a wave instead, and made my way to my car.

My phone chimed with a text when I walked into the Port Angeles house.

*What did you hear?*

I chuckled ruefully as I replied, wondering if any other creature on earth was more stubborn than Bella Swan.

*That your father loves you and is concerned for your well being. Sleep well, Bella.*

I returned to the Swan household on Wednesday and then Thursday evening. I made awkward small talk with Chief Swan while Bella made their dinners, then helping her with her homework until he kicked me out.

Bella was clearly still curious about the thoughts I had overheard; her gaze was particularly sharp on several occasions. She did not ask me about it again, though I suspected she might if we had time and privacy for an in depth discussion. We did manage some personal conversations at her kitchen table when Chief Swan's attention was on the televised baseball games.

"Have you asked your father about spending time with me on Saturday?" I asked. "For your birthday, I mean."

She shook her head. "Not yet, but I will tonight. My birthday is on Friday, so he'll want to take me out for dinner. I don't think he'd mind if I went out with you the next night, as long as it's not too late."

"That depends on you, actually," I said with a smile. "If you can leave work a little early, we could start the party in the early evening; I'd imagine your father would be all right with that."

Her face fell. "Party? You said nothing big, Edward."

"And I meant it. If the word party bothers we can call it a… gathering."

"A gathering of vampires," she murmured with a smile. "I like that. And yes, I think I can get out of work a little early."

Chief Swan's heavy step outside the door interrupted my reply. "How's that homework coming, Bells?"

"Good, Dad." She rolled her eyes discreetly. "How's the game?"

"Mariners are winning," he said as he walked past us toward the refrigerator. "So good, in my book."

"Awesome," Bella murmured.

Chief Swan pulled a beer from the fridge and cracked it open with his eyes fixed on me. "You like baseball, Edward?"

"I do. I'm originally from Chicago, and I'm a-"
"White Sox fan," he cut in with a dry smile.

"Not exactly. My dad was a White Sox fan and my mom loved the Cubs."

Chief Swan drank his beer in silence for a moment and then cocked an eyebrow. "Your parents were fans?"

"They died a few years ago," I explained calmly. "The Cullens took me in and I've been there ever since.

"I'm sorry to hear that." His quiet voice was sincere.

"Thank you. Anyway, I could never choose between the two teams when I lived with my parents. So I follow both."

For the first time, I saw kindness in Chief Swan's dark eyes as they appraised me. His mustache even stopped twitching.

Esme and I were talking about a composition I had been writing when my phone chimed with a text from Bella late that evening.

*Charlie's okay with the 'gathering' on Sat. I'll be home by 5:00.*

aDc

"Where are we going?"

Gravel crunched loudly under the wheels of Emmett's Jeep as we turned onto Whiskey Bend Road.

"Lake Mills is just ahead." I grinned when Bella raised an eyebrow at me.

"I've never been up here before. Charlie's a fisherman, not a camper."

"We'll take this road to the trailhead and then go on foot from there.

"On foot? Is that why you told me to dress warmly? It's getting dark out, how-?"

"I can see in the dark. Don't worry; I won't let you get lost."

"Well, that's not what I meant, but thanks," she laughed.

"I know it's a bit unconventional to have a birthday gathering in the middle of the woods," I said. "I thought, though, that having lots of space to run around and air to breathe would be better for Alice. None of us has any idea how she's going to handle being so close to a human at this point in time."

Understanding washed over her face, followed by a smile. "So instead of cooping us all up inside, we're coming out here. You're a smart one, I'll give you that."

"Thanks. I'm sure that was hard for you to admit." I couldn't help laughing when she grimaced in agreement. "Don't worry, by the way - we don't have far to go on foot, and I did bring a flashlight. You'll be fine."

She shrugged easily and looked out the Jeep's window. My chest swelled with emotion when she spoke again. "Okay. I trust you."

I pulled off into the woods near the trailhead and grabbed the supplies from the back of the Jeep
before helping Bella out. The canopy of trees overhead and fading daylight made the woods quite dark though it wasn't quite six o'clock. Handing her a flashlight, I took her free hand and led her into the woods.

We walked for a little while without speaking, simply listening to the hush of the woods around us. The beam from the flashlight bounced along the ground, Bella's hand was secure in mine, and her steps were sure.

"Are you warm enough?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm glad you told me to wear this." She smiled and looked down at the blue jacket she had zipped up to her chin and then to the button down shirt I wore. "It's a bit odd to see you in shirtsleeves. Do you really never get cold?"

"Not cold or hot, really. Both extremes can feel pleasant to my kind. Regardless, we normally dress for the weather to better blend in with the humans. As far as tonight goes, we have something set up to keep you warm."

"Are we going to a campground?"

"Just a little place that we found during one of our hunting trips. Alice has a certain knack for finding pretty hidden spots in the woods."

She fell quiet again and I saw certain tightness around her mouth that told me she was tense.

"Are you nervous, Bella?" I asked gently.

"A little, maybe. I just… Alice and I used to chat so much. I really liked having someone out there that I could call a friend." She shot me a quick smile. "Besides you and Jacob I mean.

"When I realized that she might be your sister… you can't imagine how surprised I was. But we started talking less and less and now, it's like the girl I knew never existed," she finished wistfully.

"You know Alice couldn't help that, don't you? After her change… she was so lost before you helped us find her. She was afraid to talk to you, even though you were the only contact she had to the outside world."

Bella's brow furrowed. "Afraid?"

"She didn't want to hurt you," I said simply. "She worried that even hearing your voice would be too much for her. That's why she didn't just ask you to help her; she didn't want to put any more people at risk than there already were."

"I had no idea. I wish I'd known-"

"Don't blame yourself," I squeezed her fingers gently until she met my eyes. "There was no way you could have known, and nothing you could have done even if you had. Alice couldn't be helped by just anyone, Bella. The important thing is that she's okay now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I smiled. "She thriving and learning… she seems happy. And you helped make that happen."

She looked down shyly, but a smile played at the corners of her lips and I knew my words pleased
her. She seemed about to say something when the sound of silvery laughter floated through the trees. Her eyes grew wide in delighted wonder.

"Everyone's just up ahead." I nodded toward a low glow about a thousand meters in the distance, chuckling when she moved forward more quickly, unable to contain her curiosity.

We wound our way around a copse of hemlocks and I heard Bella's soft intake of breath. Even I had to smile at the sight before us. The little clearing Alice had found was decorated like a fairyland with hundreds of white lights. They wound around trunks and branches, and hung between the trees, filling the space with a lovely glow. Near the center of the clearing was a little table with an arrangement of small packages and a birthday cake decorated with blue flowers. My family stood around a fire burning near the table, watching Bella's reaction with bemused smiles.

Except Alice. Half hidden behind Jasper, my sister peeked at Bella with wide eyes. Despite Jasper's calming waves, Alice looked nervous, even frightened. I frowned and started to lead Bella forward again until I heard my sister's words.

"I'm scared, Edward," she murmured very quietly. "I don't know how to do this."

"Hold your breath, Alice," Jasper whispered, turning his head slowly to watch the petite girl behind him.

"Stop," I ordered at once. I didn't take my eyes off the newborn vampire across the clearing for even a moment. "I need you to pay attention to me, Bella. We're going to have to go about this very, very carefully. You must listen and obey every directive one of us gives you. Do you understand?"

"I—yes," she said. The sober tone of her voice told me she understood the seriousness of the situation.

"Promise me, Bella," I said as I watched Alice's eyes.

"I promise."

"I'm going to ask Esme and Rosalie to stand with you while Jasper and I talk to Alice. Please don't move."  

"All right."

Esme and Rosalie walked toward us at a human pace, their smooth and unhurried movements designed as much to soothe Alice as to put Bella at ease.

"We've got her, Edward," Rosalie thought as she and Esme drew up alongside us. "Go on and talk to Alice."

I nodded in return and walked calmly toward the skittish newborn standing behind my brother. As I closed the distance, Carlisle and Emmett stepped forward and then turned to face Alice, providing another buffer of protection for the human at their backs. Jasper continued to whisper encouragement to my sister and use his ability to calm the lot of us, though every vampire in the clearing remained on high alert.

"Talk to me," I told Alice as I stepped around Jasper and very carefully took hold of her hands. "Tell me what's going on in that head of yours. And use your thoughts… don't take even the smallest breath."

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Esme and Rosalie walked toward us at a human pace, their smooth and unhurried movements designed as much to soothe Alice as to put Bella at ease.

"We've got her, Edward," Rosalie thought as she and Esme drew up alongside us. "Go on and talk to Alice."

I nodded in return and walked calmly toward the skittish newborn standing behind my brother. As I closed the distance, Carlisle and Emmett stepped forward and then turned to face Alice, providing another buffer of protection for the human at their backs. Jasper continued to whisper encouragement to my sister and use his ability to calm the lot of us, though every vampire in the clearing remained on high alert.

"Talk to me," I told Alice as I stepped around Jasper and very carefully took hold of her hands. "Tell me what's going on in that head of yours. And use your thoughts… don't take even the smallest breath."

"I don't know if I can do this," she thought miserably. "What if I hurt her? I can see her, Edward,
and she looks so... so soft and pink... so good. I can almost feel the heat coming off her body. I can hear her blood, and her heart. It's thumping and thumping, and it's wet."

"I know, sweetheart. We all know how hard this is for you."

Alice's eyes gleamed with venom and I knew that she would cry in frustration if she could.

"Hey, hey, hey," I murmured, pulling her into a hug. "There's nothing to be upset about."

Jasper turned to face us and took one of her hands. "You're doing so well, Alice. We won't let anything happen, believe me. And if you don't want to do this we can try another time."

We three stood motionless for a little while, Jasper and I encouraging and calming Alice until she felt more confident.

"I won't be able to talk very much, will I?" she thought, her long eyes sad as she watched me.

"I don't think so. You should have enough breath to say what you want to, thought." I smiled and pushed the hair from her forehead with my fingers before stepping back and taking her free hand in one of mine. "If you really need to say more, I could speak for you... or you and Bella could use your phones."

Alice's eyes lit up when her face creased in a smile, and Emmett let out a laugh behind us.

"That seems appropriate for the two of you," Jasper said with a grin, chuckling when Alice scowled at him playfully.

"Okay then," she thought. "If you all will help me-"

"Of course we'll help you," I said reassuringly, waiting until she nodded before turning my eyes away.

I looked to the edge of the clearing, where Bella was talking softly with Esme. Rosalie, however, kept her eyes on Alice.

"Rose, Esme, I think we're ready to come to the table now," I said, making sure to raise my voice for Bella's benefit.

The three of them moved slowly toward the little table, Esme and Rosalie walking slightly in front of the human girl. Bella's eyes were bright and active, moving over the still figures ranged around her, returning often to mine.

"Hello, Bella," Carlisle said, stepping forward to introduce himself. My throat tightened as he said her name. "I'm sure you've guessed that I'm Carlisle. It's nice to finally meet you."

"Hello," Bella with a smile.

"I think you've met everyone else here... in one way or another."

"Yes," she chuckled nervously. "I can't believe you all put on a party out here. Thank you, I- I don't know what to say."

"Alice and Rose did most of the work," Carlisle said kindly. He gestured toward the chairs arranged around the table and stepped closer as Bella sat down. "The rest of us weren't of much use to them, but we're glad to able to help Edward celebrate with you."
I bit my lip when a rosy splash of color crossed Bella's cheeks. From the corner of my eye, I saw Alice duck her head slightly and glance away, her fingers tightening around mine.

Bella turned her big eyes on the blonde standing guard, her voice shy when she spoke. "Thank you, Rosalie."

"You're welcome," Rosalie replied after a pause, the corners of her lips turning up a tiny bit.

Bella craned her neck slightly as she tried to see the silent sister by my side. "Alice? Thank you. This is lovely."

"You're welcome," Alice whispered. She raised her amber colored eyes to meet Bella's and, slowly, the two girls smiled.

"It seems silly to introduce the two of you after all this time," I said, nodding to Jasper as we led Alice two careful steps forward. "So let's not stand on ceremony tonight."

"That sounds good to me," Bella said. "I'm just glad to finally meet you… Ali."

The girls continued to beam at each other, and I saw their smiles echoed in the faces of my family. Even Jasper, always so watchful and cautious, couldn't completely prevent himself from enjoying their obvious connection.

"Thank you, Bella," Alice whispered, her smile fading though her eyes shone with gratitude. "Thank you for everything."

Bella seemed unsure how to respond, her mouth falling open slightly in surprise. For a moment, her eyes locked with mine, the confusion in them clearing when I nodded slowly.

"You're welcome," she said at last, turning her gaze back to Alice. "I'm so glad that you trusted me."

The birthday gathering was going very well. Rosalie docked her iPod, filling the clearing with music that offset the conversations. Bella ate some cake and gratefully accepted a thermos of hot chocolate from Esme while they talked about Forks and Chief Swan's job.

"Why don't you open your gifts?" Emmett said at last, nodding at the little collection of packages wrapped in silver paper next to the cake.

"I— you really didn't have to do that," Bella said, blushing furiously.

"Nothing big." I assured her, winking when she scowled. "I promised you, after all."

She raised a brow at me, clearly unsure whether or not to be annoyed, and graciously chose one of the packages after a moment. Her irritation faded when she saw the copies of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

"Thank you, Edward," she said sincerely.

"I figured that it never hurts to have extra copies of the books you love."

"Mine are looking kind of ragged, to be honest. These are perfect."

She was pleased by the classical music CDs in the next package, and gasped in delight when she unwrapped a pair of blue cashmere gloves and matching hat.
"Rosalie helped with the shopping," I told her and laughed when my sister rolled her eyes at me.

"Thank you," Bella said, running her hands over the hat. "Oh, this is so soft! I'd put them on now except that I don't need them with this fire."

She reached up to unzip the collar of her jacket, pulling the fabric away from her neck and exposing her slim neck. Everyone in the clearing saw the veins in her throat pulsing blue beneath her fair skin. Everyone smelled the salt of her skin and the coppery hints of the blood beneath it. Everyone swallowed discreetly and looked away, pushing down the natural desire to bite and feed.

Everyone in the clearing but one.

"Want."

I felt Alice growling before I heard her, or perhaps it was the thought forming in her head before she even realized what was happening. Jasper's thoughts and reactions crashed into me next as Alice's body began to stiffen under my fingers.

Oh, fuck, no.

"Get out of here, Bella," I hissed, staring hard at Rosalie. "Get her to the car."

A second later, Alice lost control.

Everything happened both very slowly and very quickly.

A massive weight slammed into me as Rosalie scooped Bella out of her chair. Alice, Jasper, and I fell crashing to the ground while Esme and Rosalie took off at a dead run, my sister's hair blowing behind her and mixing with Bella's in a trail of gold and chestnut.

Alice's snarls were loud as I wound my arms around her, crushing her frame against my body. Jasper crawled over us both, pressing down and pinning Alice's arms back as best he could to prevent her from hurting me. I blinked and sensed a flurry of new movement as Emmett and Carlisle leaped into the fray.

"Alice," I ground out, almost unable to draw breath to speak. "Stop!"

There was nothing but a feral keening noise, utterly devoid of sensibility. The thoughts flying through Alice's head were as brutal and monstrous as her strength, making me grit my teeth in rage.

I managed to look at the figure struggling against me and knew, without any doubt, that my sister was gone, at least for the time being. The eyes that looked back at me were black as pitch, and her bloodlust twisted her pretty features into a horrifying mask. In her place was a beast I knew very well; I worked every day to contain that same beast inside myself.

My sister's teeth snapped within a half-inch of my right eye before Jasper pulled her head back, his own teeth bared with effort. I gave a strangled grunt when the pressure on top of me increased exponentially as Carlisle and Emmett crawled onto the pile. The earth beneath my body began to give way as the weight bore down on me.

"We're gone, Edward." Rosalie's crystal thought sliced through my head, not a full minute after Alice's explosion. I knew that Bella was safe and moving further from the clearing with each second. We just needed to hold on to Alice for a little longer.

"Easy, easy, Alice," Jasper said, bending low to speak into my sister's ear in an effort to calm her. He
tried to calm Alice's mood as well, but she was simply too far gone.

With stunning speed, she managed somehow to twist around in my arms, curling her arms and legs underneath Jasper like a spring. I saw the understanding in his eyes a half second before Alice hurled him into the trees on the other side of the clearing with a thunderous crash.

"Jesus Christ," Emmett swore, battling at Carlisle's side to help contain the thrashing girl that I somehow still held against me.

With a wail, Alice abruptly tore away from us all, throwing Emmett and Carlisle to the ground. Her forceful motions sent burning seams of pain through my shoulders, though I lacked the breath to cry out; had she pulled harder, she would have ripped my limbs off.

My sister gave me one wild look, the anguish written clearly on her features before tearing off into the woods. I felt a flash of gratitude to realize she was running in the opposite direction from Whiskey Bend Road and Bella.

The pain in my shoulders forgotten, I was on my feet in an instant and sprinting after Alice. I heard the others weaving around the trees behind me, and grinned when I recognized Jasper's steps and thoughts among them.

I approached Alice cautiously as she ran, knowing she would be volatile; even without the temptation of human blood, my sister was still very dangerous.

"Where are you going, Alice?" I called gently, pursing my lips when she shook her head furiously and tried to edge past me. "We'll stop whenever you're ready. You're not alone in this."

She had fled deep into the mountains before slowing, finally coming to a stop in a thickly wooded river valley. She stood unmoving on the river's shore, her eyes fixed on the water rather than look at any of us.

"Did I hurt you?" she murmured.

"Not permanently," I replied honestly. "Jasper's fine, too. You can't hurt us, Alice, not in the way you're thinking."

"I tried to bite you, Edward." Her voice was bitter. "That would have hurt you."

"Only because of the venom," Jasper offered, approaching us slowly. "And only for a moment. We're all okay, Alice. You're okay."

Her lips twisted before she finally looked up, her big eyes filled with sadness as they moved between Jasper and me. "And Bella?"

"Rose and Esme took her home. She didn't even have time to see anything."

"I'm sorry-"

"Stop worrying, sweetheart," I said, and meant it. "Bella knew how hard this was going to be for you. Once you've had some more time, you won't have such a hard time."

Alice nodded before looking away once more, and my dead heart ached at her obvious misery. I knew very well how disappointed she was in herself, and how alone she felt, even with so many at her side. So when Jasper stepped around me to hold her hand, I smiled.
It was late when I stepped out of the woods near the Swan's house with a bag in my hand. The porch light was burning, however, and I saw Bella sitting on the porch swing with a patchwork quilt gathered around her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed softly as I approached the steps, her eyes widening to see me.

"Is it all right if we talk for a few minutes?" I asked, pitching my voice as low as I dared for her human ears.

"Yes, of course! I wasn't sure I'd see you again tonight... but I hoped I would."

I sat beside her and gave her a tentative smile. "Your father?"

"He's inside; fell asleep watching the game," she said. "He worked a double today. I told him I'd come in by midnight anyway."

"I've got fifteen minutes then," I said, handing her the bag. "I'm sorry things ended so... abruptly tonight."

She gave me a small smile before reaching into the bag and removing the hat and mittens. Her eyes were tired but glowing with happiness and the blue hat complimented her coloring wonderfully. She was lovely.

"These really are perfect, Edward. I've never felt anything so soft."

"I'm glad you like them."

"Thank you for tonight," she said seriously. "It was beautiful."

I couldn't help snorting and nearly turned away when she frowned. "I'm glad you had a nice time. Alice feels really badly about the way she acted."

"Is she okay?" Bella's voice was meek. "Or... are you okay, I guess?" She looked me over more closely and I managed a chuckle.

"Yes. Everyone is okay, including Alice and me. I wasn't sure if we'd be able to control her, to be honest... she's incredibly strong."

I gave Bella a long look before speaking again. "Thank you for listening to me when I told you to leave. And for letting Rose and Esme take you home."

Her face colored and she nodded soberly. "It all happened so fast. I wasn't even sure what was going on until Rosalie got me into the car. She and Esme explained as much as they could on the way back to Forks."

"You and Alice can't be around each other yet, I'm afraid," I told her. "She's just not ready. I can't risk something like that happening again."

Her frown deepened. "I'll be able to soon, won't I? Alice isn't going to be like that forever, right?"

"Given enough time, she won't have as hard a time," I said. "She'll always be dangerous, though, Bella. I'll always be dangerous. You must never forget that."

"Yes, I-I know that. I do understand, honestly. I still want to be around you. Alice, too; your whole
family."

She shook her head when I looked at her dubiously. "But you, Edward, most strongly."

"You don't make sense," I murmured, holding her eyes with mine.

"Neither do you."

"I'm not the one in danger."

"You're in danger of pissing me off, that much I can tell you."

We sat silently for a few minutes longer. Bella wrapped her fingers around one of my hands as she watched me, her dark eyes moving over my face.

"You still want to try to make this work, don't you, Edward? Even with the way... with the way that I am?"

"Yes." I lifted my free hand to stroke the hair falling over her shoulder. "There's nothing about you that I don't want, Bella."

"I feel the same way," she whispered. "I don't care about what happened with Alice tonight; it was nothing, I just want to be with you."

She sighed when I leaned forward and kissed her, her hands sliding up and around my neck as I gathered her closer. Our touches were desperate, and we weren't particularly gentle or careful. Every part of her that I could touch was blazing with that delicious heat, sending waves of desire through me. She groaned quietly when our tongues met, and I knew that had I not already been dead, I would have expired on the spot.

"We should stop." I pulled away enough to rest my forehead against her temple, closing my eyes while working to calm myself. "You have to go inside soon."

"I know," she grumbled in agreement, her slim arms pulling me closer. "Thank you for bringing my birthday presents back."

"There's one more, actually." I straightened up without letting her go, and ran a finger over the fine hairs of her eyebrows.

"One more present?"

"Yes. And you can use it at any time; there's no expiration date."

She smiled, obviously intrigued, and waited for me to continue.

"We have a cabin in Montana, near Cooke City. It's very beautiful, at any time of year, and especially during the autumn." I paused and licked my lips before continuing. "I'd very much like to take you there for a weekend. If you'd like to go, that is."

"That sounds really beautiful," she said, her face growing serious again. "Would this be a family weekend?"

"Not unless you would prefer it that way. I was hoping that you and I could spend some time together again. Alone."

"I'd like that," she said with a warm smile.
Chapter End Notes

Soooooo... thoughts? I really do love Charlie Swan and his copstache, by the way.

Thank you for reading and your patience. It was wonderful to hear from so many of you after the last chapter, by the way - big hugs to everyone.

The next chapter will be Bella's.

I have an entry in the Slash/Backslash 4.0 contest. Not sure when voting begins, but there are some gorgeous entries; be sure to swing by the LiveJournal if you're a slash fan. http://slashbackslash.livejournal.com/
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. And thanks for hanging in there with us!

Chapter author: transitory07

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_I'm always driving, forget where I'm going,_
Should've turned left but I was singing some song
      And I am arriving as everyone's leaving.
But there you are, waiting. Something is wrong.
      Where did I go right?
      How did I get you?

_Where did I go right? - Hillary Duff_

I was sitting with Angela, Jessica, and, unfortunately, Lauren at Bessie's diner on Thursday afternoon during our lunch period when my phone buzzed. As Lauren and Jessica giggled over a reality show actor or something equally silly, I set my drink down and fished my phone out of my coat pocket.

_Edward_
_I love and hate how tempting you look in that light blue sweater. You shouldn't wear that when there are thirsty creatures around... including hormonal human boys ;)

My head shot up and I glanced out the window. There was a silver car parked next to Jessica's white Sentra.

_Oh, my God._

"Bella, what's wrong?" Angela suddenly asked and I realized I was clutching my phone tightly as I gawked at the smug-looking driver outside of our window.

"N-nothing," I stammered and blushed, dropping my phone on the table as Edward got out of his car. I glanced at my friend, self-consciously tucking a lock of hair behind my ear as the bell above the diner door jingled.

_I can't believe he's here._

Jessica kept prattling on until Lauren poked her in the side with her elbow. I immediately knew why. Slowly I lifted my gaze to the earth-shatteringly handsome person strolling towards our table.

"Edward, hi," I mumbled as he stopped, staring at Angela and me with a charming smile on his face.

"Hi, Bella," he said smoothly. "I hope it's all right that I stopped by."

There was nothing for me to do but blush even harder.

Before I could mumble a response, Lauren reached her hand across the table towards Edward.
"Hi, I'm Lauren!" she said brightly, smiling so wide I thought the skin of her heavily made-up face would snap off.

"Nice to meet you," Edward replied, shaking her hand for a second before dropping it instantly. I stifled a giggle at the disappointed look Lauren gave him.

Angela and Jessica introduced themselves in a more reserved manner and I scooted over towards Angela to make room for Edward in the booth.

"You live in Port Angeles?" Angela asked him politely.

Edward nodded as I picked up my fork and tentatively took a bite of my salad to keep the butterflies in my stomach quiet. We were sitting so close, our knees were touching, and Edward kept trying to hold my hand under the table. It was ridiculous how much I was blushing and in front of my friends too!

"I assume you're still in high school?" Jessica asked.

Edward nodded as Lauren shot me a sly glance that made me want to vomit.

"That makes sense," she exclaimed, fiddling with her earring coyly. "I mean, Bella doesn't seem like the kind of girl to date an older boy. In fact, I thought she was a nun up until now." She smirked.

I was completely mortified, imagining my cheeks the color of a ripe tomato. Luckily, Angela spoke up at that moment, casting an impatient glare at Lauren across the table.

"Bella's eighteen now, Lauren. She can date whoever she wants."

Jessica laughed nervously. "Right. She just meant that we didn't know Bella was dating."

Edward ended our secret game of cat and mouse hand holding under the table by pulling his arm back and wrapping it around me.

"Well, I'm lucky she chose me, regardless."

Angela smiled. "How did you two meet?"

"At a music store," Edward answered immediately, seeming motivated by Angela's kindness. "I was in town one day to get some sheet music and a few CDs for my sister when we... collided." He gave me a fond glance at the end of his sentence, making me smile unwillingly back.

Sometimes Edward could be extremely persuasive, I had to admit.

I was ready to take off after we said goodbye to Edward, if only to hide my embarrassment in the backseat of Jessica's car when Edward suddenly grasped my hand, pulling me back a few steps.

"Hold on a second, speedy," he said in a low, amused voice.

I turned to face him with a slightly frustrated look that made him raise his perfect eyebrows in question.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked.

I sighed softly, trying not to huff. "I just didn't expect you to show up today."

Edward nodded. "Uh-huh. And do you have a problem with me meeting your friends?"
"No! I just... planned to tell them about you privately. It was kind of sudden, that's all."

I didn't want Edward to think I was ashamed of him, but given how shocked Jessica and Lauren had looked at the sight of us together, I figured I was in for major interrogating later. That wasn't something I was looking for to, obviously.

Edward looked so sweet though, and even a bit hurt, as he ran his alabaster fingers through my hair. "Okay. I'm sorry. I thought it would be fun but sometimes I get carried away."

I was already melting under his gentle gaze. "Its fine, Edward. You know how easily embarrassed I get, that's all."

He cupped the side of my neck, making me step even closer. I was sure all three of my classmates were gawking at us from the car window at that very moment.

"Well, I hope you're not too upset to deny me the opportunity to take out tomorrow night?" Edward asked, suddenly very formal.

My eyes narrowed. "Tomorrow night?"

"Yes, I'd like to take you out to dinner in Seattle."

"Oh." I let out the breath I was holding. "Umm... okay. I think Charlie won't mind."

The most adorable smile crossed his face. "Great! I'll pick you up at seven?"

"O-okay."

Edward glanced away for a moment, probably traveling to my friends' shocked faces before he dipped his head towards me, planting the quickest of kisses on my lips.

"See you then, beautiful," he whispered, letting go as I stumbled back. I watched as Edward waved to my friends and walked to his car. Once he'd sped away, Jessica turned to look at me from the driver's seat, her eyes wide and pressuring.

"So how did you come across that sexy piece of ass?"

I groaned, sinking back into the soft upholstery in the backseat as Angela rubbed my arm comfortingly and Lauren glared unashamedly, while fumbling with her lipstick.

The rest of the day was as excruciating as I had imagined the second Edward had introduced his handsome self to my classmates.

aDc

"But why?" I demanded for the third time as Charlie sipped his beer and told me he didn't want me going out with Edward on Friday night. I tapped my foot impatiently against the kitchen floor as I did my best not to sigh like a disgruntled teenager. He was being difficult for no reason!

"Bella, I just think you're spending too much time with that boy lately," Charlie stated unconvincingly. "When was the last time you and Jake hung out?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Like, two weeks ago."

"Exactly."
"Oh c'mon, Dad. That's not long!"

Charlie exhaled, setting the now empty beer can on the table in front of him. "Look, you just met this boy, okay? I don't want you rushing things."

I smirked. If Charlie thought that Edward and I were moving too quickly, he should've seen us five months ago. Then again, if he had known what our interactions had been like back then, my poor father would probably have had a heart attack.

Taking that into consideration, I dropped the towel I was using to dry the dishes, and asked in a softer tone, "Dad, what's this really about?"

Charlie feigned confusion for a second before simply shaking his head, standing up with a quiet sigh. "It's nothing, honey. Just be home by eleven, okay? And please promise me you won't drink anything a third-grader wouldn't touch."

This time I really did roll my eyes but he smiled before exiting the kitchen so I knew we were okay. Charlie was probably just getting used to the idea of me having a boyfriend. If I were totally honest, I was just getting used to that idea myself.

That was why, when Friday night rolled around, I was frantically going through my closet, scattering various items of clothing in an attempt to figure out what to wear... what Edward would like to see me in, and what wouldn't embarrass or make me fidget uncomfortably.

My phone buzzed an hour before Edward was supposed to show up, his sister's name flashing across the screen.

Alice
I had a mental image of you wearing a horrendous pair of trailer park jeans. Please throw those away and pick something else... He's taking you to Palisade.

I chuckled, shaking my head, imagining how annoyed Edward would be had he known that Alice had just ruined the surprise. But Palisade, really? My stomach churned. I'd heard Jessica raving about it the one time her dad had taken her there for her birthday. Of course, Mike didn't have that kind of money to spend on dinner, and that fact seemed to have pissed her off at the time. I, on the other hand, was going out with a guy who was dripping with cash so I had the opportunity to embarrass myself in an expensive restaurant on the gorgeous Seattle waterfront.

Charlie answered the door when Edward knocked just before seven. I was in the bathroom, braiding my hair and trying not to puke. It was my first real date... getting drunk with Jacob on a beach didn't count, and I was extremely nervous. Edward would most likely be as dapper and compelling as ever, while I was, well, me: mediocre and average on the attractive scale. Then again, he was here, when he could have been anywhere with anyone else. That meant something, no matter how insignificant, right? I tried to focus on that as I slowly came down the stairs.

Charlie and Edward were still standing in the entryway, both seeming reluctant to make conversation.

My dad's eyes misted over when he saw me.

"Bells, you look beautiful, honey."

"Thanks, Dad," I said around the lump in my throat.

Edward reached out, wrapping his hand around mine, gently pulling me off the last step.
"I agree." He smiled widely.

Soft piano music was playing from speakers when Edward and I walked into the Palisade and my eyes immediately latched onto the glittering chandelier hanging spectacularly from the ceiling.

Edward took my hand as if everything was fine; like there weren't elegantly dressed people walking around, including the servers, and the whole atmosphere didn't scream romance.

"This is insane," I muttered when Edward turned to me after thanking the hostess, who was openly goggling at him from the waiting area.

"What is?" Edward questioned, his eyebrows drawn in genuine confusion.

"This place," I explained in a low voice, not wanting the other diners around to hear. "You do know I've been eating in diners and the occasional drive-thru since I was a kid, right?"

He smirked, undeterred by my condescending tone. "That's why you need to come to step out of your comfort zone, sweetheart. You should experience a fancy dinner once in awhile, though to me, everything is gross."

"And what if I don't fit the fancy dinner scene?" My eyes trailed to a blonde woman dressed in an off-the-shoulder purple dress standing nearby. "I'm more country bumpkin."

"Are you kidding?" Edward sounded like he was fighting back laughter and I looked up sharply.

"What's so funny?" I demanded, not liking the warmth I could feel flushing my cheeks. Hadn't I blushed enough in the past week?

He ran his fingers through my hair, pretending to tuck a strand behind my ear, though I knew nothing was falling out of place.

"First, who says 'country bumpkin' nowadays, Cinderella?" he teased. "Second, I brought you here because you deserve something special."

I tried not to shiver as Edward's cool fingers trailed down the side of my neck and over my collarbone. "Bella, you're undeniably special to me. You always have been, so stop putting yourself down."

For some weird reason, the fact that he had called me "special" had a bigger impact than if he had used the word "beautiful." It made so much of a difference in that moment that I felt my eyes prickling with tears as we stared quietly at each other.

Then our hostess was back.

"If you'll just follow me, sir, your table is ready." She spoke to Edward, of course, while giving me the briefest of once-overs.

I couldn't help noticing how her lips were caked with shocking pink lipstick and that her hair was unnaturally colored. Jessica or another more confident girl my age would have called the hostess a "high-class skank." Edward wasn't paying attention to her, either way, which should have soothed me if it weren't for the fact that it seemed to make her behave even more rudely towards me.

She led us to a table in the center of the crowded restaurant, and the noise of clinking glasses and
chatter almost drowned out the music that was playing.

"I don't think this will work out," Edward said before I took one of the seats. "Could we have something more private?"

The hostess's eyebrows shot up as she regarded his arm slung loosely around my waist.

"Of course, sir. Right this way." She turned on her heel, moving swiftly across the spacious dining area to a table at the very back next to a wide slanted window. The view overlooked the boats on the harbor.

I could feel my heart stir at the mere sight, gorgeous though it was. The whole evening seemed surreal.

"Is this better, sir?" the hostess asked briskly.

Edward flashed his million dollar crooked smile, making the woman blanch. "It's perfect. Thank you."

Edward pulled out a chair for me and I sank down slowly, keeping my eyes on the ocean and dimming coral sunlight outside.

"Your server will be right with you," I vaguely heard the hostess say. "Please let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks," Edward replied and I was surprised by the sudden brusque tone in his voice.

"This is such a gorgeous view," I commented lightly once were alone. Edward followed my gaze to the boats and smiled, a bit more relaxed.

"I thought you'd appreciate it, if nothing else."

I sighed, ashamed by my earlier reaction to the location of our date. "I do appreciate this, Edward. I appreciate everything you're doing tonight."

He met my gaze as I spoke, his eyes only getting brighter and more distracting.

"I just feel intimidated," I finished, almost inaudibly.

Edward reached across the table, covering my hand with his cooler one.

"You don't have to feel that way. You're the most stunning thing I see here, and I'm not just saying that because I love your smile or because I intend to take you to more places like this in the future."

He winked.

I shook my head. "You're incorrigible," I scolded playfully.

This might just work out. If I don't spill water on the table or accidentally cut myself with that scary-looking steak knife, that is.

A cute dark-haired waitress dressed in a crisp white and black uniform with a green apron stopped at our table at that moment, and Edward and I both looked up. When I made to slide my hand from under his, however, he only tightened his grip.

"Hi," the waitress said. "My name is Lindsey and I'll be your server. What can I get you to drink, sir?"
Of course, she was only addressing my extraordinarily handsome companion.

"Bella?" Edward prompted.

"I'll have a coke," I murmured, glancing away from Lindsey's scornful gaze.

"Two Cokes, please," Edward told her.

She smiled tightly. "I'll be right back, sir."

Edward let go of my hand when she had gone but kept staring at me as if I was the most important thing. It should've been unnerving or awkward and a small part of me still thought it was. For the most part, though, I felt incredibly safe. It felt a bit like taking the few steps into the ocean from a comfortable spot on the shore; all I had to do was let go a little more and then I might enjoy the cool sensation. I was so used to being all coiled up, on my guard, that unwinding, even just a little in Edward's presence was difficult.

But you've done it before. On the drive to Sacramento... You two were able to joke and laugh together, even hold hands. You can do this.

"What are you thinking about?" Edward wondered out loud, observing my expression with curious eyes and I blinked, shaking my head.

"Nothing," I said. "Just drinking everything in, I guess."

Edward laughed. "Is this really shocking? Perhaps I should've taken you to dinner on one of the yachts instead."

He winked when my eyes narrowed.

Lindsey returned with our drinks. "Here you go," she said, setting them on the table. "And are we ready to order?"

Oh, crap! What the heck am I going to order that won't cost a fortune?

"Do you need a moment, Bella?" Edward asked politely as I read the first page of the dinner section.

"No, um... I'll have the smoked salmon," I mumbled, awed by the prices.

"What about you, sir?" Lindsey inquired and I glanced up to see her leaning towards Edward. I bit back the urge to vomit. That would be a shame considering how pretty the tablecloth was.

"Nothing for me, thanks," Edward replied shortly, passing her his menu after she had collected mine.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded, reaching for my hand again. I couldn't help smiling.

"Let me know if you change your mind," Lindsey said in a slightly irritated tone as she turned away from our table in the direction of the kitchen.

"How's it going with your therapist, Bella?" Edward inquired gently a few minutes later.

I took a sip of Coke before answering. "How do you know about that?"

"I heard your father's thoughts," he said simply.
"It's fine." I didn't know what else to say, as I wasn't feel comfortable going into detail about what Carmen and I had talked about during the past few weeks.

Edward seemed to understand and just nodded. "Good," he said simply.

"Is Alice doing all right?" I asked with genuine interest. Though she sounded like it from her texts, I wanted to get her brother's perspective on how my friend was feeling since the last time we had seen each other.

Edward's face was serene so it put me at ease. "She's adjusting very well, actually. Jasper has been a great help." He hesitated before adding carefully. "They seem to have feelings for each other... romantic ones.

My eyes widened. "Seriously?"

Edward's lips turned up in a little grin. "I'm not sure if they're going to act upon it, but it's clear that Jasper cares a lot about my sister and she feels the same, despite how erratic her emotions have been since the... transformation." He whispered the last word, but I didn't mind. I was intensely happy for Alice.

"That's truly amazing, Edward. I know Alice has you and the rest of your family but she needs someone to be there for her in that special way too."

His smile broadened and he reached across the table, grazing his hand down the side of my face and tracing the line of my chin slowly.

"How can you be so lovely?"

My skin felt like it was on fire beneath his touch.

The waitress, Lindsey, appeared then and Edward pulled his hand back. The meal went by smoothly after that. The salmon was superb, unsurprisingly, and the only awkward moment had been when Edward had asked me about therapy. We found other, easier topics to talk about like my classmates, his siblings, and our interests out of school.

Edward filled me in on some new indie rock bands that he'd recently discovered and I shared a hilarious story about how Mike and Tyler's prank on Eric last week during gym had backfired, landing them both with serious rashes on their bodies due to old gym clothes and bleach.

"You should've seen how red Mike's face was!" I exclaimed before taking a last bite of my dinner. "He kept scratching his neck and hopping around until Coach Clapp interrupted his speech because it was so distracting."

Edward's laugh was infectious. "No offense, but this Mike guy doesn't sound like the sharpest tool in the shed."

I shook my head, grinning, remembering how many times Mike had been oblivious to Jessica's flirting.

"He's not, believe me. I don't know how he's straight A student. Maybe he gets Jessica to do his homework for him. I swear she'd do practically anything to get his attention and after three years, I still don't understand why."

Edward stared at me with a peculiar glint in his eyes.
"What?" I wondered aloud, feeling self-conscious again.

He blinked and shook his head, seeming to realize he had been staring. "Nothing."

My eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"It's nothing, really."

"Tell me," I demanded and he grinned.

"Not a chance."

"C'mon, Edward."

His smile widened into something so brilliant that my heartbeat actually stuttered. "You're not the only stubborn one, Bella."

I rolled my eyes. "Edward Anthony Masen Cullen," I said elaborately. "You are the hardest person to fight with... Even play fighting."

He was still chuckling as Lindsey left the check on our table and cast him a look of utter admiration. Edward didn't seem to notice.

On the drive back to Forks, Edward played some of the music we had talked about during dinner, and our hands interlaced between over the console. Despite my worries about our upcoming trip to Montana, I tried my best to keep my mind strictly on the present. Our night in Seattle had been so dreamlike, that the romantic little girl inside me wanted to play princess for a little while longer.

Charlie was still sitting in front of the TV when I tiptoed through the door after Edward had dropped me off. He had insisted on escorting me out of his car, even though I had rolled my eyes and pretended not to enjoy it. From the grin on Edward's devastatingly handsome face, I could tell he knew I did.

"Bells?" my dad called. I pulled off my shoes and made my way to the living room.

"Yeah, Dad?" My skin was still buzzing with the delicious aftershock of Edward's goodbye kiss on the porch. It had been such an *Anne of Green Gables* moment.

"So how was it?" Charlie asked, sinking into the couch as he held the remote in his left hand and a can of beer in the other. It must've been a fun night for him too.

"Your… uh… date, how was it?" Charlie clarified when it took me a moment to answer.

I was searching for a word that wouldn't sound too girly or cheesy.

"It was incredibly…good," I ended up saying lamely. I could practically hear Edward chuckling at my lack of coherency but for some reason, that idea made me smile.

Charlie smiled in response, which made me happy.

*It seems I've done something right for once,* I thought as I climbed up the stairs.
Not bad, right? Disasters averted during date. And next, we'll have the weekend away. WIN.

Thank you for reading and your patience. Thanks so much for all of the amazing feedback after the last chapter - hugs to all. Hope your Halloween was happy and anyone in the path of Super Storm Sandy is okay!

The next chapter will be Edward's.

My Slash/Backslash 4.0 contest entry was given an Honorable Mention by the judges. I also wrote a Halloween piece for the Slash Writers' Workshop, too, and placed 3rd. Aieeeee - excited! :D
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. This chapter was meant to be posted last week, but I just wasn’t feeling it after the news from Newtown, CT.

Please see author's note at chapter's end. This chapter is unbeta'd—all mistakes are more mine than usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

My love
Your light
Incantations
Struck
Stars like tears fall
The sequence ends
"Incantations" – Massive Attack

"You don't look very happy, Edward."

I blinked and looked up from the piano keys to where Rosalie was standing in the door of the music room.

"What makes you say that?"

She walked across the room and sat at my side on the bench, smiling when I furrowed my brows in confusion.

"You've been sitting here for the past hour, but you haven't played a note." Her voice turned teasing. "You've always been a bit of a sullen Cullen, but that's not really like you. What's wrong?"

I laughed and made a show of putting my hands on the keys, playing a soft melody that I knew she favored.

"Nothing, really. I've got a lot on my mind, that's all."

"Can I assume you're brooding about the Swan girl?" Rosalie lifted her own hands to the keyboard to add harmonizing notes. "I thought that was all worked out, so to speak."

"It has been, for the most part. Bella and I have been going out, getting to know each other. It's been nice."

"Then what's got you thinking so hard?"

I frowned and stopped playing. "You know that Bella and I are going to the Cooke County house on Friday."

"You mentioned it," Rosalie said dryly before she stopped playing and turned to face me. "Have you changed your mind?"
"No. I am a little ... worried that I'll make a mistake with her. Lose control when ... well if, things get more—"

"Physical," she finished for me.

I nodded and raised a hand to rub at the back of my neck.

"I think you'll be okay, Edward."

Rosalie's confident tone and words floored me. I stared at her for a long moment, waiting for the punch line of what I knew had to be a joke, while she met my gaze calmly.

"That's what you're going to say to me?"

"It's the truth," she replied with a shrug. "You don't give yourself enough credit; you never have. You've gone through a lot for that girl already. Hell, you walked away from a kitchen full of human blood for her—what makes you think you can't do this, too?"

"I didn't walk away from that blood, Rose," I protested, "Em and Jas dragged me out of Chase's house while you made sure Bella was safe."

Rosalie waved her hand dismissively. "Still, you didn't rip the girl's head off before I got my hands on her and you had ample opportunity. That says a lot about your ability to control yourself around her. Emmett or Jasper couldn't have pulled that off when they were your age, and I'm willing to bet Esme would have struggled, too."

I nodded reluctantly, aware of the truth in my sister's words, though they did little to quell my concern.

Rosalie's voice was softer when she spoke again. "If you're really worried, we could come with you."

"What, you and Em, like chaperones? God, no, ugh."

She laughed and knocked my shoulder with her own. "You're right, that's kind of weird. But we'd do it for you if it made you feel better."

I grinned. "I'm not sure if it would really make me feel better to know that Bella and I had company out there. But thank you for offering."

Rosalie stood, walking to the corner where the guitars stood in their stands. Fingering the neck of her favorite acoustic thoughtfully, she lifted it and looped the strap over her head. Her expression was serious when she turned to face me.

"We keep telling you, Edward: you don't have to do everything by yourself. Jasper, Esme, and Carlisle can handle Alice if that's what's worrying you."

"I'm not worried," I replied. "And I don't feel that way anymore, Rose; as if I have to hide things from you all. What goes on with Bella, though—all of those very personal things—are between her and I. Surely you can understand that."

For a few, long minutes, Rosalie didn't reply, strumming the strings of her guitar gently instead. Her eyes were kind when she raised them to meet mine again.

"Come play with me, Edward."
Chief Swan's cruiser was nowhere in sight when I pulled in behind Bella's truck the following
evening. Bella's father had become more comfortable with his daughter dating, but continued to be
very watchful. To Bella's great chagrin and my silent amusement, he interrupted our conversations
whenever he could and insinuated himself into whatever room we were in.

She opened the door as I walked up the steps, her eyes wide with surprise and a smile curling the
corners of her lips.

"I didn't think I'd see you until tomorrow," she said before her brows drew together. "We're still on
for tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, of course." I drew her toward me and pressed a kiss on the apple of her cheek. "I was out
buying a few things for the trip and thought I'd come by to say hi."

Her dark eyes shone as she smiled. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Come in, I was just warming up some chili for dinner," she said, backing up to let me through the
door. "What kind of things were you buying for the trip?"

"Food for you, actually. We keep kitchen appliances in the house, so you should be well fed while
we're there."

Once in the kitchen, I took a seat at the table, keeping my face still as sharp smells filled the room:
peppers and tomatoes, mixed with an oily-smelling meat. Bella stood at the stove, stirring the
contents of a pot before turning off the burner.

"Where's Charlie tonight?"

"He's working a later shift—should be home in a couple of hours." She filled a bowl and brought it
to the table before turning back to the refrigerator for a carton of milk. She sat down across from me
and poured herself a glass. "Charlie, and his friends, Billy and Harry, are heading up to Crescent
Lake first thing tomorrow morning. They make the trip for a few days every September. Jake and a
couple of the younger guys are going with them this year, too … that should be interesting."

Bella chuckled, her hands busy topping the bowl of hot food with orange grated cheese.

"Something funny?" I asked with a smile.

She shrugged, stirring the food. "Not really. It's just that Charlie and his buddies have a routine after
all this time. I'm not sure how they'll take it when Jake, Embry, and Seth start butting in with their
own routine."

"They'll start marking their territory, like any self-respecting human men," I replied, making her
laugh again.

"Yup. I can't even begin to imagine what Charlie and Harry will do if they find Jake and Embry's
beer stash." Her cheeks turned pink with amusement. "I just hope my dad and Billy thought to rent
two cabins."

We talked while Bella at her dinner, discussing her day at school and some lingering questions she
had about what to pack for the trip.
"It's pretty rustic," I reminded her, "and the house is at a higher elevation because of the mountains. Bring warm things that wear well and your hiking boots. Heavy socks."

She looked thoughtful. "I suppose I should bring my ski parka."

"You may as well. We have the car and the house, so don't worry about having to store things you don't use; there's plenty of space even if you were to over pack. Knowing you, that's unlikely to happen."

We washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen as we discussed the trip details again. Bella planned to meet me in Port Angeles the next morning, where we would change cars for the trip.

"I know you've said that the trip won't take as long as it is mapped out on Google." Bella looked at me questioningly. "How long do you think it will take?"

"Probably six hours," I replied, pressing my lips together to stop myself from laughing when her eyes flew open in surprise.

"What? That's not possible, Edward!" She nibbled her top lip for a moment. "Is it?"

"With vampire reflexes, it is more than possible. I like to drive fast; you know that already and I won't have to stop unless we need more fuel for the car."

"I'll have to," she said quietly, her face flushing pink when I looked at her in question. "Stop for pit breaks, I mean. At least a couple of times."

I smiled in understanding. "You didn't let me finish. I know you'll need to stop, and to eat, too. Esme's going to put together a cooler for the trip so you don't have to eat diner food."

Bella shook her head. "Sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you'd forgotten. You're really good at remembering the human stuff."

"We Cullens spend a lot of time around humans. Keeps us on our toes, so to speak."

Eager to spend a little more time together before Chief Swan got home, we went to the living room and sat together on the sofa. Bella looked shy when I put my arm around her shoulders, but leaned back against my shoulder, tilting her face toward mine. I watched her for a long moment, and breathed in her wonderful scent.

"I'm really looking forward to this weekend," I said, raising my free hand to cup her cheek.

Bella's voice was low and trembled just slightly. "So am I."

Only recently, that tiny tremor would have made me hesitant, perhaps even pull away. I knew Bella well enough by now, however, to read the emotions flashing in her dark eyes: desire and excitement, tempered with caution.

With great care, I leaned in to brush my lips against hers, stroking the soft skin of her cheek as her eyes fluttered closed. Bella's arms wound their way around me, her hands moving over my waist and lower back. I drew her closer to deepen the kiss, humming quietly as our lips moved together. The heat and taste of her mouth flowed over my tongue, and I felt myself growing hard when she pressed her body against mine.

I don't know how much time passed, or when Bella's hot hands crept under the hem of my shirt to press against my skin. I was half-reclined in my seat and Bella was on my lap when I finally pulled...
Pressing my lips to her ear, I forced myself to whisper. "We have to stop."

"We do?" she murmured, ducking to kiss the corner of my jaw and making me groan. "Why is that?"

"Your father will be home soon," I said, inwardly cursing Charlie Swan while I ran the tip of my nose over her skin.

She sighed and pulled away enough to rest her chin against my shoulder. "I suppose you're right. This is so nice, though. It's been such a long time that we've been really alone together."

"We'll be alone tomorrow," I reminded her, kissing her once more before I straightened up and depositing her on the cushion beside me. "I should probably go before Charlie gets home. The last thing either of us wants is for him to get upset right before we leave for our trip."

"Fine." Bella grumbled as we got to our feet, but managed a small smile when I took her hand.

"Can you be in Port Angeles by seven-thirty tomorrow morning?" I asked. "I know that's very early, but the sooner we get going, the sooner the trip will be over. If that's too early for you, I can pick you up and drive your truck back to my house."

She shook her head at once. "No, no, I can do that. The truck's not very fast though," she said, poking me when I smirked. "Will it be really terrible if I'm a little late?"

"Not at all." I frowned, remembering the other person that shared her house. "What about your dad? Will your leaving so early be a problem?"

"Charlie and the guys will be gone before the sun comes up; don't worry about them."

"What does he think you'll be doing while he is away?"

"Well, he knows the school is closed tomorrow for a teachers' seminar," she said. "So he thinks I'll just be hanging out here in Forks for the weekend, and maybe seeing Angela."

"I'll leave him a note to tell him I'm visiting a couple of the college campuses in Seattle."

I blinked, before giving her a critical look. "If Charlie were to come back early, would he believe that?"

"That I'd gone into Seattle by myself? Sure; I did it a few times over the summer, and Charlie knows that I've been interested in taking a couple of tours that I missed on my other trips." She gave me a reassuring nod. "Charlie won't be coming home, though. He never has in the past."

"I'm surprised he leaves you alone for the whole weekend," I said, hastening to explain myself when she raised an eyebrow at me. "Obviously, you're capable of taking care of yourself. Charlie's a bit protective, though, and it seems in character for him to worry about you being alone here as well as in the city."

"My dad's come a long way since—" she paused and licked her lips. "Since I started therapy. Since you and I started dating, too."

"Are you sure keeping the truth from him is the best idea, though? Won't he wonder where you are overnight?" I cringed when her eyes rolled in over-dramatic fashion.

"As far as Charlie has come since I started therapy, Edward, he definitely would not be happy if I
went away with you for the weekend. Especially if I didn't discuss it with him, first."

"I see your point."

She put her hand over mine. "I know my dad and his friends. They'll fish in the rain and fog, all sorts of bad weather. On the off chance it snows, they'll just hang out at their cabin and tell stories over their vitamin R. Charlie won't be back until Monday night at the earliest.

"If it makes you feel better, I'll write something in the note about staying overnight in a hotel in Seattle or something."

I nodded, aware that Bella knew her father's behavior well enough to make assumptions about how the weekend would play out. Still … my past experiences nagged at me.

Taking her hand in both of mine, I stroked her soft skin with my fingers. "Bella, would you do something for me?"

She sighed, letting me see a flash of her impatience. "Is this still about my dad? Can't you trust me?"

"Yes, it's about your father, and yes, I do trust you," I assured her. "There are things we can't predict, though, no matter how hard we try.

"Don't bother asking me to check in with Alice, either," I said when Bella's face brightened. "You know her sight is still very muddled from time to time."

She gave me a small smile. "All right. What do you want me to do?"

"Leave the number for the Montana house phone in your note."

"But, why? He'd basically know exactly where I was, Edward, which is what I want to avoid." Her eyebrows furrowed as she looked at me.

"On that very, very off chance that Charlie comes home early, he wouldn't be able to reach your cell; reception's spotty at the house unless you have a satellite phone. That's why we keep one there.

"It's … difficult … suddenly not knowing where your family is. Having no way to reach them," I told her softly. "Charlie wouldn't know you were all right until we came back on Monday. He shouldn't have to go through that."

Bella's eyes softened with sympathy and her fingers tightened around mine. "Of course. I didn't think of it that way."

"I'll help you deal with Charlie if it comes down to it," I promised.

"You should know I could end up grounded until I'm ready for college," she said with a wry smile.

"Then I suppose I'd have to climb in through your window when I want to see you."

"Any excuse to be a creeper, hm?" she said fondly.

...aDe

"Damn, Edward. You weren't kidding about her truck being a dinosaur," Jasper said dryly.

I took the bag Jasper was holding and put it in my car's trunk. The sound of an ancient Chevy engine on Route 101 was clear and growing louder by the second.
"That thing she drives is older than her father," I replied. "She loves it, though."

Jasper grinned. "Bella's a strange one."

"Please. Bella's got nothing on Alice," I retorted and smiled when my sister growled from the third floor of the house.

"I can hear you, Edward!"

"Sorry, sweetheart," I murmured, frowning when I caught the undercurrent of concern in her thoughts.

"I should take her out into the Park before Bella gets here," Jasper said. He was good at reading Alice's emotional state even when she was not in the same room.

"Good idea. No need for her to feel uncomfortable."

"I said I can hear you," Alice whispered, appearing at our side.

I rubbed her arm with one hand. "I know you can. We're not trying to hide anything from you, Alice. I promise."

She watched us for a long moment, her eyes moving between us, measuring our expressions while a mixture of emotions flashed over her face. Finally, she seemed to settle on resigned and nodded, standing on her toes to kiss my cheek.

"Have fun. Tell Bella hello for me, would you?"

"Of course," I replied before she and Jasper flashed away.

I had finished putting the remainder of the bags in the trunk when Bella's red behemoth pulled into the drive. It seemed a long moment before she cut the engine, because she was staring up at the house with wide eyes.

"Morning, Bella," I called as she opened her door and got out. She pulled a duffel onto her shoulder as she swung the heavy door shut. "Have any trouble with my directions?"

"G'morning. Not really," she mumbled, still staring at the house behind me. She was dressed in jeans and a simple, red hooded sweater that offset her fair skin and dark hair beautifully. "Wow, Edward. I figured your family had a big house, but this—"

"Is home to seven of us," I interrupted gently. "Yes, it's a large house, but there are a large number of … people … living in it. Even before Alice came to stay, there were six of us."

Bella's face flushed red. She had the decency to look embarrassed for once more dwelling on the differences in the way our families lived.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean anything by it, honestly, Edward. I was just surprised."

I nodded, aware she was not telling the entire truth. I knew well, though, that calling her on this particular insecurity would get me nothing but arguing. Bella found my family's wealth intimidating, and nothing I could say or do would change that.

"I'd invite you in, but there's no one here right now." With a smile, I held out my hand for her bag.
"Carlisle's at the hospital and Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett are in Seattle. Jas and Alice went hunting a little while ago."

Bella handed me her bag and stuffed her hands in her pockets, trying to disguise her disappointment.

"I was really hoping to see Alice. We've been texting, but I haven't seen her since my birthday."

"She said to tell you 'hello.'"

"She did?"

"Yes. And she's been talking to Jasper and me about trying another meeting sometime soon. Maybe in a month or two."

Bella smiled in relief. "Great! I'd like that."

"Why don't we get on the road? You're actually fifteen minutes early, which works in our favor."

"I figured I'd give myself some extra time just in case I had trouble with your directions. Does extra time mean that we can stop for coffee?"

I dropped her bag in the trunk before pulling her into a hug. "You ask this as if I really have a choice in the matter, Bella."

In the end, the trip to the Montana house took slightly less than seven hours. We stopped a few times for the "human stuff" but Bella was perfectly happy eating while I drove, and that saved us time. As before, she was appalled by my driving speed, but I managed to reassure her that my heightened reflexes made the high speed perfectly safe. I didn't bother telling her that I drove much faster when she wasn't around.

We passed the time chatting about music, books, and movies again, but we also talked about our families. Bella was understandably fascinated by this family of vampires she had befriended, and very curious about the origins and lives of each member before they joined the Cullen coven. I was happy to hear more stories about her friends and family in Forks; Bella seemed to understand that talking about their homely lives was something that held interest for me.

"Have you been talking to your mother?" I asked, and suppressed a sigh when Bella's lips pressed into a thin line.

"Yes and no," she replied. "We talk once a week or so. It's fine, just shallow stuff. Renee doesn't want to talk about anything … deeper, you know?"

I nodded, knowing she meant Chase and the abuse she had endured. "And you've tried to get her to talk about those deeper things?"

"Not really," Bella admitted. "I don't necessarily want to talk about it all the time either. I do plenty of talking about it when I'm at therapy.

"Sometimes, I think it would be good to know that she thinks about what happened to me, though. To all of us, really. I hope it's made a difference in her life, somehow."

"I'm sure she thinks about what happened to you, Bella. And I know it's made a difference in her life; how could it not?"

"That's what Charlie says, too," she said, her face becoming somewhat sad. "She told him that she wishes I'd figured out a way to tell her what was happening. Maybe she could have done something
differently."

I frowned, nearly growling at the idea that the little child Bella had been would be held responsible for what had occurred so many years ago.

"That's hardly fair," I said in a rough voice, feeling the weight of Bella's eyes on the side of my face. "To put that responsibility on you. You were a child, Bella."

"I know," she said gently and then sighed. "Renee is … she's very immature for an adult. We can't go back and change anything. We have to keep moving forward. That's what my therapist keeps telling me."

"Your therapist is right." I tightened my grip around the steering wheel and turned to meet Bella's eyes. "Look at the way I was living before we found Alice. I was stuck in the past, just going through the motions here in the present to keep my family happy."

"That's different though, Edward. You were actually looking for someone. There was a purpose to your looking at the past."

"It didn't help me get through it, though, did it?" I asked, giving her a smile to let her know I wasn't angered by her words. "You and Alice are the ones that got me through that in the end."

"I just helped you find each other, Edward," she scolded. "You and your family did all the rest."

Just after half-past noon, Bella dozed off, curled up in the passenger seat with her pretty face half-turned toward me. Her breathing slowed as she relaxed into sleep and I took the time to look at her without fear of causing her embarrassment.

The last of her summer tan had faded, and her skin was almost the same hue of alabaster it had been the day of our first meeting in Garrett's music store. Her long lashes fanned across her fair skin, trembling as she dreamed, and there were a few new freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. Her lovely lips were pursed, almost pouting, though the corners lifted in a half smile that melted as she slept. Long, dark hair fell over her shoulders in loose waves that begged to be touched, shining in the sun that poured in through the windshield.

I shifted forward slightly, breathing in her luscious, warm smell, made so much stronger by the heat of the car. Sweet freesia and orange blossoms filled my nose, mixing with the salty tang of her sweat and blood, making my chest tighten with desire. I welcomed my body's responses, the hardening flesh and quickening breaths, and hoped fervently to finally show Bella how deeply she affected me as well.

We had danced delicately around the subject of sexuality on a few occasions since my return to Washington, not an easy task with Chief Swan inserting himself into Bella's private time. When we could speak, we were always careful to avoid territory that would make Bella uncomfortable, though we tried to find a middle ground that would allow us to learn more about each other.

I had enjoyed a healthy sex life as a young human man. I had never been in love, but had dated and known a healthy mix of intimacy and sexual excitement. Bella's experiences were the polar opposite of mine, tainted with fear and violence. She desired me—that much was clear, and knew well how much I desired her. It was a matter of making sure that we proceeded with care and awareness, and that we were as candid with each other as we could stand. She told me of the work she was doing with her therapist, Carmen, and the relaxation exercises geared toward making her less fearful of her feelings and contact with others. I, in turn, gave her an idea of the life I had led before my change.
"Mmm … Edward," she murmured then, before sighing in her sleep and shifting on the seat.

The tenderness I felt watching her in those simple moments never failed to stagger me. If my heart were still beating, I knew it would have been knocking against my ribs as my emotions swelled, pushing me once more to say the words I'd been thinking on and off for so long, but never found the right time to say.

_I love you._

aDc

"Oh, wow. Edward, this place is beautiful!" Bella exclaimed as she got out of the car to look around at the property.

"Thank you," I replied with a smile before walking to the back of the car to unpack the trunk. "I'll get the bags; feel free to explore."

"Oh, no," she frowned, coming to my side and reaching for a couple of bags. "Let's do this together and then you can show me around, okay?"

We made short work of unpacking the car and bundling everything inside. We put the food away first and her eyes were wide from the state-of-the-art kitchen—that had never been used—when she saw the music room with its upright piano and older guitars. She was quiet as we walked through the ground floor and then upstairs, and her eyes lit up with curiosity when I led her into my room.

I watched her unreadable expression as she walked slowly around, taking in my collections of books and music, and the large Kandinsky reproduction on the main wall.

"It's … funny," she said finally, smiling softly at me.

"What is?"

"This place." She gestured at the room and then seemed to look beyond the walls. "The house. It's rugged and it fits here in the woods—anyone visiting would just see a beautiful rustic house in the middle of the forest. But it's really luxurious, too. The kitchen, the furniture, the artwork. Inside, it's not at all what you'd expect from looking at the outside."

I nodded, crossing the room to look out the window. "In a lot of ways, this house and the others we own are a lot like my family. They hide in plain sight, and are more than meets the eye." I huffed a soft laugh. "Or less than meets the eyes, depending on how you look at."

"Don't think that way." Bella's voice was stern, but soft, as was the expression on her face when I turned to meet her gaze. She came to stand by my side, slipping her hand easily into mine, before she spoke again. "You're never less, Edward."

"Neither are you." I raised my free hand, tracing my fingers along her hairline, and coming to rest on the side of her neck. "I hope that you've stopped thinking that way too, Bella."

"I'm working on it," she said simply, and shrugged.

Glancing out the window again, I tugged her hand toward the bedroom door. "Sunset is in a couple of hours; let me show you around the property before it's too dark to see."

"Um, can I ..." She trailed off, her cheeks flaming with color.
Oh, what I wouldn't give to know what she was thinking.

"What is it?"

"Can I ask you a question?" she got out and then rolled her eyes at herself. "And no, that's not the question I want to ask."

"Of course you can." I frowned at her obvious discomfort and drew her to the low couch where I often read or wrote in my notebook. "What's wrong?"

"I was wondering … God, this is embarrassing," she said, erupting in a sudden fit of giggles as we sat down. It was a moment before she was composed enough to speak. "Edward, you don't happen to have a bed stashed somewhere, do you?"

I raised an eyebrow at her when she began laughing again, and smiled as she raised her free hand to wipe at her eyes.

"Are you okay?" I asked dryly.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"As long as you're sure, Bella. I don't want you getting the hiccups or something."

"Edward," she said with a tone of warning. "Answer my question, please."

"Oh, all right. No, I do not have a bed." I bit back a smile as her face fell. "I'm sure you remember that I have no need to sleep."

"Right; I haven't forgotten."

"This couch is perfect for reading or writing if I feel like sitting down, and it is a necessary human prop. Not something I really need, though."

She didn't reply, settling for nodding in response to my explanation.

"But because I know you need someplace to sleep," I continued, "I brought an air mattress with us."

Bella's face changed as her interest was piqued. "You did?"

"I did. It's over there by the door with the rest of the bags we brought up. It's a queen-size, by the way, in case you were interested. Plenty of room for both of us."

"Oh, thank God," she mumbled, and then froze, suddenly aware that she'd spoken the words aloud. "I mean … oh, hell."

I laughed softly and pressed a kiss to her hair before getting to my feet. "Come on. Let me show you around. After we get back, you can work something out for your dinner while I get the thank-God-its-a-queen-size air mattress set up."

aDc

We spent the afternoon walking in the woods surrounding the house while I told Bella stories about the recent wild time I'd spend there with Alice and Jasper. She was endlessly curious about the lifestyle we led, and wanted to know more about how Carlisle had gathered us all into a family.

When it grew dark, we returned to the house and sat in the kitchen while Bella ate pasta with peas.
We talked in more detail about the house, which Esme had designed herself thirty years before.

"The house has been remodeled, hasn't it?" Bella asked, looking significantly at the stainless steel appliances around us.

"Yes, of course. Esme replaces the appliances and bathroom fixtures from time to time. She repaints and buys new furniture every now and then as well."

"Even though the furniture isn't actually used?"

"It's important that we keep up appearances, even in a house as isolated as this. Esme also appreciates beautiful things." I rubbed the back of my neck with one hand. "I suppose it seems a bit silly when you consider that we don't spend much time in the house when we're here; we spend a lot of our time in the woods."

"That's why you come here, isn't it?" Bella asked, her eyes focusing on the thick forest visible through the windows. "So you can be-"

"Vampires?" I asked with a grin. "Yes, for the most part. It's a nice change, not worrying about acting human. We can stay out here for long periods because we hunt animals—the only threat to our food supply is winter weather."

She looked startled. "Gosh, I never thought of that. Is it very hard to find game during the wintertime?"

"It can be challenging, but it's not impossible. We take longer trips and sometimes we split into two groups. Staying on the west coast, where it's mild, is helpful as well."

Bella stood and took her plates to the sink, and gave me a shy smile when I went to her side to help her with the washing.

"Thanks for talking to me about your family … the hunting … all of that."

"You're welcome."

She gave me a searching look. "Can I ask what changed? When I've asked you about those things in the past, it always seemed as though you didn't want me know about that side of you."

I considered her words with a slight frown. "My first day back in Washington, I told you that we both need to be able to compromise to make sure that we keep moving forward together. Being more open about whom … what I am is one of the ways I'm keeping that promise."

aDc

We were quiet as we climbed the stairs to my room again later that night, and a bit serious. The lighthearted banter we'd shared earlier had dried up and a weight seemed to hang over us. Bella nervously excused herself to wash up and change while I turned up the thermostat in the room to drive away some of the chill in the air.

I glanced up when Bella walked through the door carrying her clothes. Even as my body responded to the sight of her long legs and bare feet, I was concerned to find her pale and faint looking as she fidgeted with the hem of her sleep shirt.

"Bella? Here, sit down."
I met her as she crossed the room and led her to the bed, which was piled high with enough blankets, quilts, and throw pillows for several people. Taking the bundle of clothes when she sat, I thought better of sitting next to her, and started for the couch. A warm hand on my arm stopped me.

"Don't go," she said, her eyes wide in the dim light of the room. "Just sit next to me. Please."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she said, patting the mattress beside her with one hand. "Sit with me."

Finding a spot on the floor for her clothes, I lowered myself to sit, watching her face carefully. "Are you all right? You didn't look so good a minute ago."

She sighed and pushed her hair back from her face. "I'm a little nervous, that's all. I've never done anything like this before."

"There's nothing to be nervous about," I told her very softly, taking her hands in mine. "You just say the word and I'll be out of your hair. I can go back downstairs if you'd rather be alone."

She frowned and shook her head. "That's not what I want, Edward. I want you here and to be here myself. To be closer to you. I just feel … nervous. I don't have a lot of experience; you know that already."

"Nothing will happen that you don't want to, Bella. I promise."

"I know," she whispered. "I don't know how far I'll be able to go."

"I would never hurt you, sweetheart."

"I believe you."

"I trust you, Bella." I raised my hand to cup her cheek, marveling at the delicate beauty that belied her fierce spirit.

"I trust you, too."

Carefully, carefully, I bent to graze her lips with mine, savoring their luscious heat. Bella's fingers tightened around mine, and I heard her heart rate accelerate.

I pulled back slightly to look at her, and smiled at the way her eyes shone.

"What is it?" she asked, her lips curling into a little grin.

"You look happy."

She nodded once. "I think that maybe I am."

"I'm glad."

"Don't let it go to your head." Her eyes narrowed but there was a glint of playfulness in them and I knew she was telling the truth. Bella Swan was happy, there with me.

She may have been the one that closed the short distance between us again. I leaned in, pulling her lower lip between mine, humming gently to feel the plump flesh. Bella let out a sigh, and reached to wind her arms around my neck. I felt her smile when I ran my tongue over her top lip and she seemed to melt against me. Tilting her face with my hands, I moved her so our mouths could open
against each other, and a low groan filled my chest as the kiss deepened.

Something inside Bella seemed to loosen with that sound. Her hands moved, slipping under my arms to run the length of my back, and toying with the hem of my shirt before gently sliding under. Her touch was inviting, prompting me to skim her waist with my hands, and creep under the hem of her shirt with slow care. Her hot skin pebbled beneath my fingers as I teased her smooth belly and ribs, and I paused, unsure if my cool touch made her feel good. Bella drew me closer, breaking the kiss long enough to whisper my name with a longing that I knew only too well.

"You'll tell me if you need me to stop," I murmured, nuzzling her cheek with my nose. "For any reason, Bella—"

"Promise." She clung to me more tightly, her lips moving against my skin as she spoke. "I want this, want you."

"I want you, too." I told her, drawing back again to look into her eyes before I said the words. "I love you, Bella."

She went very still against me, her eyes growing wide with wonder. "You do?"

"Very much."

"I love you, too, Edward," she whispered, pressing her forehead to mine while inside I soared, weightless. "I never stopped."

We kissed and cuddled for a while longer, simple touches meant to soothe and reassure. Strangely, Bella's growing confidence seemed to make me more tentative.

"Are you all right?" she asked, grasping one of my trembling hands in hers.

"I'm the one that's nervous now," I admitted, humming when she pressed her lips against my closed eyelids. "I'm afraid of hurting you. That I'm too cold and strong. You're so soft, Bella."

"You won't," she replied. "I trust you, Edward."

Slowly, slowly, she built me back up. Before I quite knew how, my shirt was gone, and I was lying on my back, with Bella straddling my waist. I listened to her heart pound and her blood rush while those small, wicked hands of hers trailed fire over my bare chest and the heat of her body leaked through our clothes and into my cold skin.

"Touch me," she said. "It's okay."

Her eyes closed when I raised my hands to cup her breasts through her shirt and she trembled as I swirled my thumbs over her nipples. She shuddered, making a small, inarticulate sound of need. An urge to be even closer swept through me. I sat up to press my lips against the ridge of her collarbone while the sound of our breaths filled the room. Bella tasted salty and perfect, and smelled so, so good, her scent mixing with the deep sweetness of arousal and making my head whirl.

Mmmmm. So good.

"Oh, God," she said in quiet surprise. Her eyes opened, dilated pupils fixed on mine with awe.

Using my hands to both move and cradle her against me, I let my lips ghost over hers. "Let me make you feel good, Bella. Can you do that?"
"Yes." Her voice was faint and her eyes half closed.

I pushed my hips up minutely, acutely aware of the tenderness of her body, and bit my lip as the warmth between her legs intensified. Bella gasped quietly, rolling her hips and chest into mine and setting my nerves on fire.

Want.

"Jesus Christ," I grunted before I stopped breathing; the smell of her arousal was too much.

We moved together, holding each other close as her heart thundered between the two of us. My mind and body were screaming, one telling me to be careful, and the other to crush her with my lust. Bella's soft, steady moans grew louder when I took her hand and we reached together between her legs, sliding under the waistband of her underpants. Her long moan and the sensation of slick fire against my fingers dragged a strangled groan from between my clenched teeth, I threw my head back, desperately trying escape the tender flesh just inches from my face that I wanted to tongue and taste again.

Take.

Just as I felt my last reserve of control begin to crack, Bella stiffened and inhaled sharply. I froze, clenching my eyes shut as heat flashed over her skin and out of her lungs, and I held her as she trembled and came undone. Finally, she collapsed against me with a mutter, our hands still between her legs, her fingers weaving through mine.

Slowly, I settled back down on the bed, taking her with me and carefully drawing our joined hands up onto my stomach. We lay in silence for a long time, each pulling ourselves back together in very different ways. When I felt calmer, I reached to pull a thick blanket from the pile on the bed and draped it over Bella, tucking it between us to protect her from my cold skin. I thought she would drop off as she relaxed against me, and was surprised when her sleepy voice rung out into the silence.

"Are you all right, Edward?"

I experimented with a breath and found that I could answer honestly. "Yes. I needed to be very careful … my urges were much stronger than I anticipated."

She tilted her head back to look at me, concern clear in her face. "I'm sorry this is so difficult for you. Can I do something to make you …?" she trailed off.

"No," I said quietly. "Right now, it's better this way. Safer. We'll figure it out as we go, Bella."

"I'd like to make you feel good, too," she said, looking shy. "You'd have to show me."

"You do make me feel good, sweetheart. Just like this." It was true; my body ached with need, but for the time being, focusing on Bella was what I wanted.

"But there should be more," she said, "for you, I mean."

"There will be more," I replied. "We'll learn together."

Bella watched me from under heavy lids for a few moments, searching my face as she slowly relaxed. Her eyes grew clear, the puckered skin on her forehead smoothed out, and she nodded before snuggling against me.
"Thank you, Edward."

I held her as she fell asleep, keeping her safe from my cool skin in the cocoon of blankets.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and sticking with me. A little citrus action, hm ... you like? ;)

I find myself in an unusual position with this fic. My co-writer, transitory07, has decided not to continue the story and has left the Twilight fandom. As you must realize, this means I have to assume both points of view rather late in the game. I went back and forth about whether or not to pull this story or continue and came close to deleting A Dove's Cry several times. Then I remembered that a.) I don't abandon fics, and, b.) I am both very stubborn and slightly nutty. LOL.

For better or worse, I'm going to finish A Dove's Cry. It is only right to tell you now that this fic will not end the way it was originally outlined. I have a lot of loose ends to tie up and no notes from my former co-writer to go on, but I hope you'll trust me to work it out. (For those of you who have read my other fics, don't worry, I won't take this Edward into a beautiful, slashy HEA ending with Garrett or some other hot nomad ... though I am very, very tempted. ;))

There are just a couple of chapters left. I'll be back soon; I honestly do want to finish this fic and hit that complete button. You all deserve a completed fic, and Edward and Bella deserve it, too. I apologize for not replying to reviews, by the way - now that I have a clearer picture of where to go from here, I'll be better about it.

I wish you all beautiful holidays, and much peace and love. Be good to yourselves and one another. xxoo
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading, and for the many encouraging reviews and PMs last chapter. You guys ... you're fantastic.

This chapter is unbeta'd - all mistakes are more mine than usual. This is my first Bella chapter ever! If you hate it, well, so be it - my bad. If you love it, scoooore.

Disclaimer: I do not own twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I am the spark
Before the blaze
I am the raindrop out at sea
I cause the ripples that become the crashing waves
"Reign" - UNKLE

Waking up next to Edward was … wonderful. I blinked at the strange walls and ceiling around me, unable to stop my smile when I realized where I was and whom I was lying next to. Strong arms held me loosely over the thick layer of blankets, giving me enough room to move while still making me feel cared for and safe. My smile grew bigger when I remembered the night before and the warm, swirling ecstasy I had felt at Edward's hands. Not once during my many dreams about him had I come close to knowing such ... wonder.

A familiar, low chuckle rumbled in my ear. "Good morning, Bella."

"Morning." I turned my head on the mattress to look up at him and bit back a groan. He lay against the pillows, smiling and bathed in the golden sunlight pouring through the windows, looking inhumanly beautiful. The light refracted against his skin, making his strange eyes shimmer, and when he smiled, my stomach fluttered. "Do you have to do that?"

His brows furrowed in confusion. "Do what?"

"Look so perfect? It's too early to deal with you sparkling like a diamond when I've got bed head and morning breath," I scolded, narrowing his eyes when he laughed softly.

"I'll see what I can do. You should know, though, that it's no longer early morning, so part of your argument is void. I think you look very pretty, by the way, despite the bird's nest on your head."

"Hey!" I exclaimed. Sitting up, I tried to smooth my hair while also searching the room for a clock.

"It's ten-thirty," Edward said, gently combing his fingers through my hair.

"Oh, gosh, you shouldn't have let me sleep so late!"

"Why on earth not?"

"Because, well …" I trailed off as he stared at me, a little line forming between his brows just before
he let out a sigh.

"Bella, you were tired. I let you sleep. We don't have to be anywhere today, so why does it matter if you get a little extra rest?"

"Well, when you put it that way," I mumbled and felt my face flush when Edward leaned forward to press a kiss to the tip of my nose.

"Why don't you take a shower or whatever you'd like to do while I make some coffee." He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the mattress.

"Okay. Actually, wait." I followed him with my eyes as he stood and walked around the bed. "Do you know remember how to make coffee?"

Edward's face was thoughtful as he held a hand out and helped me to my feet. "I think so. If worse comes to worst, we can drive into town; there's a trading post with a diner attached. Unless you'd prefer that anyway?"

"I think I would like that, if you don't mind," I said. "I'm pretty hungry."

He drew me in for a hug. "Totally understandable. If you get ready in the next fifteen minutes, we can be at the trading post before noon."

I looked up from my plate to find Edward looking at me with amusement. We were sitting in the trading post's diner, surrounded by loggers and townspeople, while I attacked my food and Edward warmed his hands on a mug of coffee.

"What is it?" I put my fork down and dabbed at my mouth with a napkin. "Do I have something on my face?"

"No, no," Edward said. "It's nice to see you enjoying your food."

"I am enjoying it, very much. I can't remember the last time I was this hungry; especially for pancakes and eggs."

"Must be the fresh mountain air." Edward's voice was playful and his smile transformed his face. Around us, I sensed the other diners take notice; their conversations paused and their eyes widened as they stared at the beautiful man in their midst.

I swallowed before shaking my head slowly. "I think it was all of the … sleep I got."

We watched each other for a long moment before laughing.

"You did sleep peacefully, now that you mention it," Edward said, turning the cup in his hands. "You hardly stirred all night."

"Were you watching me sleep? Always the creeper."

He smiled, shrugging and looking sheepish.

"You didn't have to stay with me, Edward," I said more seriously. "It must be very boring for you, just lying there waiting for me to wake up."

"I don't mind." He smiled gently. "I did some composing and thought about a project that Emmett
and I am working on. It's not often I have a chance to stay still in the dark like that, with just my thoughts. At home, there's always someone else to talk to or somewhere else to go. It was nice knowing that I could just lie there with you."

We paused when the waitress stopped by to refill my coffee, her eyes lingering on the man across from me when she asked if we needed anything. Edward answered her politely, though his gaze held mine the whole time.

"You told me once that you suffered from nightmares," he said when she had moved on. "I was pleased that you didn't seem to have any last night."

For a moment, I just looked at him, moved by his thoughtfulness and delicacy. "They've gotten much better," I said, "especially since my dad made me start seeing Carmen."

"That's good to hear. I wondered how that was going. You're very private, after all."

I nodded and ate another bite of my pancakes before speaking again. "It was hard at first—really hard. It still is." I sighed. "I never thought I'd say this, but Charlie was right: it helps to talk about the things that had happened with Jimmy. Even when it hurts."

"Are you able to talk about … everything?" Edward asked, his voice dropping slightly on the last word.

I pressed my lips together, considering how to answer before I realized that he looked almost nervous.

"I know that we agreed not to talk about James Chase," he said quickly, "I just wondered if talking about it with Carmen would help."

"That's all right; I knew what you meant. No, I haven't talked about what happened with him … to anyone."

Edward simply nodded, turning his eyes back to the cup in his hands without a word. In a flash, I understood that he was honoring his promise not to question the decisions I had made in Sacramento, though they obviously continued to weigh on his mind. I appreciated the gesture, but Edward's sudden silence left me fumbling with my thoughts and words.

"I know that probably sounds ridiculous: keeping secrets from your therapist—"

"You don't have to explain, Bella," he interrupted gently. "Whatever you want to discuss with Carmen is your decision."

"I know that." We sat quietly for a few moments before he raised his eyes to mine. "I don't think discussing Chase would be helpful, for me or you. I'm not the only person that was in his kitchen, Edward. And it would be difficult to explain how things happened, without giving you away."

Edward nodded. "Thank you for thinking of us. You don't have to protect us, Bella; we've become expert at finding ways to start over when we have to."

"Well, I'd rather not be the reason you and your family have to leave town to get away from law enforcement," I told him, ignoring the flush that spread like fire over my face. "I still feel like you just came back into my life, Edward; it'd be nice to keep you here for a while."

"I'm not going anywhere, Bella." Edward reached across the table to rest a hand over one of mine. I sighed when I realized his skin was warm from holding the coffee cup, and he gave me a small
smile. "I'll have to remember that trick. I'm assuming you haven't told Carmen about me, then?"

"I told her what I could," I said truthfully, smiling when the worried expression on Edward's face eased. "She knows that we've been dating and that I have feelings for you."

"Perhaps you can tell her about my feelings for you …?" he suggested, looking adorably unsure.


A slow smile spread over my lips, just as one did over Edward's.

aDc

Edward took me deeper into the woods surrounding his family's house that day, showing me a few of the places that he and the others liked to visit. Having spent years in Forks, I was accustomed to forests. These woods were different from woods I knew, though, and beautiful in an austere way that awed me.

"I can see why you like it here, Edward; it's just gorgeous." We were walking beside a creek that wound its way amongst the massive trees. The ringing silence all around us made the sound of the gurgling water and our voices seem very loud.

"As much as I enjoy the cities where we choose to live, this is one of my favorite places that we stay," he admitted. "There are forests on the East coast I'm fond of, too, in Appalachia. Emmett grew up there as a human, and the woods are deep and wild; perfect for creatures like us. Carlisle has talked of moving the family back that way when the time comes."

I frowned as Edward's words made other ideas form in my head, disturbing ideas that made me feel cold. He was watching me when I looked up, his brow crinkled as he waited for me to speak again.

"How long will your family stay in Port Angeles?"

Edward's steps slowed, finally stopping before he answered. "The family normally stays in one place for ten years or fewer before we have to move on; the average is around eight if nothing unusual happens. Toward the end of a stay, Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper usually went off on their own for periods of time, to make it appear that they were off pursuing their studies at university.

"We've been following some unusual patterns in the last few years," he continued, "because of me. The family has to leave the Chicago area when they found me, and we went east when I was finally ready to be around humans. We came Washington to pursue a position that Esme had found; that's how we wound up in Port Angeles."

I swallowed hard, my heart hammering as my brain did the calculations. "So, you could all be gone by the time I graduate from college? Would I … I'd never see you again?" I asked, my voice squeaking on the last word.

Edward stepped closer at once, drawing me into his arms as he spoke soothingly. "I can't see that happening, Bella, ever. The way I am drawn to you is too powerful for me to ignore, I know that now."

"But what will you do?" I buried my face in his chest, trying to hide the stupid tears that had welled in my eyes.

"I'll figure something out," he said confidently, his lips moving against my hair. "We can move to another city as a family while I keep in touch with you at school. Or I could live apart from the
family for a time, if I had to. I won't be far, Bella, I promise."

"I can’t ask you to leave your family, Edward. If I could, I'd apply to colleges on the East coast; that would make your life easier," I mumbled, nearly pulling away when Edward chuckled. "Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing, sweetheart, I promise. But I don't want you trying to figure out ways to make my life easier when you should be focusing on your own. Don't live your life for me, Bella; live it for yourself. That's all I ask."

aDc

I tried not to let my discussion with Edward about our future affect my mood as the day wore on, but it was difficult. When I thought about the Cullens leaving Washington in just a few years, my mind went on, further into the future. Edward was immortal and I was not. How could a relationship work when the man I loved would stay young and beautiful forever, while I changed every single day?

The idea that we were living on borrowed time made me feel needy and reckless, and then that made me feel out of control. Before confronting James Chase, I reacted badly to feeling out of control. I would stop eating and withdraw as much as possible, seeing mainly Jacob and my dad, and rarely speaking while at school. With Carmen's help, I slowly found ways to work through my feelings without isolating myself; just talking to her or my dad helped. Now, however, I faced a future where Edward might not exist, and every coping mechanism I had learned seem to slip away.

"Bella, come here," Edward commanded softly while I scraped my uneaten dinner into the trash.

"I'll just clean up." I hardly had time to mumble before he rose from his seat at the table and crossed the room. Taking hold of my shoulders gently, he silently steered me from the kitchen into the den.

"Will you please stop obsessing about something that may not even happen?" Edward sat on the leather sofa in the center of the room and pulled me down beside him, rubbing my arms in an effort to comfort me.

"I'm not obsessing."

He pressed his cool lips to the apples of my cheeks and then my nose, speaking in a quiet, comforting tone between kisses. "You've hardly spoken all afternoon and I think you ate three bites of your dinner. There's no point in worrying that far ahead, Bella. You have to trust me to figure out a way to make things work."

My voice was a strangled whisper when I replied. "I can't help it. We're finally here, finally together, I can tell you how I feel … and now I find out that I may only have a little while to enjoy it?"

"You really don't listen to a thing I say, do you?"

"I do listen!"

"I don't think so," he said with a wry shake of his head. "If you were listening, you'd have heard me explain repeatedly that we can find a way to work it out."

"Yeah, or not find a way," I snapped back, my face reddening immediately when Edward pressed his lips together. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay."
"No, it's not," I exclaimed softly. "God, Edward, we're alone for once and who knows when that will happen again? I don't want to spend the time we have here arguing with you."

"Then stop," he said. "I know you're feeling uncomfortable about what the future holds. All I can say is that I'll do whatever I can to make sure I'm in your future for as long as you want me."

"I'll always want you, Edward. That's exactly what worries me." I swallowed hard as his eyes moved over my face, looking at me with such care and concern. "What about four or five or ten years from now? What's going to happen when I turn twenty-five? When I turn thirty? I'm going to keep getting older and you won't; how is that going to work?"

"I don't know," he said quietly, dropping his hands to take mine. "I can't give you answers to any of these questions, sweetheart. I'm not Alice: I can't tell the future."

"I'm not sure I can live like that."

"That's how we all live, though. None of us knows what will happen from one day to the next. Only that there will be a next day, no matter how we feel about it."

Edward's smile was heartbreaking. "I don't want to think about any of that right now. I've spent too much time in the last five years wondering and thinking. I don't want to think about why I can't give you the things you need, as any human man could. I don't want to wonder about how soon people in Port Angeles will notice that Carlisle and Esme aren't aging. Or about you going off to Seattle for school, and maybe meeting someone new—"

"I wouldn't," I choked out, but Edward shook his head.

"Right now, it doesn't matter. Tomorrow, we can worry about everything. For now … just be with me, Bella. For a little while, let's forget."

"I'd like that."

I raised a shaking hand to cup Edward's cheek, and my heart squeezed when he turned his face into my palm. He breathed out the softest sigh, his eyes sliding closed so that his long lashes fanned across his white skin. He looked so weary; I couldn't help bringing my other hand up to cradle his face gently. I leaned in, pressing my lips against his closed eyes first and then his cheeks, trailing slow, sweet kisses over his skin. He exhaled again, his sweet breath ghosting over my face before I brushed my mouth against his.

"I love you," he murmured, his lips moving against mine, and I felt him smile when I replied the same.

Edward drew me toward him, his strong arms holding me without holding on too tightly, and he hummed when I wound my arms around his neck. I kissed him, moving delicately until he opened his mouth and took my lower lip between his. My long, low groan filled my ears at the same time that my skin caught fire. Without thought or intent, I slid my tongue into Edward's mouth.

He froze and that sudden, utter stillness in my arms almost pulled me out of my warm haze of lust. Then Edward was moving again, his hands moving over my back and neck, reaching up under my hair and sending a flash of white heat through me. I went from hazy to dazed.

"Oh," I groaned stupidly when he moved to kiss along my jaw, my bones turning to jelly with every touch.

"Are you all right?" he asked between kisses, letting out a little groan himself when I clung to him.
more tightly. "Bella, I'll stop if you—"

"Don't you dare." I tilted my head back so he could run his nose along the skin of my neck and sighed shamelessly. "You feel so damned good, Edward."

"Mmm, you do, too. I've thought about you this way so often." His voice was low as he nipped my clavicle with his lips. "It's hard to believe that this is really happening."

"I feel the same way."

I leaned away slightly, taking hold of his face again and bringing it up so that I could look into his golden eyes. The emotions I saw blazing there stole my breath. In a flash, I knew. Despite our differences, Edward and I were right; we fit. This, the love between us, was true, more so than anything I'd ever felt in my life. I wanted to hold on to him for as long as I could. I wanted everything with him.

"Edward, will you do something for me?"

"Of course, if I can," he replied, and my eyes pricked with tears at his words because I knew he meant each word.

"I want … to be with you," I said, licking my lips when his eyebrows drew together. "That way. I want to know what it's like to love someone like that, with you. Is that something … can we do that?"

For a long moment, Edward didn't answer. He sat without moving, becoming too still again, though his eyes gave his emotions away: desire, fear, sorrow, love.

"Not tonight," I said hastily, giving him what I knew was a weak smile. "I'm not quite ready for that just yet. But someday?"

Edward blinked, and his beautiful face softened.

"I think so," he said gently, raising one hand to smooth the hair back from my forehead. "I'm so … humbled that you would trust me like that Bella; you can't know how honored I am, and proud of you, too."

He brought his hand up, kissing the tips of my hair wound around his fingers, and my heart cracked a little before it turned on a dime. Even Edward's loving movements and words couldn't stop the dark doubts that so often lingered in the corners of my heart.

Why would this beautiful creature want you?

"Really?" I swallowed hard against the lump that filled my throat. "It doesn't bother you that I'm … that he did those things to me?"

Edward's eyes flashed with an intensity that pierced me, and his low words made the tears standing in my eyes spill over. "Never, Bella. To me, there is nothing about you that is not perfect and beautiful and whole. I'm going to keep telling you that until you believe it."

As he so often did, Edward read my cues with endless patience and without complaint. He held me, soothing my doubts with whispered words and kisses until I felt steady again. He grinned when I stood and tugged him up after me, and let me lead him through the house and up the stairs. He smiled when I raised my hands to my shirt collar, and ran a thumb over the apple of my cheek when it flushed with heat.
"I want to try something." He stepped closer, his lips ghosting over my forehead.

Intrigued, I tilted my head to look up at him. "What is it?"

"I'm not telling just yet. I need about ten minutes, though. You get ready for sleep in the meantime." The gleam in his eyes made me grin, and he winked impishly before he blurred and was gone.

Ten minutes seemed both too long and too short as I changed into another sleep shirt and put away my clothes. I listened hard for other noises in the house while I washed my face and brushed my teeth, but heard only the wind in the trees outside of the house.

I was settled under the pile of blankets on the air mattress when I heard Edward's light step in the hallway. My mouth went dry when he walked into the room, dressed only in a white t-shirt and boxer briefs. I couldn't stop staring at the long, lean, and painfully beautiful man smiling down at me.

All that smooth, white skin.

"I was beginning to think you'd ditched me," I joked weakly. My breath hitched when he dimmed the lights and walked to the side of the mattress to crouch down.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," he said. "Mind if I join you?"

"No," I blurted, backtracking quickly when his smile faltered. "I mean, no, I don't mind! Or yes, join me. I don't know what I'm trying to say," I said throwing the blankets back, "but come on in."

Edward slid into bed, his smile returning when I gasped in surprise.

"You're warm!" I laid a hand on his arm, marveling at the heat radiating off his skin; he felt like a stone that had been baking in the sun.

"You like it?"

"I like you any way, Edward, but this is amazing. How did you do it?"

He shrugged and took my free hand in his own. "I took a hot shower; there's a bathroom on the first floor. Holding the coffee cup and then your hand this morning gave me the idea. The heat won't last forever, of course, but I thought it would be nice for you."

I smiled at that and cautiously slipped my fingers under the edge of his t-shirt sleeve. "Just for me?"

Edward's expression became suddenly shy. "For me too; it's nice to feel your skin against mine."

"That is nice."

"I … won't be able to breathe for much longer," he said, nibbling on his lower lip. "The way you smell when we're together like this is very tempting. I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be." I leaned forward to kiss him, giggling when he wrapped his arms around me and fell back against the pillows.

"I won't be able to say much. You don't mind?"

"You had it right earlier, Edward, and last night. Let's just be ourselves and be together."

"I'd like that," he said, giving my own words back to me, his eyes shining as he pulled me down for a kiss.
We moved together under the blankets, our limbs tangling, Edward holding his breath while my
breaths grew loud and ragged. Together, we were a blur of sensation and emotion that made my
head and heart race. Edward's shirt came off and my fingers moved over the warmed expanses of his
inhumanly smooth skin. His hands on my thighs, my waist, my ribs, my breasts, pushing the sleep
shirt up under my arms, his touches edged with the faintest undercurrent of roughness. Our fevered
kisses and hoarse whispers, two bodies throbbing with desire as my blood turned to fire.

"More," I heard myself groan. I wanted to free fall into pleasure—to abandon myself to it. To drown.
"Touch me, Edward. Please."

Edward's hand slipped slowly under the hem of my underpants, stopping my breath entirely as he
opened me with long, slim fingers. His eyes burned even as he watched me carefully, always
mindful of my comfort levels. He knew just how to move over my most tender flesh: slowly, both
gently and yet not, each touch making me burn and sigh.

"More?" he mouthed, smiling gently when I moaned out something like yes.

Together we pulled my underpants off and I started mumbling as he continued to tease me. "Please,
please, don't stop."

I was writhing by the time the heel of his hand replaced of his fingers. I had time to draw one breath
before Edward slipped a finger inside me. I froze for a long moment while every bone in my body
turned liquid. Before I could think to urge him on, Edward'd other hand pressed against my back,
canting my hips forward onto hand, and I gasped as my need detonated. I clung to him, wrapping my
arms tightly around his neck as we rocked together, our eyes locked; I couldn't look away. One
finger became two, stretching me in the most delicious ways until I didn't care anymore if I breathed
or spoke or thought.

"Oh, God," I think I said. I may have screamed.

My body took flight, soaring high and then higher, bliss blossoming from my belly and rushing
outward, searing my nerves. I fell, my mouth and eyes wide, staring at the man beside me in awe.

"Beautiful," he murmured.

I realized I could feel him too; Edward, hard and needy against my thigh, and for the first time, I
needed to touch him; I craved it. Somehow, I made my hand move, pressing it between his legs,
feeling the soft cotton of his underwear and Edward shuddered, his face crumpling with need. He
turned away, hiding his teeth in the pillow while I buried my face in his shoulder. The waves of my
pleasure began to ebb as I pressed my hand over him more tightly.

I heard a tearing sound as Edward's fingers slid away from me. Warm and wet, his palm pressed my
hand against his hard flesh, curving my fingers to fit around him as our hands moved together.
Edward groaned into the pillow, long and low as his body curled inward. A cool wetness spread
against my palm beneath the cotton, while the man I held in my arms trembled.

It was much darker when I opened my eyes next. I didn't remember falling asleep, and I sighed to
realize that I was cocooned in the blankets again, while Edward held me over the fabric.

"The heat wore off?" I asked, snuggling into his side when he hummed.

"I'm afraid so; sorry, love. I … may have ripped the pillow you were using last night, by the way.
With my teeth."

It took a moment for his words to sink in. When they did, I laughed, and felt him chuckling beside
me.

"Jeeze, Edward; I'm surprised the air mattress survived."

"It nearly didn't. I have an extra one in the car, though."

"You're so weird," I said through my sleepy giggles. "I like it."

"I'm glad that you're good with weird," Edward murmured, tucking the blankets in around me.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading. How'd I do? Never mind, there was moar citrus, right? And I co-opted some lines from the movies like the pirate that I am. Aarrr. ;) Feel free to yell at me if you need to.

I'm projecting 3 or so chapters left. I'll be back soon, I promise.
Chapter 32

I poked my head around the freezer door when my dad stayed silent. He was sitting at the kitchen table, sifting through piles of paper spread over the tabletop, clearly deep in thought; he made no sign of having heard me at all.

"Dad?" I laid the package of trout I was holding on the counter and closed the freezer door before walking across the kitchen. "Hello? Um … Charlie?"

That got his attention; his mustache twitched and he scowled. "Bella, you may be growing up, but I'm still your father. Call me Dad, or you and I are gonna talk."

"Sorry." I chewed the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. "You were pretty zoned out; that's why I called your name."

Charlie's face fell. "Oh. Sorry, baby. Do you need something?"

"I was asking if seafood chowder would be okay for dinner."

"Sure, sure, that sounds great." He smiled apologetically. "Aren't you tired of fish at this point?"

"I wouldn't say tired—"

"What would you say?"

I sighed and sat down beside him. "I'd say I'm almost tired of fish … but I don't mind eating it again tonight."

Charlie grinned and sipped his coffee. "You don't have to cook fish if you don't want to Bells; I do eat other things."

"We need to make room in the freezer," I said dryly, making him laugh before I turned my attention to the papers on the table. "What's all this?"

"I'm applying for a bank loan. To help you pay for school next fall."

My mouth dropped open in shock. We were silent for several long moments, until I forced myself to
clear my throat. "You don't have to do that, Dad."

"I know I don't have to do it, Bells; I want to. Your mom and Phil want to help, too; they're applying for a loan from their bank."

"Oh, no," I said weakly, my face growing hot with embarrassment. "I'm not sure that's a good idea —"

Charlie's frown made me blush harder. "Why wouldn't it be a good idea for parents to help out their daughter? Did you think you were going to have to pay for everything on your own?"

"I don't know." I mumbled, looking at my hands folded in my lap. "I guess I thought I'd get a part-time job or apply for a work-study program. I'll figure something out, Dad."

"Of course you will." He waited until I looked at him again before speaking. "A part-time job isn't a bad idea, as long as it's just one or two days a week. You need time to study and do your school work, too, Bells."

I nodded and tried to look positive, but Chief Swan wasn't fooled.

"Why are you fighting me on this?"

"I don't want to be a bother," I said with a groan. "I don't want you guys doing this out of some sense of guilt or anything—"

"Bella; you're our daughter." Charlie rubbed his chin with his hand before he began gathering up the piles of paper. "You're not a bother. We're doing this because we love you, not out of guilt."

He stopped abruptly, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand while his cheeks flushed red. I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat and was about to speak again when he reached across the table to pat my hand.

"Look, Bells, we don't even know where you're going to school yet. You'll probably have to apply for a loan or two of your own, but with your mom and Phil, and me helping, it shouldn't be so bad. We are going to help you, so you may as well get used to the idea. For now … just think it over, and we can talk about it again at dinner. Okay?"

I nodded, eager to put off our discussion for even a little while longer. "That's fine, but can we talk tomorrow instead? I'm hanging out with Jake today and I don't want you to have to wait to eat if I'm late."

"You've got the day off?"

"Yeah. The Newtons are out of town for a family wedding, and they closed the store for the weekend. I thought I'd go down to La Push and see Jake because it's been a while since we hung out."

Charlie smiled approvingly. "Good for you, kid. You are coming home for dinner though, right?"

"Yeah, absolutely. I'll make the chowder and leave it in the fridge with some garlic bread … maybe you could heat dinner up on your own …?"

"Uh, sure, I can probably manage that. What about your boyfriend? Is he coming for dinner, too?" Charlie grimaced slightly, and I forced myself not to roll my eyes.
My dad had come a long way toward being reasonably okay with my dating. He was pleasant and even friendly toward Edward when we were all together, though my dad still hovered too much for my liking. The fact that Edward was a great boyfriend helped, of course. He never kept me out late, never overstayed his welcome, and was always polite and respectful toward Charlie. In fact, Edward played the part of the perfect boyfriend so well, I found myself wishing that he'd rebel just a little ... or at least when we had a few minutes alone. After the weekend in Montana, time alone with Edward didn't happen nearly enough.

*What I wouldn't give for another night with him*, I thought. *His lips on mine ... our bodies pressed together, his warmed skin against my own ... our breaths mixing while our hands explored ... his breathless groan when he was about to—*

"Bells." Charlie's deep voice pulled me from my thoughts with a snap.

My face burned again, and I fidgeted when his brows furrowed. "Um, right, sorry. What were you saying, Dad?"

"Can I expect to see the Cullen kid tonight?"

"Yes, I think so; we talked about it last night before Edward went home. Probably not for dinner, but afterward; you know his family always, ah, tries to eat together." I cleared my throat hastily to cover my awkward pause.

"I'm surprised he's not here today, considering you've got the day off."

"Edward's helping his brother with something this afternoon. Something about a camping trip."

I stood and walked back to the fridge, hoping my dad would drop the subject; I certainly couldn't tell him that my boyfriend was hunting game in Olympic Park with his siblings. After a long pause, Charlie turned his attention back to the papers on the table, and I set to work gathering the ingredients for the chowder.

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The skies were mostly clear over La Push, so Jake suggested we go for a walk on the beach near his house. I borrowed an extra jacket to bundle up against the fall wind and we set off over the sand, talking about school and catching up.

"You seem different," Jacob said after we'd walked about half a mile.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure," he said tentatively, "I guess you seem … I don't know. Maybe … happy?"

We stared at each other for a long moment before we both burst out laughing.

"You sure about that answer, Jake?" I asked once I had recovered.

He chuckled again and stuck his hands in his jacket pockets. "Yeah, I'm sure. Sorry. It's not like you seemed really miserable before ...." he trailed off when I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Oh, come on; we both know I seemed very miserable."

"No, I wouldn't say that, Bells," he insisted, "at least not all the time. You were always fun to hang out with. You're right, though; I knew you weren't happy. Anyone who knew you well could see
Everyone except my mom, I guess, I thought grimly.

I blew out a long breath. "Yeah, you're right; I wasn't."

"Are you now?"

"Sometimes." I smiled. "I have crappy days too, just like everyone. But it's ... things are getting better."

"That's great," Jacob said with genuine happiness. "Is it the thing with the counselor?"


"Oh, reeeally. What's that about?" Jacob's voice was smug but still gentle.

"Forget it. It's hard enough getting any privacy with Charlie around."

Jacob's happy laughter made me grin. "Oh, man, I'll bet!"

I made a face, though we both knew I was only half-serious. "Charlie's been pretty cool, actually. He's trying. I guess he can't help being a dad, even now."

"It's nice to see you having fun, Bells."

"Thanks." I smiled, grateful to my friend for the patience and understanding he'd shown me for so many years, even when he had no idea why I was struggling so much.

"And things with this guy, Edward; they're serious?"

"I think so. Yeah." Though I was glad to be able to Jacob a little about Edward, I knew I had to be careful; it was up to me to protect Edward's secret, for everyone's sake.

"What about you?" I asked, quickly changing the subject. "What's going on with the girl you met over the summer ... Sharon?"

"Oh, yeah, that," Jacob said heavily. "Nothing is what's up with Sharon; nothing at all."

"Why? What happened?"

"She pretty much disappeared after her family went back to Oregon. I sent her a couple of texts and emails, just wondering how she was, and didn't hear back for a while." He turned his gaze out over the water. "I was ready to write her off when she finally sent me an email saying that she wasn't interested in speaking to anyone from the Black family, and that I should ask my Dad why."

I winced at the rueful look on my friend's face and waited for him to continue.

"I thought about just blowing the whole thing off, to be honest. I mean ... she lives in Oregon, you know? It's not like I'd ever see her, really, unless one of us moved, and I don't see that happening."

"Really? You think you'll stay here after high school?" Before that moment, it had never occurred to me that Jacob didn't want to leave La Push someday.

"My dad is here, my tribe ... I have roots here, Bells. I like La Push. Maybe I'll go to school in Port
Angeles or something, and I won't say I'll never leave ... but this is my home."

I nodded and turned my gaze to my feet. I was almost humbled by Jacob's conviction. No matter how much more comfortable I was with myself, I still had so much to learn about who I was and what I wanted.

"Did you ever ask Billy about what Sharon meant in her email?" I asked quietly.

Jacob sighed. "Yeah. My curiosity got the better of me. Turns out her family used to live in Neah Bay about ten years ago. Sharon's mom and Billy used to … date."

My mouth fell open in surprise when I turned to look at my friend, and I watched a flush warm his tawny skin. Obviously, I was aware that single adults dated; I had just never known the adults in my own life to do it. Neither Billy Black nor my dad had been out on a date in the last fifteen years ... at least that's what I had thought until today.

"Does that mean that you and Sharon met back when you were both kids?"

"No, thank God. My dad didn't want to introduce Sharon's mom to us before he was sure about how they felt about each other. He did meet Sharon's family, though. They were on their way to being serious, I guess. If Sharon's mom hadn't gotten a job in Oregon, I think things would have been really different for all of us.

"She asked my dad if he'd consider moving us all to Oregon, too; my dad said no, and that was that." Jacob looked at the ground. "He said no because of my sisters and me, Bells; he didn't want to risk moving us away from the tribe."

"That sounds like something your dad would do."

"Yeah. I just wonder—" he paused and cleared his throat. "I wonder if he'd have been happier with her, you know? With Sharon's mom. Maybe moving would have been better for him … he wouldn't be alone now."

"You can't think that way, Jake." I nudged him with my elbow until he met my eyes. "Your dad did what he thought was best. If he doesn't have any regrets about his decision, you shouldn't have them for him."

One side of Jacob's lips pulled up in a crooked smile. "When did you get so smart?"

"I've always been smart," I said, narrowing my eyes at him. "You're just finally starting to notice."

"Yeah, yeah." He looked serious again. "I get what you're saying."

I could hear the hesitation in his voice, and prompted him. "But …?"

"But that's kind of oversimplifying things isn't it? Wanting not to regret something doesn't mean you won't." He shrugged when I frowned. "Aren't there things you regret no matter what you tell yourself? Or maybe things your parents did that you'd change if you could?"

I was quiet as we turned to walk back toward Jacob's house, turning his words over in my head. Of course there were things I'd change if I could. Things to do with my parents. Friendships I had made or hadn't made during my life, and the way I'd treated those people. My relationship with my mom. Everything to do with Jimmy … with the exception of Vallejo.

*That's not really true though, is it?* I asked myself.
It wasn't. In my heart, I knew that I should regret going to Jimmy's house to kill him … but I couldn't bring myself to feel sorry. What did bother me was knowing that my actions had damaged Edward's trust. Though we rarely spoke about Jimmy, I knew Edward often thought about what had happened. He wouldn't leave me, no matter how he felt about what I had done—he was bound to me in ways I couldn't understand— but that knowledge did little to comfort me.

As Jacob and I approached his house, I noticed the slim figure of a girl lingering near the door. My stomach tightened when she swept back a curtain of dark hair, revealing Leah Clearwater's fine features. Her brows drew together briefly in a frown when her eyes met mine, but her expression seemed to lighten again as we drew closer.

"What's up, Leah?"

Jacob's cheerful tone caught my ear, and I was interested to see a friendly grin cross his face as he looked at his friend. My interest grew when I noticed Leah's pink cheeks and shy smile; the combination made her dark eyes shine, transforming her whole face. She was quite beautiful.

"Hey, Jake," she said before her expression became stony. "Bella."

"Bells and I were just catching up," Jacob cut in before I could say anything, giving me a sly wink. "I don't see her much these days because she'd rather spend time with her boyfriend, I guess."

"Um, I go to school and have a job too, Jake," I muttered, though I more curious about his behavior than truly annoyed. "And so do you."

Leah's gaze was sharp as it moved over my face. "Oh, yeah, Jacob mentioned something about some guy from Port Townsend, right? Ed something?"

"His name is Edward," I said simply. "His family lives in Port Angeles."

"Cool." Leah gathered her long hair together in a ponytail with her hands as she turned back to Jacob. "Mom and I made some pies last night for tomorrow's potluck dinner. There were a couple extra and we thought you and Billy would like them."

"What kind of pies?" Jacob's voice was eager as he pushed open the back door to the house.

"Apple and plum," Leah began and then snorted when Billy's voice rang out from inside the house, calling everyone to the table for coffee.

"You heard the man," Jacob said with a bright smile, gesturing for us to enter. "He'll eat it all if we don't get in there, so let's not keep him waiting."

Seth Clearwater turned up as we sat down with our plates, followed shortly after by Jacob's friends, Embry and Quil. We spent a few hours sitting in the Blacks' warm kitchen, picking the pie plates clean and telling stories. It was nearly dusk when I got up to leave, and I scolded myself for not having noticed the time.

"You okay to drive, Bells?" Jacob stood and walked around the table to my side.

"She's been drinking coffee, Jake, not beer," Leah said dryly while the others chuckled. "I think she's safe to drive." Jacob rolled his eyes at her playfully, making her smile.

"I'm fine, Jake," I said, and waved over a chorus of goodbyes. "See you later, guys."
Jacob walked me to the door, helping me with my jacket on the way. "Thanks for coming over today, Bells; it was nice to hang out again. We should do it again soon. I was starting to feel like you were avoiding me to hang out with your boyfriend," he teased, though the expression in his eyes was not joking.

"Oh, come on, Jake; you know I'd never do that," I scolded softly. "With work and school, I really have been busy; I only see Edward at dinner time, most nights. Besides, you've been just as hard to get a hold of lately."

He grunted noncommittally, but I looked at him closely as I zipped my jacket. "Does Leah Clearwater have anything to do with you being too busy to call me back?"

I smiled when his eyes went wide.

"No-o-o. I wouldn't say that."

"Oh. So you two aren't hanging out or anything?"

"I wouldn't say that, either."

"Uh-huh. Well, you should say something, Jake, at least to Leah."

"What do you mean?" He looked puzzled.

"If you like her—and I'd say that you do—then make sure she knows." I gave him a serious look as I laid my hand on the doorknob. "Look at what happened with that girl, Sharon. You never even got the chance to tell her you were interested."

Jacob paused for a long moment, clearly thinking about my words before he nodded. He mumbled a thank you before promising to call me sometime the next week, and waved from the door as I left.

I called home as I walked back to the truck and left a message for Charlie to let him know I was on my way. I noticed a smell in the cab as I slid behind the wheel, something sweet and cloying, and slightly acrid, like lightly burnt sugar. The smell was oddly familiar, and I frowned and sniffed, trying to place it. The key was in the ignition when I realized that the smell reminded me of Edward, so much so that I felt unsettled. Had he been in my truck while I was visiting with Jacob? If so, why hadn't he left me a note or waited for me?

My phone buzzed as I pulled onto Front Street and headed toward La Push's center, but I knew better than to answer it while driving. I wanted to beat Charlie home, if I could, and was looking forward to seeing Edward again, so I focused on my driving and let the call go to voicemail. The phone was quiet for a moment before it buzzed again, making me bite my lip; whoever was calling was persistent. As I turned right onto Alder Street, a deafening crash from behind me filled the cab. I jerked the wheel hard to the right with a gasp, cringing as a shower of broken glass fell over my head and shoulders. Something cold clamped down over my mouth, smothering my scream before the world around me spun and went black.

Alice and I raced away from the others, taunting each other as we streaked through the trees. My sister's newborn speed allowed her to keep up with me if I kept under a certain speed, and I was having too much fun to spoil the game; even the pull of missing Bella didn't lessen my enjoyment in being free of the constraints of my human disguise for a short while.

The family had been oddly quiet about my weekend in Montana with Bella, though I heard their curious thoughts when I focused my mind; Alice, in particular, wanted details. Other than to thank
Esme for the use of the house, I couldn't bring myself to talk about the trip; even acknowledging the most innocuous comments seemed like too much. I treasured that weekend—especially the 'first times' Bella and I had experienced together—and wanted to keep my memories private.

When my siblings had insisted I go hunting with them that day, however, I resigned myself to finally answering some questions. They surprised me by not bringing it up, instead reminding me that it had been weeks since we had hunted together. We had traveled south over the course of the day, stalking an elk herd, and now I was feeling pleased to have dodged a bullet once more. Alice's head snapping in my direction made me groan; my train of thought had affected events to come enough to catch her attention, and I cursed myself for being careless.

"You'll have to tell me sometime," she called out with a grin.

"Forget it," I replied, scowling a bit when she laughed.

"It's only a matter time, Edward. Don't bother trying to hide from me; I already know that you love her."

I narrowed my eyes before sprinting away, Alice's gasp of surprise loud in my ears. I could hear the others' thoughts, both grudging and admiring, and smiled as the trees around me blurred. Pushing deeper into the rainforest, my feet whispered over the earth and my clothes and hair grew damp in the misty air. I slowed my steps when I neared Lake Quinault, and came to a stop just before the trees gave way to a short stretch of beach. The area was remote and the skies overcast, but I was still cautious, scanning the area for signs of human thought. The sound of the others' footfalls caught my ear as I stepped out from among the trees, though I knew it would be a minute before they caught up to me. I took a seat on the shore and admired the expanse of water before me, silent and so very nearly still, like a mirror.

"You didn't have to run off like that," Alice said as she dropped down beside me. Her peevish expression made me laugh.

"I didn't run off. You're just upset that I can run faster than you."

"You can run faster than everyone, apparently." She turned her eyes out over the lake and dragged a hand over her short hair. Her eyes were kind when she looked at me again; despite their unearthly color, I saw the girl I had grown up with in them. "You don't have to tell me anything about Bella, Edward, if that's what you want. I just … tell me you're happy with her and I won't say another word."

"I'm happy with her, Alice." I patted her hand, making her grin. "Incidentally, I don't believe that you won't say another word; you're way too stubborn to give up so easily."

"You're right not to believe me," she retorted. "I'll leave you alone for now, though. I can see that you need to keep your … whatever it is you have with Bella, to yourself. I can respect that, believe it or not. Or I can try to, anyway.

"It's not just you that I want to see happy, by the way." Her voice was quiet. "It's important to me that Bella is happy, too."

"I know, sweetheart. I don't mean to seem selfish. It's just new. I've never felt like this before."

"You two are boring," Emmett said grumpily as he and the others emerged from the woods. "I'm tired of getting my butt kicked by not just one Masen but two. How much longer do we have to put up with Alice's super speed, anyway?"
Jasper chuckled and came to sit on Alice's other side. "You never know, Em; Alice may stay this fast after her first year. Maybe the speed runs in the family."

My sister gave him a gleeful smile before she looked at me again. "I'm right, though," she murmured, her voice as low as she could manage. "About Bella and you ...?"

"Yes, you're right." I looked across the lake, pretending to ignore Alice's exuberant thoughts while she struggled to keep a straight face. "It's love."

It was nearing dusk as I made my way toward Forks to see Bella. I found myself driving recklessly, and being careless about my speed. The pull I always felt toward her had grown steadily sharper all day and knowing that she had planned to visit the Quileute boy, Jacob, sparked my old insecurities. I missed her, the sound of her voice and her light laugh and the sparkle in her dark eyes. I missed the heat of her soft, soft skin under mine when I held her close. I craved her sweet smell, and the way it changed in response to her emotions and her body's reactions.

Seeing the police cruiser outside of the Swan's house deflated my spirits when I pulled into the driveway, especially when I realized that Bella's truck was nowhere in sight. I didn't have time to sulk, however; Chief Swan came out of the house almost before I had switched off the ignition. Quickly, I let myself out of the car and crossed the yard toward him, ignoring my phone when it buzzed in my pocket.

"Hello, Chief Swan," I said, climbing the stairs to the porch. "I take it Bella's not home yet?"

"Edward," he said with a minute twitch of his mustache. "She's running a little behind. I expected her to be home by now, but she's been at La Push all day and I guess the time got away from her."

He frowned and I noticed for the first time that he looked a bit weary. I caught a swirl of thoughts about bank loans and college applications before he spoke again. "Bells left a message just before I got home, so she should be here pretty soon."

"All right then." I laid my hand on my still buzzing phone as I turned to go. "I can do a few errands in town and come back after you've had a chance to eat—"

"You don't need to do that." Chief Swan held up a hand as if stop me from moving, but his voice seemed gentle. "You're welcome to eat with us, Edward. Bella made some chowder this morning, and there's more than enough if that's what you're worried about."

I smiled at his obvious gesture of friendliness, thinking how much it would please Bella, too. "I had dinner with my family earlier, but thank you, sir; I appreciate the offer."

"Okay then." The mustache twitched for a moment, followed by a short silence before the man smiled. "Why don't you come on in, son; maybe you can help me heat up the dinner without burning the house down."

The house phone rang as Chief Swan put a big stew pot smelling strongly of seafood and tomato on the stove. I pulled my own phone out of my pocket when he excused himself to answer and my stomach dropped when I saw the missed calls and texts from Alice and Emmett on the screen. I flipped rapidly through the texts, all from Alice, and my alarm increased with each one.

Alice
I moved to call the voicemail when Chief Swan's voice rose dramatically in the other room. "What? When did this happen? Jesus Christ! I'll be right there."

The normally stoic man I was accustomed to seeing was nowhere in sight when Bella's father rushed back into the kitchen. Chief Swan was pale and clammy looking, and I could hear his heart thundering and smell adrenaline in his sweat. Going to the stove, he wrenched off the burner and whisked the pot into the sink before turning my way. He seemed to almost to freeze when I stepped forward, and I saw that his hands were shaking.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I asked, my voice heavy with dread.

For three long seconds he stared at me, his dark eyes wide. His thoughts struck me like bullets, almost too jumbled to be coherent, and blistering with fear.

*Screeching* *tires.*

*Twisted metal.*

*Long hair, streaming and wet.*

*Screams for help.*

*Dark water.*

*Oh, God, where is she?* we thought together.

Suddenly the man was pulling me toward the door, his fingers wound tightly around the fabric of my jacket sleeve.

"I have to go," he rasped out. "It's Bella."

"What about Bella?" I couldn't stop myself asking; I only barely managed to keep myself from shaking an answer out of him. "What happened to Bella, Charlie?"

The color drained from Chief Swan's face and his grip on me became desperate; suddenly, he was holding on to me for support. "There's been an accident. Her truck went into the water at the marina in La Push. They're trying to get her out now."

Chapter End Notes

Soooo … still with me? I'll be back soon, I promise.
Note: Neah Bay is a town located on the Makah Reservation in Northwest Washington.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading and for the many encouraging reviews.
This chapter is unbeta'd - all mistakes are more mine than usual. I'll let you get to it.
Warning: This story contains descriptions of violence.
Disclaimer: I do not own twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He'll wrap you in his arms
tell you that you've been a good boy
He'll rekindle all the dreams
it took you a lifetime to destroy
"Red Right Hand" – Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds

I had to pry Charlie Swan's fingers from my sleeve before he got a hold of himself. He blinked, his dark eyes focusing on mine as color crept back into his pale cheeks.

"Sorry," he said roughly, stepping back. "I—I have to go, Edward—"

"I'll come with you." I swallowed hard when he shook his head.

"No, son. I can't let you do that." He turned and headed for the front door, holding it open for me as we left the house. "Go on home now."

I followed him down the porch stairs and to his car, my throat and chest constricting with stress and fear. My voice was thin when I spoke. "I can't go home, Chief. Let me help—"

Charlie turned when he reached the police cruiser. His face was tight but he seemed more in control as he opened the door. He looked at me encouragingly as he slid behind the wheel. "I'm sorry, Edward, but you can't be there. There's a roadblock set up on La Push Road anyway; they're not letting anyone in or out right now. Go on home, and try calling the station later. We'll ... we'll know more then."

My phone buzzed even before Charlie's police cruiser roared out of the Swan's driveway. I pulled it out with a growl, working hard to keep from crushing the device as my anxiety increased.

Esme
Stay where you are. Alice is coming to you.

I hardly had time to grit my teeth in frustration when I heard them: Alice, Jasper, Rosalie, and Emmett, flying through the forest toward me. My belly crawled with fear as I listened to their thoughts, focusing on Alice's in particular. Each image in her mind confirmed what I had already guessed: Bella had been taken against her will, and my sister had seen it happen. The face I saw in Alice's thoughts was the one I dreaded and loathed more than any other: Beni, our sire. The thought of that monster touching Bella's in any way filled me with cold fury.
My siblings streaked out from between the trees, their movements blurred by speed. In less time than it took to blink, they stood at my side, their golden eyes wide and intense.

"It's him, isn't it," I said, more statement than question, snarling when Alice nodded.

"I don't know how he found us ... or Bella. He snatched her from her truck," she said grimly.

"The truck went into the water at La Push," I continued, my jaw tightening when Rosalie swore. "I was with Bella's father when the call came in. The police are there, trying to get it out of the water. Trying to find Bella in the water."

Alice's voice was soft and regretful. "Her poor father."

"But she's—" I gulped, "Bella's alive? Isn't she?"

Alice's eyes seemed to turn inward before she spoke, and she frowned thoughtfully. "Yes. He's on the move with her now ... he's thinking about Bella as if she's alive."

"Where is he taking her, Alice?" The increasing tension in my voice made Jasper and Emmett shift on their feet.

"He's moving southeast ... on foot, deeper into the woods. I can see him so clearly," she said, her voice soft with wonder. "It's never been like this before—when he changes direction, I can see it happening. He's not deciding, exactly ... not knowingly. He's just driven to keep moving."

"I need you to show me."

"Edward, I—"

"Alice, I need you to take me to him." I took my sister's hand in mine so that her eyes refocused on me. "Just get me close enough, that's all I'm asking. I can handle it from there."

Her eyes blazed angrily. "You're crazy if you think I'm letting you go into this alone, Edward."

"Then show me where he is," I begged, past caring what anyone thought of me. "The longer we wait, the greater the danger to Bella. Please, Alice."

"I will. But you need you to listen to me, Edward." The forced calm in Alice's voice raised my hackles. "There's something you need to know about Beni, about the way he's thinking—"

"I know what you're going to say." I nodded when Alice winced. "You forget, Alice; I can hear you."

"And what did you hear, Edward?" Jasper asked, his eyes flicking between my sister and me.

"Beni's not hiding." My voice was flat. "He wants to be found."

aDc

Though she didn't need to, Alice spoke to me as we raced through the forest with Emmett and Jasper. I nodded absently from time to time, finding a strange comfort in the silvery sound of her voice. She told me about the vision that had come over her while she had been hunting, so vivid it seemed to block out everything else.

"I don't know what happened," she said, "because the things I see are always murky and shifting. This was like a blade, cutting through everything else. I couldn't not see it, couldn't not understand"
what it was showing me. I saw him behind her in the truck bed, and I tried to call her, but ...."

"Maybe you've finally got a handle on your gift," I murmured after she trailed off. "You've time to practice since coming to live with us. Maybe it was just a matter of time before you figured out how to control it."

Maybe it's because he got near Bella, Alice thought. I stiffened as I caught the wisp of her idea.

Without missing a beat, my sister continued speaking, working to calm me with words. She told me about Rosalie driving my car back to Port Angeles to maintain appearances for the humans, and that Carlisle and Esme had left work as soon as they could. They were following us, tracking our trails through the old forests.

Despite Alice's efforts, I felt my self control slowly ebb. Unable to run as fast as I was accustomed without leaving the others behind, my thoughts spun, becoming chaotic.

How could I let him get close enough to take her?

She must be so frightened.

We have to save her. I'll do anything.

If that monster has touched her ... I will burn him.

"We'll find her, Edward," Alice murmured, her eyes turning inward again.

Jasper took hold of my sister's fingers when she reached out, guiding her forward as we continued to run. His eyes flicked quickly over her face before he looked forward again. "What do you see, Alice?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "He's slowing down. He found a place for her, it seems."

"A place like the one where you were kept?"

Alice snarled at Jasper's question. "No. He's not thinking long term this time. It's just a shelter ... a place to stop."

Emmett's head snapped toward us. "What do you mean?"

Alice blinked and came back to herself. Her voice was harsh with disgust when she spoke. "This isn't about keeping a pet. Beni thinks Edward is here ... I'm not sure how. He wants Edward to find him."

"That's why he took Bella?" Emmett's jaw was tight.

"He doesn't really want her," I replied slowly. "There's no reason for him to take Bella except as bait. This isn't about her. It's about me."

aDc

The moon was high overhead when I slowed my steps. The others watched me curiously, though there was no need to explain myself; in the next moment, my sire's scent was thick all around us.

Alice's teeth drew back from her lips when we crossed Beni's trail, and Jasper reached out to her. Stress made Alice more volatile than usual and she jerked away from him with a hiss.
"Get your hands off me," she said, her eyes flashing fire.

"Don't, Alice, not now," I said, cutting Jasper off as he made to speak. "I can hear Beni. He's close. Two miles, maybe a bit more."

"And you're slowing down why?" she demanded.

"To buy some time." I stopped and squatted down, resting my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. "To keep Bella alive a little longer."

Slim arms slid around me as my tiny sister held me close. Her voice was tender and sorrowful when she spoke. "She'll be all right."

"You don't know that," I choked out. "He could kill her, Alice. He's thinking about it right now! That fucker is thinking about Bella's blood; the way it sounds in her veins and how good she smells."

I was falling. The woods around me disappeared, taking my brothers and sister into the void. The things anchoring me to the earth were gone, and instead I saw the dirty walls of the basement. I smelled water and fear and blood. I hurt. Bella's cries pierced me, even through the pain of my injuries. I wanted to scream in pain and horror when the red-eyed man laughed again, and told me how much he wanted me.

"It should have been you." His cold breath spilled over my skin with the scent of cloves and green oak. "I should never have let you go, boy."

My mouth opened in a silent scream when he asked if I would trade my life for Bella's, if I would trade my soul for love. The darkness crushed me, stealing every bit of warmth and light, making me let go even as Bella begged that I stay.

Oh, God.

"Edward," a voice breathed close to my ear, making me tremble and groan. "Please, Edward, don't do this."

I fell back into myself in a rush, my eyes snapping open. There were hands on my shoulders and arms like iron around my waist, all of them holding me together. I gulped in the good smells of rich earth and trees, and the scents of my family around me.

Standing, I pulled away, trying not to gasp when I spoke. "I'm okay."

I could feel concern in the weight of their silence, and in the way Alice's hands lingered on me. There was no time for fear, though, or self-pity. Instead, I clung to the familiar pulse of fury against the vampire who had taken so much from me. The anger cleared my head, enabling me to pull myself together and begin running again.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Alice murmured as she and the others fell in behind us.

"Doesn't matter," I replied. "All I want is to find Bella before that crazy bastard hurts her."

aDc

Only minutes later, we heard the sound I had been straining to find since leaving Forks; the low, moist thump of a human heart. We followed the beats through the trees, my throat constricted and my eyes stinging.
The cabin stood at the edge of a makeshift yard between two massive cedars, a small and crooked structure that had fallen into disrepair, all faded boards and sagging roof. A chipped rocking chair stood by the door and a broken porch swing hung from one chain. There was a little round table off to one side, pieces of a broken vase scattered across the top. A sad, forgotten air hung over the place and I felt certain that nothing human had walked there for many years.

Piercing the resounding silence around us was that same steady thud of Bella's heart. Each beat reassured me that she was still alive even as they heightened my panic to find her. Traces of sweet honeysuckle lingered underneath the heavy smells of the woods and my sire, and there ... when the wind shifted ... my Bella.

I didn't think. I reacted, pure speed and intent, moving so quickly my feet seemed not to touch the ground. I swept inside the little structure, reducing the door to fragments before I froze, staring hard into the darkness. A beat passed, and then another before awareness sunk in. There was a shabby room, empty of furniture except for a small cot. Bare walls, dirty windows, and everywhere, Bella's scent. She was nowhere to be seen.

"They're here somewhere," Jasper said. "I smell them, for Christ's sake."

I nodded, turning in a circle, unsure where to move next. "I can hear his thoughts. I can hear Bella's heart, her breaths—"

"Outside," Alice said abruptly. Her big eyes slid out and back into focus before her face creased in anger, and she dashed out the open door.

We burst onto the porch as Rosalie, Esme, and Carlisle appeared, running in our direction. The only thing I truly saw, however, was the familiar figure of a slim young girl. She stood on the other side of the yard near a copse of trees, half-hidden behind a tall man dressed in black.

"Bella."

The word was a breath, almost a prayer, and my voice was not the only one to say it. There was hardly time for the whispers to fade before the vampire called Beni took a step forward. Bella shrank from him, even as he motioned to her with one hand. When she did move, a limp hobbled her steps, and she grunted softly when she put her weight on her right foot.

Red mist settled over my vision.

"Rose ... Esme," I murmured. "She's hurt. I'll need you ... will you take Bella out of here?"

The others pressed around me, trying once more to calm me with touch. I breathed steadily, listening to my family's reassuring thoughts as I clung to the fraying threads of my control. My eyes never left the figures in front of me.

I snarled when the other man's gaze locked with mine. He was as I remembered, tall and slim, with regal features and wide, gleaming eyes. His beauty was sinister and devastating. My stomach curled with revulsion when I realized that I was drawn to him, even now, after all that he'd done to Alice and me.

"What do you want?" My voice was hard, making Bella's eyes widen in alarm. For once, I didn't care that she could see the part of me I battled so hard every day to hide. I was grateful for the monster that always lurked beneath the surface of my control; he was the equal of the inhuman man at her side.

"Everything," Beni replied in the deep voice that haunted my memories. "Nothing."
He simply gazed at me, a faint smile curling his lips. His thoughts continued to stream into my head, growing more strident the longer he watched me. His mind's patterns shifted and changed quickly, as only thoughts can, and the notions were fractured and chaotic, one idea contradicting the next and then circling back around.

_Oh, my beautiful boy. Why did you make me hurt you?_

_How can you be here?_

_It was a mistake, letting you go. You'll forgive me._

_I can make you mine. Now. Again._

_Forever._

The red-eyed man went suddenly very still. He watched me almost sadly, and when his lips moved, I felt sure he wanted to speak again. Unfortunately, the human girl at Beni's side chose that moment to shift on her feet, drawing my attention.

Beni's face emptied of expression when my eyes flicked from his to Bella and back. He smiled, his eyes shining as he reached out toward Bella, making my stomach fall. The vampire pulled her close, pressing her soft body roughly against his. Bella gasped, stumbling over the uneven ground before she fell against him, sliding along his legs to sprawl at his feet.

"Edward!" Her voice seemed so small and frail.

Time blurred.

I threw myself across the yard at them, Jasper and Emmett at my sides and the others close behind; Alice's dark chuckle was in my ears as she sprang into the air.

Beni turned in a flash, pulling Bella to her feet. Her screams rang out through the darkened woods as she tried hopelessly to fight him off.

The impact of my body striking Beni's was crushing. His spicy-sweet scent made my head swim as I wrapped my arms around his neck, and the weight of the others crushing against us made the ground tremble.

The red-eyed man writhed beneath me, his snarls loud and vicious. Had I been alone, we might have been evenly matched. My family was all around me, though, and rage made my strength staggering.

The smell of blood cut through the air without warning, surprising us all. We froze before a harsh gasp tore through the air. The vampire bucked hard against my hold, groaning with lust.

Instead of holding my breath, I inhaled deeply. Venom flooded my mouth as the rich, human smell flooded my nose and throat. The red mist hanging over my vision deepened, staining everything scarlet, and my mouth stretched in a wide smile as the last ties to my control fell away.

It went on forever. It lasted a moment.

The sounds of snapping teeth were loud, echoing over grunts and the screech of vampire flesh rupturing. Blows fell against my body and teeth scraped my skin, leaving behind the momentary sting of venom. A laugh bubbled up inside me when I saw the human girl in Beni's arms slip out of his grasp, only to be whisked away by another pair of white hands.
The vampire in my arms stumbled, causing the crush of bodies around me to shift, pressing us down onto the ground. Alice's face was suddenly beside mine, her eyes gleeful and her teeth shining before they sank into Beni's flesh. She hissed in triumph when I wrenched my arms up and back, tearing flesh from flesh with a metallic screech.

Beni's movements stopped with a suddenness that was shocking. He slumped forward beneath me, his body shuddering with aftershocks. The figures around me paused, once more holding their breaths as they grappled with their bloodlust.

The night was still.

Until Bella screamed.

aDc

I threw the head and body of my sire down, dashing to where Carlisle and Esme were crouched over a figure huddled on the ground.

"How badly is she hurt? We have to get her out of here!" I reached for Bella, stiffening when Carlisle stopped me.

His voice was pained. "Edward—"

"What are we waiting for? We have to get her help, Carlisle!"

"Bella's been bitten, son." My father's face was drawn and sad as I gaped first at him and then at the girl on the ground.

Bella's fair skin was bone white and gleaming with sweat. A long gash marred the side of her face, and blood from the wound was smeared along the length of her neck, staining the collar of her jacket and sweater. Her breathing was labored and her face twisted in pain, eyes rolling wildly in their sockets as she screamed and Esme tried to soothe her.

"No," I murmured, taking her clammy hand in mine. My stomach flipped when my fingertips traced the mark of teeth on her skin, recognizing the ice of venom mixing with her blood. "Oh, no, no, no."

"There are several bites," Carlisle told me, his voice resigned. "Oh her arms and neck ... I'm not sure we can even determine who among us bit her, other than your sire."

I shook my head at him mutely, unable to acknowledge the sorrow in his eyes and in the words he spoke next.

"I'm sorry." His hand came to rest over mine as I clutched at Bella's. "Bella is changing. There's nothing we can do."

aDc

I knelt beside Bella in the little cabin, holding tight to her hand as she lay burning and crying on the cot. Someone handed me a damp cloth that I used to wipe her wounds clean, the sweet smell of lake water lifting away the blood and salt. Bella's voice soon gave out, until she could only croak hoarsely as the venom burned its way through her body. I murmured to her quietly when she shuddered, dropping soft kisses over her cheeks and forehead when she wept.

The others came to me, speaking gently and offering comfort. I drew silent strength from their touches, sometimes allowing myself to relax when arms slid around me, though I didn't always
recognize whose they were.

"He's gone," I heard a voice say, and blinked. Alice was beside me, her head on my shoulder and one hand on Bella's forehead, smoothing the girl's hair away from her overheated skin. "Beni can't hurt anyone again, Edward."

Abruptly, I realized that the spicy-sweet scent of my sire was overwhelming, almost choking, and undercut with the smells of sulfur and ash.

_Burned._

"He always knew she was here." My voice was raspy, forcing me to swallow when Alice gasped. "His thoughts were confused … but there were things that made some sense. Beni watched your chats and messaging with Bella … he knew about her even before he changed you. He couldn't decide if I was real or not, not even when he saw me."

"Bella told me about you," Alice said sadly. "We didn't make the connections right away … or I didn't, at least. But she used your name and told me about the things you liked. We talked about where she lived and about Forks. That's how Beni knew where to find you."

"Oh, Bella," I breathed, biting my lip when the girl on the cot tried to scream again. "I'm so sorry."

Carlisle's voice was low and soothing. I wasn't sure how long he had been speaking before some of his words registered. "Edward, you have to go back to Forks."

I blinked, watching the girl struggling in front of me for a long moment before I frowned. "What for?"

"Chief Swan … you need to see Bella's father and ask about her. He'll be expecting to hear from you at some point."

It was almost impossible to turn my eyes to meet Carlisle's. "I'm not leaving her."

"You must, Edward. If you won't go back to Forks, at least call Bella's father. It's important that you do this."

Anger bloomed inside me, filling my belly with fire that eased my anguish. "I'm not leaving. And what does it matter, anyway? They're never going to find Bella. She's never going to go back there to live. She's just … gone from their lives. I don't give a damn about what the humans think, Carlisle."

"This isn't about you." Carlisle's voice was so calm. "This is about Bella's parents, her friends. You're right. They won't be able to grieve losing this girl as they deserve. But you can try to offer what comfort you can."

I looked at him, appalled and unable to hide my emotions. "Comfort? I don't have the right to comfort them, Carlisle. It's my fault that Charlie Swan is losing his daughter. My fault she'll never go to college, my fault she'll never be married and have a family. Her life is over before it even started."

I hid my face in my hands. "How can you ask this of me?"

Carlisle's hands were strong and steadying on my shoulders, his voice low in my ears. As so often in the past, he grounded me, with kindness and a quiet, unwavering confidence.
"I'm not going to let you blame yourself for this. The actions of your sire ..." he sighed. "There's no way you could have predicted what he would do. Not even Alice, with her gift, could predict his future. He was too damaged. From what your sister tells me, I daresay Beni didn't know himself where his actions would take him from one moment to the next.

"You're the only one that can do this, Edward. Obviously, you can't give Bella back to her parents. But you are their last link to her, even if they don't realize it."

"How can I tell them lies? How can I hide the truth from them? Hide her from them?" I whispered. "I know what it's like. To be left behind, to lose someone."

The sympathy in Carlisle's golden eyes when I raised my head made my throat tighten. "That's why I know you can do this, son, not just for Bella's family and friends, but for her. It won't take more than an hour or two; all you need to do is find a signal for your phone. We'll take care of Bella while you're gone."

"I'll go with you." Emmett's deep voice was gentle as he came to stand by me, and he held up his hands when I opened my mouth to speak. "Bella's change won't be complete for some time, Edward; they don't need me here. I'll go with you."

Chapter End Notes

A/N
Eeeeeeeeeeeep. I'll be back soon, I promise.

I apologize for not replying to reviews last chapter. :-) I got really carried away with trying to finish this chapter this week and I totally dropped the ball.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Hi, again. I forgot to mention in my last post that I wrote a bit more about Beni, Edward and Alice's sire, in A Dove's Cry outtake called Hidden. Link on my profile, if you're interested in learning a bit more about his creepiness ;)

Disclaimer: I do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So far gone I won't ever stop
For all that I am, for all that I'm not
So far gone the edge I'm on
I see it now, oblivion
"Ablivion" – UNKLE

Where am I?

I opened my eyes, struggling to get my bearings. Green all around ... trees and brush... snatches of light cutting through the gloom, everything flashing past in a blur. Somehow, I was moving fast, though my feet weren't on the ground. It felt like flying.

The chill hit me next and a sweet, familiar smell like fresh leaves and burnt sugar. I felt stone under and around me, icy cold where it touched my body. The stone cradled me.

"Edward?" The word tore across my throat, making me swallow hard and wince.

There was a low, musical hum beside me—above me, maybe—and a shockwave jolted through my body at the sound and the sudden realization that I was being held ... no, I was being carried. With effort, I forced my head to the left, changing my line of vision. Cold sweat broke over my skin as I looked into a beautiful, white face and scarlet eyes that seemed to bore right through me.

"No," I breathed.

For a long moment, the man holding me watched me with indifference—even boredom before he slowly faced forward again, his face expressionless. As if I was nothing.

Darkness curled at the edges of my vision, pressing down on me and stealing my breath. I gasped, unable to get enough air as my body shook with terror. I clenched my eyes shut, trying to escape the terrifying beauty of the red-eyed man, and I let out a strangled cry when he uttered a low curse.

I welcomed the darkness as it settled over me again.

aDc

"No!"
A hoarse scream cut through the air and pain seared my throat. I scrambled to sit up, every nerve in my body jangling with fear as I struggled to focus on my surroundings. Squinting, I made out walls and weak, grey light coming in through a dirty window. Outside of my ragged breaths it was quiet, and I quickly realized that the floating sensation and stone arms I’d felt before were absent. I moved my hands, shivering in the chilled air as I felt out the edges of some kind of hard bed, and my heart leapt when I spotted a lantern close to the ground only a few feet away.

The shadows to the right of the lantern seemed to move then, almost folding in on themselves. The subtle, unearthly movement made my eyes bulge and a wave of panic crashed through me. Thoughtlessly, I threw myself off the bed, desperate to get away. My limbs did not cooperate and my knees buckled, dumping me on the floor with a crash. I gasped when a sharp pain shot through my ankle, and then held my breath as a chuckle curled like smoke out of the shadows.

"Careful," the man said in a voice like a lovely, low purr as he stepped closer. His eyes glittered in the low light, sending heat flashing under my skin, even as my stomach clenched in fear. "Mustn't hurt yourself," he murmured.

A small smile graced his face as he took another step, making my body scream with alarm. My mind raced, trying to understand what was happening and how I had come to be there, but everything was jumbled.

"Who ... w-w-where am I?" I stuttered, swallowing hard when the man's smile became wolfish. "Wh-who are you?"

"I am Legion," he said mockingly, stepping forward again. "For we are only."

I opened my mouth, unsure of what words would come out, but let out a cry instead when the man in blurred and seemed to vanish. Before I could blink, he was in front of me, his teeth snapping an inch away from my right cheek and his burnt-sugar smell filling my nose and throat.

I closed my eyes, chasing the darkness while my scream echoed in my ears. This time, oblivion did not come. I curled in on myself, pulling my legs into my chest with my arms, and pressed my face to my knees.

Edward's voice came to me suddenly, murmuring words that shaped themselves around the images that were burned into my memory. I knew who the red-eyed man was.

aDc

I must have dozed, or maybe my brain shut down when the fear and stress became too much to bear. A violent jerking pulled me into awareness so abruptly that I cried out, and then cringed at the cold hand on my arm.

"On your feet, little thing," the man said, his low voice seductive and terrible. "It won't be long now, I think."

"What does that mean?" I rasped. "Where are you taking me?"

"We're not going anywhere," he replied, then moved so suddenly my brain swirled with confusion.

I blinked, my body shuddering when I realized we were standing outdoors. Shafts of moonlight fell through the trees overhead, and I stared disbelievingly at the outside of a house that I had been inside not a moment before. A low whine sounded in my throat as I struggled to process the change, and I would have sagged to the ground if not for the hard hands holding me up.
"Why are you doing this?" I mumbled, gritting my teeth to keep myself from falling apart.

"I don't need a reason to do anything." An awful smile played at the corners of the man's mouth, sending a sudden flare of temper through me.

"Then why bring me here?" I demanded, my anger growing as his smile widened. "If you're going to bite me, then what the hell are you waiting for?"

My mouth fell open when the man's head fell back and he began to laugh. Like everything about him, the sound was beautiful and terrifying, and somehow worse than any word he could have said. I raised my hands to my ears to block him out, all the while fighting the urge to step closer.

Dear God, what is he?

Not once in all the times I had been close to Edward or his family had I felt as close to danger as I did in the presence of the man with the red eyes. Not even when Edward had nearly succumbed to his bloodlust or when Alice had attacked me.

"I know what you are!" I blurted without meaning to, swallowing hard when the man fell silent and licked his lips.

"And what is that?" he asked, his teeth shining even in the dim light.

I shook myself angrily, trying to fight off the terror I felt. "You're a vampire."

"I'm a killer," the man corrected, his smile becoming almost gentle. He raised a hand, letting one cold finger trail along the side of my neck, and sighed longingly when I shuddered. "Just as you are meat."

My fear exploded. Adrenaline slammed through me forcefully, jolting me into a state of hyper-awareness. Everything seemed clearer, louder, and more intense, and I heard myself hyperventilating as my body struggled to get more oxygen.

The vampire at my side grew very still. His eyes fixed on the woods beyond the little house, growing wide and searching. "There," he breathed at last, his voice so soft I nearly missed it.

Turning my head, I followed the vampire's line of vision, straining to see through the gloom. Long moments later, my mouth fell open when several figures streaked out of the woods and into the little house, their steps far too fast and quiet to be human. Tears burned my eyes as I guessed who it could only be: Edward and the other Cullens.

Oh, God, no.

In a flash, I understood why the red-eyed man hadn't killed me yet: I was bait. I gasped, my breath hitching painfully in my chest when the man stepped in front of me, nearly blocking my view of the house. Before I could speak, the figures were on the porch again, and more movement at the edge of the woods caught my eye, the two groups joining together and stopping a short distance away.

The vampire in front of me stepped forward, waving me on with one hand. I forced myself to follow, wincing when the ache in my right ankle made me stumble. My eyes locked on the tall, slim figure in the center of the group, my heart pounding painfully when I heard a low snarl. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as Edward's face twisted in the moonlight, his rage both beautiful and terrifying to see. The gentle man I loved was gone, leaving something fierce and hard behind.

"What do you want?" Edward's cold voice made my heart ache and tears sting my eyes.
"Everything," his sire replied in a deep crooning voice. "Nothing."

Edward's face went blank. His eyes widened as he stared at his sire, and his lips curled in grimace that spoke of devastating pain. My heart broke for the boy I loved as I stepped forward, wanting only to comfort him if I could.

In a flash, the red-eyed man's hands were on me, dragging me toward him with a force that made me gasp. I stumbled and slid in his grasp, crying out as he reached down to gather me up again, and the air exploded with snarls and growling screams. I thought I heard laughter. I know I heard my own screams.

I blinked when I hit the ground, and struggled to get free of the hard arms caging me. Something like fire brushed my neck, and I sucked in a deep breath, my body going rigid with an exquisite pleasure that exploded into pain. The heat touched my forearm. My hand. My shoulder. My cheek. A blaze raced under my skin and into my blood, drying my tears.

_Burning._

As if from far away, I felt myself fall, and the touch of something cool on my face and neck.

"Oh, Bella," a lovely, sad voice said, the words fading against the roar in my ears.

Someone screamed.

Heat and fear tore through me, licking at my skin, inside my nose and eyes, burning my mouth and throat. My lungs, heart, head, soul, all charred. There was no sight, no taste, no smell, no breath. Only fire.

I watched Bella burn for three days.

She tossed and writhed on the cot in the little house, her throat too raw to scream though she continued to try. Her dark eyes stared sightlessly as she sobbed, and she gripped my hands with a fierceness that surprised me.

"What can I do?" I begged, knowing that no one had an answer. "I can't watch her like this—"

"Comfort her, just as you have been doing," Carlisle said gently. "Speak to her. Make sure she knows she's not alone."

"I don't know if she can she hear me." I turned to look at the girl on the cot, my stomach roiling when she shuddered and cried out. "Nothing I say to her seems to make a difference."

"It's possible she can't hear you," Carlisle admitted, his face falling when he saw my disappointment. "Everyone's change is different. Some of us are aware as we change, while others seem overwhelmed by the pain and fear. You were coherent, in a sense, Edward; you knew you were not alone, though you had no idea who we were. You asked us to help you. You had some awareness of who you were through the pain."

"So much of what I remember is tied up in fire," I replied, staring hard into Carlisle's golden eyes. "I could see you and the others, and I knew you were reassuring me, telling me it would be all right ... I was hurting too much for it to matter what you were saying, but I knew you were there."

"I think Bella knows your here," Alice murmured, drawing closer. "I'm sure she draws comfort from your touch, even if she can't tell you so." My sister's eyes were sad when I met her gaze. I knew she was thinking of her own change, burning and alone in a hole under the ground.
Jasper stepped forward, looking at the girl on the cot and then to me with sympathy before he laid a gentle hand on Alice's shoulder. "Try lying down with her, Edward. The pain of the burning is too intense to go away entirely, but your cold skin might give her some small relief or comfort, as Alice said."

A second passed as Jasper's words registered, and then I was on my feet. "Anything," I breathed. Alice stepped closer, helping me to gently tear Bella's parka apart and away from her body, exposing more of her slim frame.

"We could undress her," Alice thought, pursing her lips regretfully when I frowned. "I'm sure the others won't mind waiting outside. Emmett and Jas are already out most of the time anyway, watching the woods for—"

"No," I said as I climbed onto the cot. Part of me knew that Alice was right; if my cold skin gave Bella any comfort, removing her clothes seemed sensible. The other part of me was very aware of how difficult it would be for Bella to be undressed in a room full of people ... the human Bella I had known, at any rate. "Let's see how it goes; we don't even know if she can feel me holding her."

After hesitating for a moment, I pulled my sweater and shirt over my head and Settled down, drawing Bella into my arms. I held my breath when she stiffened and gasped, and tried not to listen to the others' thoughts bouncing around in my head. Their worries and concerns for Bella were mirrored by my own.

Is she strong enough to get through this?

How will she bear losing her family?

What happens if she doesn't want to stay with us after the change?

What If she doesn't want me?

Breathing deeply, I closed my mind to the others, concentrating only on the girl beside me. It was obvious Bella was still in pain, senselessly burning along every inch of her body. My touch seemed to make her less frantic, though, and her rigid posture began slowly to relax. Her screams softened to moans and her flailing movements lessened. She seemed to murmur, and pain knifed through me when I thought I heard my name.

"I'm sorry." The ache spread through me as she trembled. "I never meant for this to happen, sweetheart. If I'd had any idea that he would follow us here, I swear that I would have done anything to protect you."

My throat tightened, making my voice croaky as I continued talking. The others in the room withdrew to give us what limited privacy there was, but I paid them no mind. My pride no longer mattered. The hopes I'd slowly been building for some sort of existence with a human girl called Bella Swan were gone. I felt empty. Stripped bare. Weak.

Bella's face burned against my chest as she twitched and groaned. "I never should have approached you in that music store, Bella, or looked into your life. I knew that I was being selfish by pursuing you and I'll never be able to tell you how sorry I am. Especially because I know that if I could go back and do it over, I don't think I'd be able to stop myself from doing it all over again."

Pressing my lips to Bella's forehead, I drew her a little closer. I knew what she would say if she could: that I had helped her. I had saved her from being traumatized in Seattle, and even given her a strange kind of justice against James Chase. I knew, too, that without Bella, I almost certainly would
have never found Alice. And that together, Bella and I had found love.

"You deserve better than this, Bella." I sighed, fighting to keep myself from despairing altogether. "I'll find some way to make it up to you ... to give you more, I promise. Just ... please, come back to me, Bella. I love you."

We lay together, Bella and I, each of us more shattered than ever before as the hours passed and her body slowly died to be reborn. I thought that if a dead heart could break, mine surely had.

aDc

"Please don't make me call Bella's father," I whispered when Carlisle knelt by the side of the cot.

"You must," he replied quietly. "I understand how difficult it is for you to leave Bella, but it can be done in just a few minutes." Carlisle nodded when I turned to meet his eyes. "I had to go to the hospital for a shift last night. I went back to the house in Port Angeles this morning after work to get one of the satellite phones. Rosalie has also brought back some things for Bella."

"Things?"

"Changes of clothes." He shrugged with one shoulder. "Other things to make Bella comfortable when her change is complete."

Carlisle frowned, his expression becoming troubled. "Rose didn't dare to go to the Swan's house to find something of Bella's that might be more personal; we're afraid something like that would be missed by her family ..."

"Bella doesn't have anything with her." My forehead furrowed with the realization. "No bag or wallet with ID ... it must be back in La Push with her truck ... perhaps still in the water."

Carlisle sighed. "Yes. Bella has, for all intents and purposes, disappeared. Without the possibility of leaving fingerprints after her change, it will be as though she never existed from this point on."

"Like Alice and me." I swallowed as I looked down at the girl tossing fitfully beside me.

"Like all of us," Carlisle agreed gently. "Ghosts."

aDc

The days and nights passed with excruciating slowness, each minute running into the next without end. I knew that some of the others came and went, checking in to work or school as they needed, while Jasper and Alice stayed behind, keeping vigil with me.

Bella's skin grew paled and hardened, the roses in her cheeks fading. Her hair seemed almost to lengthen, while her apparently unseeing eyes grew darker, becoming almost black before they clenched closed and stayed that way. She was painfully lovely as she died.

I held her, listening to her stubborn heart labor and talking quietly while she struggled. I told her about my time with the Cullens, and the histories of the family. Each day, I forced myself to call the Forks Police Department, and listened with pity to Charlie Swan describe the mystery of Bella's disappearance.

"I'm sorry, Chief Swan," I told him on the third evening. I was aware that I had interrupted his monologue, but I couldn't bear the sadness in his deep voice any longer. "I'm so sorry that this happened."
Charlie was silent for a long moment before he cleared his throat. "Thank you, Edward. I wish I could tell you what happened, or why we can't find her—"he paused when his voice wavered and he spoke more softly when he continued. "Witnesses saw the truck go into the water and the divers found her wallet and phone, and what looks like the strap from her bag. But ... she's just gone, Edward."

I closed my eyes, pressing the fingers of my free hand against my forehead. "Is there anything I can do, sir? For you or for Bella's mother?"

"No," Charlie said with a long sigh. "There's not much that can be done but try to understand what the hell happened. Renee and Phil flew up last night. They felt better being here, even if there's nothing they can do. It's too bad Bella can't see us together again, finally," he said bitterly.

"Bella loves you," I replied at once, biting my lip at the slip I knew Charlie would notice but forgive. "She did, I mean; you and her mom, and her step-dad."

"I know she did. As many mistakes Renee and I made with Bella, we loved her too." Exhaustion was clear in Charlie's voice, and I wondered if that was made his usual shyness drop away. "I hope ... I hope she knew that."

_I'll make sure she knows_, I promised him silently.

aDc

Esme's face was sympathetic when I walked back into the house. She took my hand in hers as I approached the bed where Carlisle and Alice were keeping watch.

"How is Bella's father, Edward?" Esme asked quietly.

"I think he's still in shock." I shook my head. "He's trying to grieve, but I can't help thinking he's holding out hope that Bella will be found alive and well somehow."

"That's to be expected." Carlisle gave me a meaningful look. "It will take time for Bella's family to accept that they lost her so suddenly. Not being able to lay her to rest slows the process too."

I nodded, remembering all too well how difficult it had been for me to accept Alice's disappearance. "Charlie and Renee are planning to hold a memorial service at some point. Probably in a month or two. That's their way of saying goodbye, I think. Charlie told me I am welcome to attend."

Esme reached out to brush her fingers against mine in comfort. "I think it would be lovely if you did, Edward."

My attempt to smile fell flat when Bella gasped loudly. I stiffened when the sound of her heartbeat changed, increasing in both speed and volume.

"It's time," Carlisle murmured, the words hardly out of his mouth before I heard the others gathering on the porch outside. I met Carlisle's eyes, my throat tightening with anxiety, and swallowed hard when he nodded. "The change is nearly complete."

We could do nothing but stand frozen as Bella's heartbeat grew faster and louder, thrumming like a bird's. Her gasping breaths echoed through the little house, and sadness pulsed through me as I realized that they would be her last.

I drew as close as I dared, kneeling by the cot just as Bella's heart screamed to a stop. She froze, her last breath and heartbeat melting into the air. A crushing silence followed, stretching on for what felt
like far too long. My fingers twitched, reaching carefully toward the figure on the bed, and pausing when she stirred.

Bella's eyes snapped open, shining with ruby brightness as they moved over the room, and I inhaled sharply as they locked on mine.

"Bella." My voice was the barest whisper, pitched low for the sensitive ears of a newborn vampire, but still her eyes widened in surprise.

There was a blur of movement a second before I was thrown through the air. I hit the wall with a crunch, aware of the sound of glass shattering and other low voices calling out in warning. In a flash, I was on my feet and out the door, sprinting through the woods after Bella as she fled.

Chapter End Notes

O.O

I'll be back soon, I promise. Next chapter should be the final regular chapter, and then there may be an epilogue-y thing.

Note:

Beni is misquoting The Gospel of Mark, 5:9, when he introduces himself to Bella: And He (Jesus) asked him (the man), "What is thy name?" And he answered, saying, "My name is Legion: for we are many."
Chapter Notes

Hi, friends! I'll let you get to it :) 

Disclaimer: I do not own Twilight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well, I'm all restless but I don't care
You don't like me much, well, me neither
You go read my mind like some kind of God
You live, let's have you trippin' on the same one you lost
"Restless" – UNKLE (feat. Josh Homme)

A chill settled over me as I chased after Bella. She flew through the woods with the stunning speed of a newborn vampire, her shape seeming to melt amongst the trees. It was easy for me to keep her within sight, though, while still maintaining some distance; I knew only too well how easily she could hurt me if she felt threatened.

The others followed behind, silent but for their steps whispering over the ground and occasional murmured words. My family's thoughts were clear, however, as they worried over the possibility of getting too close to human settlements. Several of them were also wondering how long it would take for the powerful newborn in our midst to injure me.

A sinking disappointment had come over me when I realized that I still couldn't hear Bella's thoughts; the vampire change had not opened her mind to me. I worried too, if any trace of the human girl I had known remained in the figure racing before me, or if the change had simply erased Bella's persona completely. The mating urge still surged inside me, as compelling as it had ever been, and pushing me to follow her with a force that I felt sure I'd never fully understand.

Beyond my calculated thoughts, though, it was as if my emotions had been switched off, even as I observed the girl running in front of me. I could hear Bella's easy breaths as she wove around the trees, as well as her small grunt of surprise when she realized she could not shake her pursuers. The scent poured off her, the floral and orange notes intensified to staggering levels that made my breath hitch. I caught a glimpse of her stark, white face when she cast a glance behind her, and I swallowed hard to be caught in a dark-eyed glare that was fierce and alien. There was nothing warm or familiar in Bella's gaze, at all.

We ran on, the others falling into place behind me as I made subtle changes to Bella's path, repeatedly approaching on her right to carefully drive her southeast and away from more populated areas. I knew, however, that it was only a matter of time before we approached a sizeable town or city. We had to get Bella to stop before she smelled human blood; there would be no reaching her then.

"Bella," I called, making my voice soft and coaxing. Her shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly, and though she kept moving, that small reaction prompted me to try again. "I know you're confused, but I'm not going to hurt you. Stop a minute so we can talk."
The only answer was a low growl.

"We've got you, Edward, three and nine," Jasper said quietly, slipping into the military language that he had used during his human life as a soldier. Emmett grunted softly in agreement before Jasper continued. "Carlisle and Alice at six."

I held up my hand to signal that I had heard him, never taking my eyes from the moving body ahead of us. Bella growled again, her shoulders tensing against Jasper's voice as she shot forward with renewed speed.

"On my mark," I murmured, the words hardly past my lips before I sprinted forward.

I flashed past Bella, glancing at her shocked expression before wheeling around and coming to a stop in front of her. A vicious snarl tore through the air as the newborn's steps abruptly slowed. She glared at me, her face twisting with rage and her hands balled into fists. Bella's body was taut with tension, the anger in her face increasing when the rest of the family caught up to us. They positioned themselves around her, careful to give her ample space. Jasper stood on one side and Emmett on her other, while Carlisle and Alice covered the rear with Rose and Esme close behind them.

The numbness that had fallen over me during Bella's flight disappeared as I stared at her. The vampire change had done more than refine her prettiness; it had made her strikingly beautiful. The soft curves of her teenager's face had sharpened slightly, setting off her bone structure. Her hair hung in rich waves around her pale face, and her enormous eyes glittered dangerously as she glared at me. Desire crashed through me with an intensity that left me feeling slightly sick, making me swallow hard, unsure of what to say or how to begin, or even if moving a step toward the girl would be wise. It wasn't possible to discern her eye color there in the dark, but I knew well enough what I would see when the sun rose; crimson irises, bathed in fire. In the meantime, low light or not, it was clear what was missing from Bella's gaze; any trace of recognition for me or the other vampires around her.

"Bella," I began, pressing my lips together when she snarled loudly.

The newborn's gaze flicked from me to Jasper to Emmett, and I knew she was aware of the others behind her too. Her eyes narrowed as they fell on me again, sizing me up with animal cunning. Bella's face stilled very suddenly. Her expression lost some of its heat, and her lips slackened as Jasper sent a calming wave in her direction.

"You're thirsty," I said, eager to leverage Jasper's efforts at quieting her. I spoke quietly in an attempt to be heard under what I knew was an overwhelming amount of stimulus, but those two words caught Bella's attention. Her eyes widened and her fingers twitched as she made a tiny, needy noise deep in her throat.

"It burns," she whispered.

Bella's raspy, unbearably sweet voice sent a jolt through me, forcing me to bite back a groan. Desire mixed with apprehension, flooding my body as I struggled to control myself. Whether Bella knew it or not, she needed my help; my staying calm was crucial.

"I know. You're thirsty because you need to feed. Let me show you where."

"Feed?" Bella muttered in question. "On what?"

"Blood," I replied, drawing a shaky breath. "You need fresh blood to settle your thirst."

Bella lowered her head, pinning me with her eyes as her body coiled tighter and another growl rumbled in her chest. I couldn't tell if she was angry or horrified by my words, and I held my breath,
as did the others, everyone poised for an attack if the newborn turned on us. Jasper and Emmett were rigid with tension, and I knew from their thoughts that Carlisle and Alice were ready to take up for me at the slightest hint of danger.

After a long moment, Bella took one slow step toward me and then paused, watching me carefully. "Where?" Her head moved in a tiny nod as she took another careful step, clearly gauging my reaction.

Without looking away, I used my hand to gesture back the way we had come before stepping forward to close the distance between us. The newborn continued to watch me closely as I moved, her eyes never leaving mine, though she remained quiet. I drew up alongside her, maintaining some distance between our bodies before I gave her a small smile. Her lip curled in a sneer, but then a fleeting expression crossed her face, like surprise mixed with something less recognizable. I wasn't sure if the emotion was real or a result of Jasper's calming vibes, but the tension in my chest loosened by a fraction.

"I'll lead, if that's all right," I told her, grinning slightly when her lips twisted again. Inclining my head toward the woods, I murmured, "I'm sure you can keep up," before sprinting away.

I led Bella north, bearing slightly east and into the heart of the Olympic National Forest, toward the places where I knew game was abundant at that time of year. Bella was mostly silent as we ran, and though I trained my eyes forward, I felt her gaze on me often. The others followed behind, Jasper in the lead as he tried to keep Bella's emotions in check.

It wasn't long before I smelled salt and blood, mixed with undertones of mossy earth. Bella growled loudly as she caught the scent, and I fell back slightly to let her take the lead as we tracked a herd of elk; I knew better than to attempt to hunt with an hours-old newborn. We burst out of the trees into a small clearing, and Bella keened when she caught sight of the game. I slowed to a stop, letting her go on as the animals scattered.

Bella took down a large stag within seconds, draining the beast with savage swiftness before springing to her feet again. Another animal fell beneath her hands a moment later, and I closed my eyes when she let out a long groan of hungry pleasure. Watching Bella feed was both monstrous and deeply erotic. My chest tightened, a growl rumbling through me as I imagined stalking into that clearing and pushing Bella to the ground before crawling on top of her. I felt myself grow hard.

A light touch on my arm brought me out of my thoughts, making me aware of the rest of my family standing around me.

"She doesn't need any help, does she?" Alice asked wryly as we watched Bella take down a third animal.

"They never do." Carlisle stood on my other side, his voice and smile quiet, though I felt his eyes on me. "The instinct to hunt comes naturally to all of us."

"I certainly didn't have anyone around to show me at the beginning," Alice replied thoughtfully. Her expression darkened as she thought about those first, frightening days after our sire had abandoned her, but she smiled when Jasper slipped his hand in hers. "I'll always be grateful to you for finding me, Edward."

"Be grateful to Bella. She was the one that put the pieces together," I reminded my sister.
Alice rested her head against my shoulder as we turned our eyes to the newborn vampire in the meadow. I felt Alice hesitate before she spoke again, and smiled sadly as I heard the thoughts behind her next words.

"I can't see anything from Bella now," she said softly. "Not her decisions or any signs of what is to come. I know my visions are sometimes shaky but I thought ..."

Carlisle sighed. "Bella may not be capable of making decisions at the moment or ... know her own mind. The change is traumatic for the body, but it can be equally traumatic for the mind and psyche. She may need time to recover herself."

I drew in a long, shaky breath. "I'm not sure ... I'm not sure that is Bella. Not really." I shook my head as both Carlisle and Alice tried to speak. "She ran from us. From me. I thought at first that she was simply angry at me for what happened: for being taken and for being bitten. When we caught up to her, though ... Bella looked at me as if I were a stranger. There's no sign at all that she knows who I am. That she knows any of us."

"I think it's too soon to say any of those things, Edward," Carlisle said soothingly, "not when you haven't exchanged even a dozen words with her."

He frowned as he looked out at the petite figure in the meadow. Bella's movements had slowed as the extreme edge of her thirst was slaked. Though her need to feed would be urgent for some time to come, she seemed sated for the time being.

"Sometimes the thirst muddles the mind of a newborn," Carlisle said thoughtfully. "They are still becoming accustomed to so much new information, after all."

Alice asked the question that I could not bring myself to voice. "Do you think that is what's happened to Bella?"

Carlisle nodded almost reluctantly. I could see the apology in his eyes as he raised a hand to settle against the nape of my neck to comfort me. "It's possible. There's no telling what may happen as Bella settles into this new version of herself."

Though I tried to force it down, hope bloomed inside me, tightening my chest and making my throat ache. Before I could reply, a movement from the meadow caught my eye. Bella had finished feeding and turned her attention back to us. To me.

The pressure in my chest intensified almost to the point of pain when Bella's gaze locked with mine. She walked toward us gracefully, her eyes passing over our faces with cautious interest. Blood from the kills had splashed over her lips, chin, and throat, soaking into the neckline of her shirt. There was gore on her hands and sleeves, and her jeans were torn from her struggles with the elk.

She was a mess.

She was stunning.

"How do you feel?" I asked, when she drew close, then swallowed past the lump that had risen in my throat.

"Better." Bella's voice was smooth with the blood she'd drunk. "I'm thirsty, even after all that. My throat is ... it still burns."

"The thirst will continue for a while," I replied. "Your body will crave more blood in the beginning."
"Do you feed too?" she asked, her eyes moving again over the vampires around me.

"Yes. We are all like you." I felt light-headed with relief that Bella seemed both coherent and self-aware, and heard similar thoughts from Carlisle and the others. Her mind appeared capable enough; what remained of her memory was less certain. "We don't need to feed as often, now."

Bella cocked her head then, watching me closely. "What ... am I?"

"You're a vampire," I replied simply. Everyone stilled, waiting for her to react in some way as my words hung in the air.

Her gaze sharpened, as if she was trying to find a lie in my expression or voice, but she was silent and seemed unfazed. My stomach grew heavy with dread at the realization that Bella either didn't understand what had happened to her or, perhaps worse, didn't care.

"We can tell you about what's happened," I said hoarsely. "How you became the way you are."

The newborn cocked her head as she watched me. "You called me Bella. I think I know that name. It feels ... right."

"Your name is Isabella Marie Swan," I replied with a smile. "People call you Bella."

"Yes," she said, nodding as she seemed to turn the words over in her head. "Who are you?" she asked thoughtfully, watching me closely. "I feel as though ... do I know you?"

I nodded miserably, forcing myself to smile once more in the face of her crushing words. "Yes, you know me. My name is Edward Cullen."

She frowned, her gaze moving down and to the left as she appeared to try to remember. At last she met my eyes again and gave a small shrug. "I'm not sure ..."

Alice's grip on my arm tightened, and I nodded dumbly, unable to speak. That final confirmation that the girl I loved did not know me—wasn't really even there inside the graceful creature standing before me—was excruciating.

"That's all right." My sister's silvery voice floated gently in the air as she let go of my arm and took a single step forward. Alice smiled sweetly when Bella's expression softened. "You'll just have to get to know us all over again, Bella. I'm Alice."

Bella acclimated to her new life with unsettling ease.

From those first moments in the hidden meadow, she hunted more than competently, and quickly learned to do so as part of our group. We showed her how to conceal her kills and why, and spent time talking with her about the reasons that our family chose to hunt animals rather than humans.

Alice took Bella under her wing, rebuilding the friendship they'd had as best she could. Jasper, Emmett, and Rosalie taught Bella how to fight and hunt larger game, while Esme and Carlisle gave her an understanding of the history of our kind.

I surprised no one by having a harder time accepting what had happened to Bella, though I tried to keep my feelings from her as much as possible; Bella couldn't help who she was, after all. Over and over, I reminded myself that she was essentially a blank slate, open to learning whatever was brought to her attention.
Without memories of her years as a human, Bella was amazingly serene. She exhibited little confusion or fear at the sudden change in her life, and felt no anger or resentment at being forced to walk away from the people she had known in Forks. So while Carlisle and the others told Bella the histories of our kind and family, I told her as much as I knew of the girl she had been before the universe crossed our paths and changed our lives forever. Bella listened with interest and some curiosity, sometimes asking questions about a particular person or place, but nothing I said sparked recognition in her eyes. To her, the stories about her life were simply that: stories about a slim, dark-haired girl with the same name. Bella didn't miss her family or friends, and was not distressed by the idea of their suffering for having lost her; she didn't know them enough to even begin to care.

The same could not be said of Charlie Swan and Bella's other family, however; I knew they were still deep in mourning for his daughter's apparent death.

"Why do you put yourself through this?" Rosalie asked after I had returned from making a call to Bella's father. "It's hard enough on you with Bella being ... the way she is." Rosalie waved her hand vaguely at a nearby copse of trees where Jasper was sparring with the newborn. "You could stop calling her father at this point."

"I know." I rubbed the back of my neck with one hand, nodding at Bella when she turned to look at us askance; the mention of her name always got her attention, no matter how quiet we tried to be.

"Walk away, Edward." Rosalie's voice dropped to a murmur, and I had to look away from the sympathy I saw in my sister's eyes. "No one would blame you. You've been kind to Bella's family through this, but you can let it go now. They will move on with time; humans always do."

"I know."

"Stop beating yourself up for what happened. What's done is done." Rosalie rubbed her fingers over my forearm to soften her words.

I turned to meet Rosalie's gaze and managed a smile. "I just think it's wrong not to give Bella some idea of what she was before ... or rather who she was. Even if she doesn't remember that life, now or ever, she has a right to know where she came from."

Beyond the fringes of Bella's sheltered existence, things returned to some semblance of normal. Carlisle and Esme went to work and made appearances at the house in Port Angeles, coming back to the forest during their off hours. After several weeks, Bella's behavior had evened out sufficiently enough for the family to consider moving her from Washington to the house in Montana. As easy as it was to stay buried deep in the forest as we were, Carlisle and I worried about her proximity to her human relatives and friends; even Alice and Jasper gifts would be of no help if Bella somehow found her way back to Forks.

Jasper and Emmett took responsibility for planning the move to Montana, and we all did our best to calm Bella when she appeared uncharacteristically unsure about making the trip.

"Are you sure I can do this?" she asked me one evening.

I turned to meet her questioning gaze without hiding my own surprise; Bella normally went to Carlisle and Jasper with her questions. "Yes, of course I think you can, Bella. Jasper, Emmett, and Alice are going to take you east through the forests and past Mount Rainier. Once Rosalie meets you with the car, you'll be ... away from any tempting scents." She grinned shyly at my teasing.
"You'll be travelling at night, when there are fewer cars on the road, and it shouldn't take more than five hours to make it to the house in Montana." I shrugged and gave her an easy smile. "If you need to hunt midway through the trip, you can always get out and keep moving east through the mountain; there's more than enough space where you can lose yourself and still find game."

Bella nodded, and then licked her lips nervously, looking away for a moment before meeting my eyes again. "And you? You're going to meet us there at some point?"

I frowned and opened my mouth to speak, closing it again when Bella ploughed own.

"It's just that I know you're not happy that I'm here," she said in a rush, her crimson eyes flashing with rare high emotion. "I've been watching you and you seem sad and even angry. I feel as though you'd rather not be here."

"That's not it at all," I protested gently, wincing at the idea that had formed in Bella's head. Seeing a frown cross her lovely face sent pain lancing through me. "I'm not at all unhappy that you're here, Bella. Quite the opposite, in fact; I couldn't have wished for anything better than for you to be here with us, safe and doing well."

"But you miss the old Bella," she said, sympathy shining in her eyes. "The one who knew who she was. The Bella that you said ... you loved."

My breath hitched at her words. I closed my eyes for a moment to gather myself.

"I miss the Bella who knew who I was, yes," I admitted when I could speak. She looked surprised when I chuckled. "And I do grieve for the girl you used to be, because she was something else. I have never met anyone who drove me crazier than you did on your worst days as a human girl, Bella."

Bella snickered and seemed to relax. "So it's better that I'm like this, right? I mean, at least I'm not nearly as annoying on my worst day."

"You're just as amazing this way as you were in your human form," I said with a genuine smile. "Different, but even more wonderful. I'm enjoying getting to know you again."

"Why don't you just come with us then?" she asked, her brow puckering in confusion. "What's the big errand you have to do that's taking you away from me?"

A pang shot through me at Bella's possessive words. "I'm going to Forks. Your parents are holding a memorial for you and I told your father that I would be there."

"You'd do that for him?" she asked softly, a pained expression passing over her face. "From what you've said you hardly know him."

"I don't know him very well," I agreed, "but I'm certain he loves you. So do your mom and step-dad, and your friends. You can't be there, obviously, and I can't tell them what really happened to you. I can go to offer them some kind of comfort in your place, though. It's not much, but ..."

Bella shook her head and blew out a long breath. "It's more than a lot of people would do, Edward. You're a good person."

"No, I'm not," I began, holding up a hand when she tried to argue.

"He's not," Emmett tossed out casually as he walked by, breaking the spell. "Edward's a red-headed creeper geek; just be thankful he can't hear what you're thinking, the way he can the rest of us."
Bella was laughing as I chased my brother into the woods, his war whoops echoing through the air.

The Montana house was empty when I let myself in the door later that week. I wasn't worried though, because the scents of the others hung heavy in the air, particular notes of orange blossom and freesia jumping out at me immediately. I stood in the entryway for a moment, listening to the silence and watching the red rays of the setting sun play over the big room before me. The trip to Forks had been more draining than I had anticipated, and I welcomed a moment to myself, away from the others and the tangle of emotions that overcame me every time I looked at Bella.

I moved through the ground floor, going at once to the music room where I sat at the upright piano to think about the days during which Bella and I had been separated. While she had been open to the fragile friendship developing between us, my feelings for her had not changed; I loved and desired her as deeply as I had before her change. Being around her and fully aware that she no longer returned my feelings was frustrating and saddening, and I often hung back, letting the others interact with her while I nursed my grief and covered it with smiles.

My body ached for her with unrelenting intensity while I was away, but I had missed simply being around her, too, listening to her husky voice asking questions with an endearing innocence. Thanks to texts from Rosalie and Alice, I knew the trip East from Washington had gone well. I felt sure that Bella would be happy in Montana for the foreseeable future ... or until she decided to go off on her own.

Closing my eyes against that unhappy thought, I lifted the key cover and laid my fingers on the keys. I drew a deep breath and let my hands move, letting the music form without real thought or intent. Notes poured out of me, filling my body and soothing the melancholy I'd been feeling for weeks. I climbed inside the notes, rendered weightless and soaring, feeling as though I would burst with the sound. The music rolled over and through me, crushing me even as it lifted me high.

Time passed, though I didn't mark how much. At some point, I felt-more than heard-someone enter the room and come to stand by the side of the piano. I kept my eyes closed, chasing the feeling of oblivion inside the notes for a little longer. When I finally did look up, my chest tightened at the sight of Bella watching me, her beautiful eyes wide and slightly awed. Gradually, I let my hands slow, the music becoming softer as the song came to an end, until the last notes melted away into silence.

"I remember you, Edward," Bella whispered.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't really think I'd leave it at Bella not remembering, did you? C'mon now. Hehe ;)

Thanks for reading and sticking with me. Seriously. I say it often, but vampfic fans are some of the most committed and patient I've ever run across. I'll be back with the last chapter soon. No, really, I mean to be back as soon as I can get the last chapter together.

I collaborated with Discordia81 again on an entry for the LDA contes. Today is the last day to vote, but you can always read ;) http://letsdoanal.blogspot.com/

My entry for the Happily Ever After Twific Contest, The Beach House, is up on the
Human memories can be fragile, fleeting things; like smoke, they fade with time. Even seen though the unerring mind of a vampire, such memories are hazy and almost surreal; the sensation is not unlike looking through the wrong end of a telescope. That is particularly true if the vampire is not interested in capturing the memories.

After my change, time was fluid. There was no past or future, only now. I remembered nothing. I woke from dreams of ashes and fire not understanding where I was. I saw a dark, dirty room and shining, golden eyes all around. I heard the whisper of hushed breaths, and a low voice murmuring in my ear.

I felt no fear—only thirst.

I ran, wondering at the feel of the wind whispering across my skin as the forest around me became a blur of green. I felt some curiosity about the slim, white figures that followed me, even allowing one of them to change my course; I knew they could not stop me if I refused.

I hunted, gasping as a warm creature writhed under my fingers. I fed, moaning soundlessly when the blood filled my senses, heat and salt crashing through me. The thunder of a dying heart pounded in my ears. My nerves sang. A world opened before me and I gladly fell into it.

When I surfaced, something inside me clicked into place. Time began moving forward, settling into something I could follow.

I turned from my kills and saw a beautiful young man waiting. He told me his name—Edward—and my own as well. He smiled kindly at my questions, and waved the others forward to introduce them.

The Cullens, I learned, were a family of sorts, and creatures like me: vampires. They knew me, or a version of me that I myself did not recognize. They showed me their ways and explained their history. They told me about their extraordinary gifts, and how they made life both easier and more challenging.

I became fast friends with Alice, the tiny dark-haired seer, though the others distinguished themselves as well. Jasper was a warrior with the power to soothe my moods. Emmett and Rosalie were the protectors, while Carlisle and Esme acted as teachers and historians.

It took longer to get to know Edward, the mind reader with one weakness: me. He could no more
hear my thoughts than I could his. When I looked at his eyes and the way he smiled, I felt sure there was something else behind their slightly haunted expression. He slipped into the background when the others were gathered, becoming watchful, but distant. Pain often flashed over his face when he thought no one was watching and I wondered who he had been to the girl called Isabella Swan.

When he approached me one evening, offering to tell me about my human years, I was amused; I had no interest in the human Bella or the people in her life. Edward's voice was sweet and low, however, like lovely music, and I found myself listening without meaning to. I watched him as he spoke, following the graceful lines of his face and changing expressions, silently noting the traces of sadness in his eyes.

"Why are you going this?" I asked, giving him a small smile when his brows drew together in confusion. "Don't get me wrong; it's sweet of you to take the time, and I do enjoy spending time with you, but I don't need all of this information, Edward. I don't remember any of the things you're telling me."

He was quiet for a moment before nodding thoughtfully. "Fair enough," he said, flashing a grin. "Let's just say that I promised myself I'd tell you about the girl I used to know."

I rolled my eyes good naturedly. "And you're not the type that breaks promises, right?"

"That's right." Edward winked. "And see? You're getting to know me better already."

As he continued speaking, my amusement slowly became curiosity. So much of my human story was shadowed by darkness and threats that I did not understand and I realized with a jolt that my existence, both human and immortal, was a puzzle from which pieces were missing. The things that Edward could tell me, however, might help me put parts of the puzzle together.

I also quickly understood something that Edward was not saying: he had loved Bella Swan. He loved me. He still loved me, in spite of the fact that there was nothing left of that girl. A sense of pity swept over me for the kind boy at my side, and I found that I was grateful he could not hear my thoughts.

I made an effort to be kind to Edward after that evening, though that often meant not being near him. He worked hard to hide his unhappiness, but wasn't really fooling anyone. I felt a vague sense of guilt knowing he was lonely, though I also knew there was nothing I could do to ease his feelings. My guilt only increased when I became aware that he continued to see the humans I had left behind in Forks.

"We've tried to talk him out of speaking to Charlie and Renee," Esme told me one day when Edward had disappeared with his phone. "Nothing about those conversations with your parents soothes Edward's conscience. But he insists on continuing with them."

"I could tell him not to bother," I said thoughtfully, and frowned when Esme shook her head. "Why not? Nothing about what I am bothers me. I ... I don't know anything but this life, and I like it."

Esme's smile was gentle. "That's good to hear, Bella. I hope that you continue to feel that way always, even if your memories ever return."

I blinked at her in confusion. "Why wouldn't I? From what Edward has told me, I was struggling with the things in my past, even years afterward. My human memories can't possibly be better than what I have now."
"I understand what you're saying," Esme allowed, running one hand over my shoulder as we walked amongst the trees. "You're more like Edward than I first realized."

"Oh? How so?"

"You're both very determined. Once Edward has something in his head, it is impossible to dissuade him. We tried very hard to stop him from seeing you after all, and look at how that turned out."

I couldn't help joining in when Esme began to laugh.

aDc

Time continued moving forward. Pieces of the puzzle began to take shape. I had a present. With the family that had adopted me, my future was forming. I abandoned a past to which I felt no ties, content with the knowledge that a new past was forming with each passing moment.

When my thirst had abated enough for travel, the family moved east to the mountains straddling the border of Montana and Wyoming. It was there that I stood in the door of the music room of a house I had visited once before but did not remember, watching Edward at the piano. His music rolled over me, soaring with aching beauty. As I watched, Edward turned his head, his eyes closed as he lost himself in his playing. And out of nowhere at all, the puzzle pieces of my memories began to reassemble.

Images and impressions fell out of the void and back into my consciousness. I knew immediately that these memories were half-formed, but they felt real. I saw Edward in a music store, his peculiar eyes shining at me across the room. I saw him sitting beside me in a car, his handsome face creased with anger. Curled beside me in a bed, a smile curling the corners of his lips. Hovering above me, his whole being radiating apprehension and concern as he pushed the hair away from my face with his hands.

I drew in a tremulous breath, crossing the room to stand beside the piano as Edward's song drew to a close. My chest ached and my eyes burned with tears that would never come. When he opened his eyes and his gaze locked with mine, I knew in an instant who Edward Cullen was and what he had meant to me. I remembered him.

aDc

Other bits and pieces of my early human years came to me as time passed, the pieces slowly filling out the puzzle. There were disjointed images and ideas, even sudden waves of emotion, all tying the creature I had become back to the flesh and blood girl from Forks.

Faces came to me, unbidden, and sometimes voices. A dark-eyed man with a mustache that I understood was my father, and a slim, pretty woman I realized was my mother. Young men with tawny skin and dark hair, whose voices still cracked with youth. I knew that those people had loved me and I them, but felt no grief at the idea that I would never see them again.

I learned darker things about my past, too. That someone had hurt me, though the details were fleeting. There was a vague shape, hulking but always cast in shadow, and a voice that made my fists curl in anger. I knew that the secrets wrapped around the memories had hurt me almost as much as the man called James Chase, and that I had spent far too much time living in fear.

One bright spot continued to emerge, of course, shining like a beacon through the clouds: Edward. I could not recall every detail about him that I'd learned as a human. I didn't remember meeting his family, or much about the times we had spent together. Most of the words we'd shared before my
change were gone, though I could recall the way his voice had made me feel. I knew that he had been kind and gentle, and very often as inhumanly patient as only a vampire could be. He had helped me when I’d asked, going against many of his own beliefs, and had shown strength when I’d lashed out at him. I remembered the way he smelled, and the cool press of his hands over my skin. The way his lips and lounge slid over mine and the sound of his throaty groan in my ear when I pulled him close.

As pieces of my memories returned, Edward found a place in my past. As we hunted and explored the forests around us, talking endlessly about whatever came to mind, Edward found a place in my present. One afternoon, I leaned toward him, and twined my fingers around his. A slow smile lit his face, and another piece of the puzzle slid into place as Edward found a place in my future.

~aDc~

I was fifty miles from the house when my phone buzzed on the seat beside me. Bella's text flashed across the screen when I glanced down, and I chuckled at the impatience I could read behind her words.

I know you're close; Alice has stopped dropping hints about your whereabouts.

With a grin, I pressed down a little harder on the accelerator with my foot.

It had been almost two weeks since I'd left for the U.S., traveling west to Washington State. Unlike years before, Bella had briefly considered traveling with me before deciding against it. We both knew it would be easier for me to slip in and out of the city of Forks without her, and she trusted me to satisfy my curiosity about her family without giving myself away.

In the nine years since her change, Bella had recovered only a small number of human memories. She felt some curiosity toward the people she'd known, but nothing more. In contrast, I felt drawn to Charlie Swan and Renee Dwyer. Perhaps because my own parents had died I had been left behind, I identified with the family Bella had been forced to abandon. I wanted to know—hoped, really—that their lives continued moving forward, and that they coped well with their loss.

I called Charlie regularly during the first year following Bella's disappearance. We spoke only for a few minutes each time, long enough for him to tell me there had been no movement on Bella's case and to assure me that they hadn't give up. I let him comfort me, knowing that he was soothed by his own words. Knowing that Charlie expected me to act as a typical young man, I gradually allowed him to believe that I was moving on, as humans always do. I let the calls taper off in favor of sporadic emails and the occasional card through the postal service. I watched his data footprints, as well as Renee and Phil Dwyer's, and that of the Quileute boy called Jacob, analyzing the data they generated and accumulated as they moved through life.

Officially, Bella Swan's case was closed. The evidence in the case was somewhat inconclusive, but compelling. Bella was seen driving the Chevy truck seconds before it hit the water and none of the many witnesses at the scene that afternoon could place her anywhere but behind the wheel. The Chevy had gone into the open water just beyond the confines of the marina during high tide, when the currents were strong. Many of her belongings were found by divers, and the temperature of the water at that time of year meant that Bella would have succumbed to exposure rapidly. Though a body was never recovered, it was generally accepted that Bella Swan had drowned.

The humans grieved; sometimes struggling with the intensity of their loss as they sought ways to fill the hole Bella's vanishing had left. Renee and Phil Dwyer separated briefly when their marriage faltered. Jacob Black had left La Push for two years to stay with friends in Northern California while attending community college. Charlie Swan had immersed himself in his work, spending untold
hours searching for signs that his daughter had either run away or been forced to leave against her will.

With time, Bella's friends and family persevered. They worked and played, and found and lost love. Renee and Phil reconciled, Jacob returned to Washington to open a body repair shop in Port Angeles, and Charlie learned how to let his daughter go. Every fall, they honored the tradition they'd begun that first year, and gathered in Forks to celebrate Bella's life. I sent a card to Charlie's house every year and when it was convenient, I made the trip to watch and listen to the humans from afar.

Now, as I pulled into the end of the long drive leading to the family's latest house, a flash of color caught my eye. In the next moment, I'd parked and was out of the car, sprinting into the woods on the trail of a sweet scent that I knew very well.

An impish grin spread over my lips as I chased after Bella, following easily as she darted around the tree trunks. With a short burst of speed, I was beside her and laughing when she pouted; after her newborn year, Bella's running speed had lessened, a development she was still lamenting. I ran a little faster, egging her on, and a laugh bubbled out of her as we hurtled over the terrain. As we approached a gorge, I dropped back enough to let Bella soar over the distance between the banks first before following close behind. I laughed as I landed on the other side, and then headed northeast, cutting my speed enough to allow Bella to catch up.

The crash of rushing water filled my ears as we ran along the riverbank. The sound increased steadily to a roar as I slowed, coming to a stop at the edge of a waterfall. White water thundered over the edge into a steep ravine, the impact at the bottom sending a fine mist pluming into the air. When Bella appeared at my side Bella moment later, however, I saw nothing else. Her hair was pulled back in a loose braid, setting off her wide, golden eyes. She smiled, her nose crinkling a little with delight, and I let my eyes move boldly over her lithe body, taking in her simple garnet red top and jeans, and the heavy, practical boots she still favored. Every atom of my body hummed with arousal.

Rather than throwing myself at her, I reached out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear with a grin. "Hey."

"Hey." Bella's answering smile was wide as she looked at me, and the joy that lit her beautiful face filled me with happiness.

The next moment, she was in my arms. I swept her close, closing my eyes as she wound her arms around my neck. The solitary days I'd spend during previous fortnight fell away as I held her, and Bella sighed softly.

"Welcome back, Edward."

"Thank you," I murmured. "It's nice to be back."

Bella smiled against my neck, though her voice was somewhat forlorn when she spoke. "I'm glad you're home. I missed you."

Pulling back, I looked down at her, my chest aching when I saw the emotion in her eyes. "I missed you too, sweetheart."

Without another word, Bella raised up on her toes to close the short distance between our lips. I leaned in, pulling her lower lip between mine, grazing the plump flesh with my teeth. She let out a soft hum, twining her arms tighter around my neck, and the corners of my lips turned up when her tongue darted out to run over my top lip. I moved my hands to frame her face, moving her head slightly as our mouths opened against each other. A low groan rumbled through my chest.
That sound triggered something in Bella, spurring her hold on even more tightly as she began to move her hands. Her touch slid over my shoulders, then moved to run down the length of my back, slipping under the hem of my shirt. I let my hands explore, too, skimming around Bella's waist, caressing her smooth belly beneath her top. She grew still against me as my hands traveled up, teasing the skin on her ribs before cupping her breasts. She inhaled sharply when my thumbs slowly swirled over her nipples, and let out a small moan when I pulled away only to press my mouth against her neck.

"Feels so good," she whispered, while I lapped at her throat with my tongue.

 Abruptly, she pulled back, reaching for my wrists with her hands and laughing when I grumbled.

 "Bella," I said warningly, narrowing my eyes at her when she chuckled. "I want—"

 "Yes, I know what you want," she replied with a wink, "and you can just hang on a little longer, Edward. Come on; let's at least make an effort to avoid any prying Cullen eyes."

 Bella drew me away from edge of the waterfall, into the deeper gloom where the trees were thick. She paused, then knelt on the moss and gave me a wicked grin before jerking me down by my wrists. I was laughing as we fell back together but my mirth turned to a hum of pleasure when our mouths met again.

 Bella's fingers moved over the buttons of my shirt as our kisses grew more heated. I tugged at her clothes ineffectually, and she laughed against my lips when I made an impatient noise of frustration.

 "Help me," I begged her. "Your clothes are always so complicated."

 "Edward, I'm wearing a sweater and jeans!" she protested before pushing me away to pull the sweater over her head.

 I snorted, leaning back onto my knees to finish taking off my shirt and then started in on my shoes and jeans. "Not my fault I can never get them off," I said, biting my lip at the sight of her pale, smooth flesh coming into view. Neither of us spoke until after all of our clothes were scattered over the forest floor.

 "It feels like longer than two weeks that you've been gone." Bella's voice was soft and raspy as she lay back, and I froze at the raw emotion in her next words. "I ... I hate it when you're gone."

 "I'm sorry," I said sincerely, bending again to lay myself over her body. "I never meant to hurt you by going, Bella."

 She was nodding even before I'd finished speaking. Reaching to cup my face with one hand, she slid the fingers of the other hand into the hair at the nape of my neck. "You don't have to apologize; I know you didn't mean anything by it. I'm glad you can go and learn the things you want to know. I'm also really glad to have you home again."

 Our kisses were gentle at first, interrupted now and then with murmured words of love and longing. Bella's hiss was loud in the hush of the woods. My desire bloomed, expanding from my belly outward when Bella canted her hips up into me. Our hands never stopped moving, fingers whispering and pressing over skin, always drawing one another closer. I was hard, so hard, and my breath stuttered when Bella reached down and took me in hand.

 "God," I groaned loudly, pressing my forehead against her chest, desperately fighting for control
over the jolts of pleasure shooting through me.

"I know," Bella murmured breathlessly, "I need you, love."

I raised my head and shifted this time to press our foreheads together, locking eyes with the girl beneath me. I held my breath as she guided me inside her, and shuddered when her eyes widened and her mouth fell open in a long gasp.

"Edward."

Bella's tortured whisper broke the spell. I rolled my hips, sinking deep inside her and grunting as her eyes fell shut. Bella moved her hips to meet mine when I thrust a second time, throwing her head back, exposing her long, white neck with a strangled cry.

"You're beautiful," I told her, my voice tight with the effort to stay in control just a little longer, though I felt it slip when her eyes opened, flashing with fire and need.

"So are you," she replied, running her hands over my body, drawing a gasp when she plucked at my nipple, and a moan when she squeezed the swell of my ass.

"Christ, Bella."

I twisted my hips as I pumped inside her, knowing how much she loved it, and watched her face go slack with pleasure. Bella moaned loudly when I reached to slip two fingers into her mouth. She curled her tongue around them and she sucked hard, and I muttered a curse when she wrapped her legs around my waist, pushing into my skin with her heels, urging me on.

She cried out suddenly, surprising us both. Her body stiffened as she fell, pulsing around me while I continued moving, I steadied her as best I could, holding her as she slowly floated back to earth, my breaths and thrusts growing erratic. She looked at me with focused eyes as I began to soar, my body straining to fly higher and higher until I felt myself fall away. Trembling with the intensity of the sensations I felt, I buried my face in Bella's neck, groaning helplessly when my limbs gave way and I fell against her.

"I love you," she whispered, and kissed me when I told her the same.

Bella held me for a long time while our limbs tangled around each other. She kissed me hungrily when I pulled her on top of me, and reached between my legs with a wicked smile and chuckle. Her laughter stopped when I slipped my fingers inside her, and she let loose a long sighing groan that sounded like my name.

aDc

The sun was low in the sky when the keen edge of our hunger for one another had finally eased. We lay, side by side on the moss, talking as our hands wandered lazily, now and then stopping to press our lips together, reminding ourselves that our short separation was ended.

"How are they?" Bella asked, one finger curling around a lock of my hair. I didn't need to ask who she meant.

"They seem really well," I replied, "more so this year than any before."

"Is Charlie still dating ...?" Bella bit her lip against a smile as she trailed off; she found the idea of gruff Charlie Swan dating inexplicably amusing.
"Still dating Sue Clearwater, yes." After Harry Clearwater's sudden death five years earlier, Charlie had pitched in with the Quileute tribe to help Sue and her children through their mourning. Charlie and Sue's relationship had matured over the years that followed, particularly when Charlie stepped in as a father figure of sorts to Leah and Seth. No one seemed surprised when the bond between Charlie and Sue became romantic.

"I think they may get married sometime fairly soon," I continued, grinning when Bella's eyes widened. "I overheard Charlie thinking about engagement rings."

"You're terrible," Bella said with a sniff, though there was a smile in her voice. "And Renee and Phil?"

"They seemed okay, too. It sounded as though Phil was being transferred to the Phoenix area in Arizona. They both seemed fairly excited about it."

"Hmmmm, that's nice," Bella mused. "Good that Phoenix is a warm, dry place, too. I think Renee has a hard time with rain and snow ... she's not a big fan of anything cold or wet."

"Probably one of the many reasons she left Forks."

Bella smiled at my obvious attempt to soften the events that had led up to her parents' divorce so many years ago.

"Thank you, but you don't have to say that," she murmured. "I don't remember any of it anyway. Besides, I'm more interested in what's going on with Jacob."

"He and Leah are about to welcome their second child," I told her, grinning when she gave a little squeal of delight. Some of the clearest memories Bella had recovered were of her old friend—next to me, Jacob was the person that Bella remembered best. "Their little boy is already two and everyone seemed really excited about the new addition."

It was fully dark before Bella and I sat up to find our clothes. We felt a different kind of hunger then, and were both eager to hunt. We knew, too, that it was only a matter of time before the others came looking for us; that they had left us alone all afternoon impressed us both. While we dressed, I noticed that Bella had grown quiet, and that her eyes were downcast as she pulled on her boots.

"They're not still looking for me, are they?" she asked suddenly. Her face was sad when she looked at me. "From what you've told me Charlie and Renee seem happy ... do you think they've let go?"

I gave her a smile as I finished tying my shoe and then stood, holding my hand out to help her to her feet. "Yes, I do. Charlie still looks in the missing persons databases now and again, and I know that he and Renee wonder about what happened to you and why you were never found. They've made peace with not knowing, though ... or they're getting to that point."

Bella nodded, a smile ghosting across her face as we began walking back toward the house. She was quiet for a while longer before her soft voice reached out to me in the dark again.

"I'm glad. I just don't remember them enough to feel as though they should miss me, if that makes any sense."

My chest felt heavy at her words. "I understand, but you shouldn't feel that way, sweetheart. Your parents remember you, and their memories are happy ones. They'll always love you, and I don't think anyone would want to take that from them."

"No, you're right," she agreed, "they know what they need better than I do at this point. I wondered
though ..."

"Wondered what?" I asked when she trailed off.

Bella stopped to gaze at me, her face illuminated by the tiny shafts of moonlight filtering through the canopy of trees overhead. "I think I'd like to go with you next year," she said, "to Forks, I mean, when you go back for the memorial. I'm ready to see them for myself. And it's too hard to be away from you, Edward."

I kissed her, smiling against her lips when she hummed contentedly. "I'd love that."

~Fin~

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it.

Eek, done! :)

I don't really have anything to say but thank you, as always, for reading and your many, many supportive thoughts and words. So many of you have been with this story from the beginning and I am just blown away that you stuck it out. I hug you! Thanks too, to my former co-writer, transitory07, for coming up with the original story idea.

The collaboration that Discordia81 and I submitted for the LDA Contest, Show Me Something More, won 1st Place in the Public Vote as well as Judges' Choice. Whut! Link if you're looking for something a little different: http://www.fanfiction.net/s/9276046/2/Show-Me-Something-More


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