I Live

by GeezerWench

Summary

Rebelling against Edward's crushing protectiveness, Bella raced for La Push. Goal in sight, she crashed, shattering her truck and her body. Jasper, discovering Bella gravely injured and bleeding profusely, pulled her from the wreckage. Fighting the lust for her blood was only the first battle. Violence, language, adult themes. 2014 Fandom Choice Award Best Bella, Vampire Category: 2nd Place! 2014 Fanfic-n-tastic Awards Best Vampire Coven: 2nd Place, Best Kiss: 3rd Place

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Notes

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Chapter 1: I Flee

*Bella*

The key? Snap decisions and speed!

Now, if only my truck would cooperate.

In the speed-challenged old iron behemoth, Bella attempted to race away from Newton's Outfitters as quickly as she could to reach La Push. Of course, race was a relative term, considering the age of the faded old beast. It was a tank, and it moved like one, but she loved it anyway.

She'd been scheduled to work until mid-afternoon, but right after she arrived, Mrs. Newton had said Bella wasn't needed.

Of course.

What was I supposed to do now?
Working at Newton's was as good a way as any to pass the time until Edward came home from his hunting trip. It was better than sitting around the Cullens' house, waiting for Alice to get her claws on her.

*I mean ... make-up brushes.*

On her way back out of the sporting goods store, Mrs. Newton had asked if Bella would take a stack of flyers that had been taking up room on the front counter out to the recycle bin. The flyers were printed on glowing neon sheets of paper with bold black letters proclaiming, "Save the Olympic Wolf." A woodcut illustration of a wolf howling mournfully at the moon made Bella think of her friend Jake and how much she missed him. She decided right then and there to ignore Edward's irrational demands and go see him. She flew to the truck, threw the stack of flyers into the cab, and scrambled in.

That was how you got around Alice's visions! Snap decisions and speed! She'd made the decision. The rest was up to the truck.

Naturally, it was raining; it *was* Forks. But that didn't make her apply her customary caution, or "Drive like a little ol' blue-haired grandma," as Jake usually said. She had to hurry to reach the invisible, but not-so-imaginary, boundary line between the vampires and the werewolves before Alice could catch and stop her.

Drag her back and torture her.

She sighed.

Edward had gone hunting with Carlisle and his adopted brothers for their Guys' Weekend, leaving Alice in charge to babysit.

*Babysit me! Argh!*

Bella thumped the steering wheel with her fist in frustration.

Edward's stifling over-protectiveness had really been getting on her nerves. And to *forbid* her to see
Jake? *Forbid* her?

Just because Jake was a potentially lethal young werewolf, it didn't mean he wasn't her friend anymore. Jake had been there for her when Edward dumped her eight months before. He'd been her best and closest friend.

Edward had tossed her aside—leaving her alone in the forest behind her father's little white house—after cautioning her against ever going into the forest by herself. She had been informed she wasn't good for him, and he didn't want her. He had become tired of pretending to be something he wasn't.

He couldn't have been more clear.

All that after he'd promised he would never leave.

When Edward left, ripping his entire family away, Jacob was the one who had put all of Bella's shattered pieces back together—except for the few shards that had still been missing. He had helped her so much. He hadn't abandoned her like the Cullens. She couldn't just abandon him and never see him again.

It wasn't just Jacob. She wasn't sure why she hadn't noticed sooner. Bella had never been a social butterfly, but had she seen *anyone* without Edward or Alice lurking nearby?

Bella missed Angela, and they hadn't had a Girl's Night in ages. With Edward and Alice always hovering, the weak little humans were too intimidated to even ask.

What she once thought of as *attentive* had become so controlling.

Edward just didn't understand. He wouldn't listen.

It seemed he never listened to anything she tried to tell him.

Then to practically hold her prisoner!
The steering wheel took the brunt of her anger again.

Since Bella had been scheduled to work and should have been safe there, Alice had stopped by the house to let Bella know she had decided to go hunting. She said she wouldn't be far away while Bella was at work and not to try "anything funny."

Bella was surprised Alice hadn't camped out in the woods behind the store to guard her.

*Cue another eye roll.*

Alice's plans included a "sleep-over" for later that night, even though none of them ever slept, and Bella just knew it would be another stimulating night of "Bella: Fashionista Wonderklutz." Why did she continue to let Alice dress her in those ... those clothes? One skirt probably cost more than what she made at Newton's in two months!

Okay ... six months.

Maybe Bella could get her a My Size Barbie for Christmas. They were nearly the same size. They could trade outfits.

Let's not forget the ever-popular paint by numbers.

*On my face.*

Well, it seemed to make her happy. Alice couldn't remember anything of her human life before she was changed into a vampire. She got to play human vicariously through Bella.

It was all a ploy so Alice could keep Bella within reach and protected while Edward was away. Sometimes Bella thought Edward did it more for Alice's benefit because they both knew she didn't like it.

So why *did* she keep doing it? What's happened to her? Why did she allow it? Was it because she had always taken care of her mother? Renee was like a butterfly, flitting from one hobby to the next; never settling for very long in any one place. Bella was the one that always made sure the bills were
paid on time and there were groceries in the fridge.

Sometimes she was surprised Renee had been able to keep her job as a kindergarten teacher for so long. But that was one part of her life she had always appeared to be on top of. It seemed keeping the little ones interested and enthused was her gift. In many ways, she was so like them, and they loved her.

Had Bella given in to Edward and Alice because a part of her wanted to be taken care of? It had become so oppressive. And she had let them!

Bella wasn't even really sure how it had all happened. It snowballed until she had no control over her own life at all.

All for her "safety and protection," Edward had said.

Protection? From Jake? Jake would never hurt her.

The last time she had tried to see Jake, she'd taken too long to decide, and Alice had ratted her out. Edward then had time to run back from his hunt and remove some part from the engine of Bella's truck so it wouldn't start.

She had been so angry; she practically had steam coming out of her ears.

It was right after that when Edward clamped down even more for her safety. He and Alice followed her everywhere. If one wasn't around, the other was. Bella was only allowed to see certain people and had to stay away from others.

She wasn't permitted to go to La Push because Edward's family couldn't cross the line into the wolves' territory without starting a war with them. But who said they had to go with her? Had they been invited?

It was a wonder they didn't follow her into any bathroom that had a window to prevent her escape.

She could almost understand their problem with Jacob, his being a werewolf and their mortal enemy
and all, but they had even kept Jasper away from her and he was one of them! Well, he had tried to take a bite out of her on her last birthday, but she had never blamed him for that. She'd cut her finger and started to bleed.

Everything would have been all right. Even though Jasper's eyes had turned black, it would have been okay. She'd seen him hold his breath and take a step back. She wasn't sure why, but then Edward had growled and thrown her into the table with the cake and glass plates.

Nothing shattered quite like lead crystal and quite a few of those razor-sharp slivers had been embedded in her arm.

It led to nice fresh blood pouring out of her. That was when six other vampires' pretty golden eyes turned to black. Jasper was an empath in a room full of vampires who had instantly craved dinner. He'd been bombarded with it from every side.

Bella wasn't really surprised when he snarled and pounced.

As fast as Jasper was, Carlisle had him, but he broke away. Emmett managed to grab him, and then it took both he and Rosalie to drag him away.

Bella had forgiven him immediately because it hadn't been his fault! She never blamed him, and Edward knew that!

In fact, if anyone had given it a moment's thought, it was Edward's fault for over-reacting.

Again.

If he hadn't thrown her into that table ...

It was infuriating!

So why had he shoved her away like that?
Bella pleaded with the truck to go faster. Alice had probably seen the decision and called Edward by that time. Maybe he wouldn't get cell reception wherever they went.

She wished it would stop raining for a few minutes until she got to the Reservation.

She had to have been near the boundary line. They all knew exactly where it was, but that stretch of road looked all the same; pavement, gravel shoulder, and grey guard rail. Grassy embankment and forest. Green, green, green.

One would think they'd put some kind of sign or marker out there. Maybe roll a boulder over to the side of the road or something.

Distracted by her angry, racing thoughts, she stared out at the monotonous green, until something flashed across her narrowed field of view.

Bella jerked the wheel to the right. The tires dropped off the edge of the pavement and plowed through the gravel. She jammed her foot down on the brakes, but the road was wet and the truck started to slide to the side. It hit the guard rail and flipped right over.

The truck rolled down the embankment. Her jacket, backpack, and the neon-bright fliers, tumbled around the inside of the cab like the spin cycle on the washer.

The ancient seatbelt snapped, and she was launched from the seat, catching her legs on the steering wheel. When the truck bounced and rolled again, Bella was slammed into the passenger side door.

She thought it was odd that she didn't feel any pain. It should have hurt. A lot.

One moment she saw pines spinning in front of her, but with the next bounce of the truck, the windshield resembled an intricate mosaic. Tiny, clear glass squares, rectangles and octagons appeared.

All motion slowed. She'd seen that before. Considering her penchant for accidents and near death experiences, she'd experienced it all too often.
Bella watched, fascinated, as the center of the clear, flat safety glass mosaic buckled. When it exploded, pretty, glittering glass tiles flew in every direction.

So much for fifty year old safety glass. She was sure the pieces had hit her, but she hadn't felt it. She hadn't seen it either because her eyes snapped shut.

The truck bounced again. Her eyes popped open and she saw red.

Red?

The rusty-salty scent of it filled her nose. Blood. Her blood.

The pebbled, fractured glass that remained around the edge of the windshield was glazed in it. More was splattered across the dashboard. How could there have been so much blood? Was there that much blood in a human body?

The world spun again; grey sky flipping to green grass, and Bella was hurled back toward the steering wheel. She struck it with the side of her chest and her useless arms flapped past her like flags in a storm.

Pain erupted through her entire body and a scream was torn from her throat. The battered truck flipped again and slammed into something solid. She was flung back to the passenger side, her body crunching against the door.

The window shattered as the door and the corner of the roof caved in around a broad tree trunk.

The truck shuddered and began to tip slowly toward the left. Through the broken window, Bella saw the world tilt again. The truck creaked and groaned as it fell away from the trees and dropped heavily to its tires.

Her body flopped across the bench seat, her head landing in the driver's seat. Blood dripped from the steering wheel. Broken glass, caught in all the sticky crimson, dotted the dashboard like sugar crystals on a cake.
Through the gaping hole where the windshield used to be, Bella saw trees to the right and sky to the left.

She felt what she thought was more blood trickling across her forehead.

-oOoOo-

Bella awoke to pounding agony and searing heat spreading across her neck and chest.

She was reasonably sure she had opened her eyes, but everything was black.

Heat? Was there a fire?

The gasoline fumes were heavy in the air. She knew she had to get out of there and get to a phone.

Why hadn't she ever gotten a cell phone?

She tried to move her arms and, impossibly, even more pain shot through her. Nausea twisted her stomach and she just knew she was going to throw up.

-oOoOo-

If she had vomited, she missed it because she must have passed out again.

Why did I wake up?

She thought her eyes were open again. At least light and dark grey out-of-focus blobs were an improvement over nothingness.
There was a hammering, screaming pain in her head and burning in her neck. There must have been a fire!

Was that rain?

Would the rain put out the fire?

A darker grey, human-shaped shadow loomed above her. Was it a man?

"I will help you, Bella."

Oh, thank God!

She was so grateful, but there was too much blood, and it hurt so bad. Her gratitude descended into hopelessness. She knew he was too late to save her from the fire.

With that thought, the flames rose up and closed over her, enclosing her in a hissing, scorching cocoon. She sank into its blistering threads.

-oOoOo-

The pain was jarring, jolting-a snapping, crackling whip cutting through and laying open her flesh. At each blazing slice, Bella twitched and flinched. Her skin was sizzling, her nerves were frying.

But when she heard his voice, it all receded, sliding almost into the background.

"Remember Bella."

Bella?
Her name was Bella!

He said she had to remember her mother.

She remembered a woman with blonde hair.

Mom.

Mom had blond hair and blue eyes.

Remember her father? Who ...?

He had brown hair and eyes. She knew she had her father's eyes.

Charlie.

Where was Charlie?

_He_ said to remember Charlie and Renee.

Where were they? Who was taking care of Charlie? Was he at home?

Home was a little, white, two-story house, and her room was there.

She parked her truck out in the street in front of the house.

The truck! It was red. Rusty red. Orange and red like...
Like Arizona? Florida? Not Florida. Florida was hot and wet and Renee was there.

Renee. Her goofy, happy mother with blue eyes. And Phil. He played baseball, and he was with Renee in Florida.

Not Arizona? Bella had lived in Arizona. She had been there before she moved to ... Forks?

Arizona was hot and dry with burning sun and hot, hot, hot and red eyes, and burning and pain. Red eyes like glowing hot coals and ...

She dropped into the red-hot coals.

-0OoOo-

What did he say?

Forks High.

She was a senior and was going to graduate with ...

With ... someone.

Edward and Alice! Ben, Angela, and Jessica, and Mike and...

She had worked at Newton's Outfitters with Mike Newton. Edward hadn't wanted her to work there, but she had anyway.

Edward with gold eyes. Alice had gold eyes.
They were ... vampires?

They'd all had golden eyes. Emmett. Carlisle and Esme. Rosalie and Jasper. Sometimes their eyes were black. Bella remembered Jasper's black eyes. He was leaping ...

... Leaping at her because she had been bleeding! But it wasn't his fault! They all had black eyes then. She remembered Jasper's black eyes, and she wasn't afraid. But then ...

Edward had left. He took her into the green, wet forest and left her there. She wasn't good enough for him. He didn't want her. They all left her and she was so alone. But then Jake helped. Warm Jake-hot like the sun. Blazing hot like the sun.

Raging heat flared up and rippled around her. There were white-hot ribbons coiling around every cell, every organ; curling and twisting around her legs, her arms, her hands ...

A cool touch on her hand.

Someone was holding her hand.

It wasn't burned to ash and gone?

"I will help you, Bella."

He was holding her hand. He was cool and smelled like leather and ...

Leather. Like when Renee made her go horseback riding, and she couldn't even throw her leg over to mount. The instructor had helped by pushing her leg over the saddle.

He was helping her. He was holding her hand and talking to her. She needed for him to keep talking.

Edward had needed her once. Bella and Alice had helped him. Or was it that Alice needed Bella to help her save Edward? To keep Edward out of the sun in Volterra so they wouldn't kill him. The Volturi vampires had red eyes. Red, blazing eyes ...
Help me fight the fire!

He was helping her fight the flames with his cool touch.

Then she had been alone and couldn't fight the vampires by herself.

How could I?

Edward had left her to fight the vampires alone. Jake helped. Jake, the ...

Werewolf?

The wolves had caught the vampire with the black hair. They chased the other one with the red hair. But she kept coming back. She had hair like red flames ...

You left me, Edward! You left me!

She had loved him and he left her to face the red-eyed vampires alone—because she hadn't been enough for him. He hadn't cared if the vampires came back.

But Edward had come back, and said he loved her, but did he? Bella hadn't been good enough and Edward came back and tried to force her into a mold of his design. For her own good, he'd said.

Or to make her good enough for him?

He broke the truck so she couldn't see Jake, and he followed and hovered and clung, and told her where she could go and who she could see. He made Alice her babysitter. She watched, and followed, and kept her from ...

Edward had lied and Alice helped him. He had bribed Alice to assist him! Bella had been so so mad. She was furious!
I am furious.

A blade of hot fury pierced her chest, cracking it open.

A cool hand on her arm pushed back the fury, the anger, and the fire.

It was him. He was the one that found her. He smelled like leather and ... there was a spice ... but she couldn't remember what it was.

He was helping her fight the fire, and though she wanted to give up, she would fight it for him.

What did he say?

Who did this? What happened? Bella didn't remember, but she had to try-for him. He was helping to push the flames away, so she fought with everything she had.

She remembered battling against Edward and Alice. Bella had been at Newton's and fought to leave before they could see and stop her from visiting Jake again.

Edward had no right to keep her from Jacob.

She'd left Newton's and drove to the Reservation.

She had been driving her truck through the rain as fast as she could make it go. She had almost made it to the boundary line.

That stupid line between the vampires and the wolves.

Something ran across the road and she swerved so she wouldn't hit it.
Something ... across the road ...

She hadn't hit whatever it was, but the truck slid off the pavement and rolled down the bank. The seatbelt ripped. Her legs caught on the steering wheel and they snapped. Just like when red-eyed James broke her leg.

The nomad vampires-James, Victoria and Laurent. James had decided to hunt Bella when Edward tried to protect her. Edward couldn't catch James, so Jasper and Alice took her to Phoenix.

James had gone to Phoenix and tricked Bella into thinking he had her mother. He lured her to the old ballet studio where she had taken lessons as a small child.

But Renee wasn't there-only James.

The pepper spray Charlie had given her hadn't worked.

He easily caught her and threw her into the mirrored wall. He stomped on her leg and broke it just before he bit her arm. The venom was like acid. It was burning ...

Jasper and Emmett killed James ...

Edward had sucked out the venom so Bella wouldn't change into a vampire like him. She should have realized then he had never really wanted her-had lied when he said he wanted her forever.

Jasper had urged them to go after the red-haired vampire, Victoria. But Edward said no. Edward always said no.

The truck had rolled and pain had exploded in her head and chest, arms and legs, and there was blood everywhere. So much more blood than in Phoenix.

Her beloved tank of a truck hadn't saved her.

It must have caught fire because she woke up and was burning.
Then the cool rain.

Wasn't it always raining in Forks? Why hadn't the rain put out the fire?

Then he was there.

He said he would help, but why didn't he put out the fire? Maybe he couldn't, but he helped her fight it.

The fire was searing acid like the venom ...

... Like the venom from a vampire.

Bella's heart had begun hammering against inside her chest, every beat another blast of agony. Was it venom? That ... that fire ... that ... torture she had been struggling against ... that he had been helping her to fight. Was it venom? Was she changing into a vampire? Or was she going to die?

He was still with her. She felt his hands around hers.

"It's nearly over, Darlin'. I'm here. It's almost over. I'm here."

He stayed. He didn't leave her. He stayed through the fire and ...

The fire stopped. The burning stopped.

Bella's heart stopped.
Chapter End Notes

Credits:

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and CapriciousC, th13enth, LoveLeVampyre, EdwardsMate4ever, and 4mejasper of Project Team Beta. They kicked my ass. Deservedly so
Chapter Notes

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Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Chapter 2, I Run

*Jasper*

He ran.

He was running as if his life—no, as if her life—depended on it. He wasn’t near enough to the house yet for Edward to hear his mental shouts, if he was even there, and so he ran faster.

They absolutely could not be seen.

Jasper desperately clutched Bella’s shattered, bleeding body to his own and ran.

“Bella, I will take care of you,” he vowed to her.

He’d seen that level of devastation inflicted on a human body before, and they didn’t survive. Jasper himself had inflicted such devastation. They either became the next meal that would sustain the rest of them, or a few would join as soldiers in the Southern Vampire Wars. In either case, no human had survived.

Bella had to survive.
He ran, leaping over rocks and fallen logs. Dodging trees. He ran.

The blood!

Her life’s blood had been everywhere and on everything and not one surface inside the cab of that truck had been left untouched. It was like someone had taken a can of crimson paint, shot it with a 12 gauge and then threw it, slammed it, splashed it over every square inch inside that truck. Then, just for shits and giggles, tossed Bella in and threw and slammed and kicked it down the embankment and into those trees.

That damn truck looked like it had imploded. How had she not been thrown clear?

How was he not going bat shit crazy with blood lust? Because he couldn’t do that to her.

“I know it hurts, Bella. I know, but I will help you.”

He just ran. He was running so fast, the light rain was beating against them. He couldn’t do anything about it, so it didn’t matter. It was splashing against, and running across and down and around their bodies, causing Bella’s blood to smear further across his face, and down his neck and arms. It didn’t matter. He felt the bloody rain soaking into his clothes, drenching his skin. Even his feet were getting wet inside his hiking boots. With blood or rain or gasoline? It didn’t matter. He didn’t give a shit.

He forced his senses as far out as they could go. He saw and heard no one. He felt no one.

No one but Bella.

Her emotions—terror, fear, sorrow, pain, anxiety, longing, and more pain—seeped into him and drenched him like the cool rain and her warm blood.

“Bella, I’m here. I’m here, Bella. I won’t leave you. I’m here.”

His enhanced sense of smell did him no damn good. All he could smell was the gasoline and her blood.
Blood and gasoline.

Behind them, moving farther and farther away, a dense black cloud of oily smoke rolled and coiled through the dark grey rainy day. The stinging, bitter odor of the plastics and vinyl, old chipped paint and tires, and all those papers burning away should cover his scent. Bella’s scent.

The scent of the fucking vampire that had gotten there before he did.

Rage flooded him and Bella whimpered. It was the first sound she had made since he’d gathered up her broken body to carry her away from the scene of the crash.

“Bella, I will protect you.”

He fought back the rage. Rage at some other vampire who had gotten there first and who had bitten her!

He bit her and left her?

Burying it all, he forced out calm and relief. Relief that she had not been taken. Relief he had found her still alive.

“Bella, I’ve got you. I’m here. I’ll take care of you.”

Bella, Bella, Bella! It was the middle of the day! Did she know how difficult it was to cover up something like that in the middle of the day!?!?

The rain was a curse and a blessing. If only it would help ease the fire of the change. He remembered the burn. Nothing eased that.

The rain would dilute, possibly wash away, Jasper’s scent from the scene of the crash. It would help to cover their trail; the faint one left as he carried Bella away.
It pissed him off that it would also dilute the scent of that other goddamned vampire.

Jasper wanted to find him. He *needed* to find that son of a bitch.

He ran.

He’d been hunting. It was unknown *why* he’d gone in the direction of the Quileute Reservation instead of with Alice, but he had. She had never wanted him too close to her when she hunted anyway.

He was supposed to go with Edward, Emmett and Carlisle, but Edward had been … annoying, nearly as badly as he’d been annoying Bella, so Jasper stayed back with Alice. She’d gone north; he’d gone west. After taking down a deer, he caught and had just finished up with a bobcat, when he heard the crash.

Of course, he was curious. At the very least, he could call 9-1-1 and disappear into the trees again.

He ran in the direction of the crash, and when he saw what was left of Bella’s truck he froze, his mind going blank.

Bella couldn’t have been there. Wasn’t she supposed to be at work? How could her truck be there?

He didn’t feel anyone in the truck. Edward had never been able to read Bella’s mind, but he had always been able to feel her emotions. Such strong emotions had come from that girl! If she had been driving the truck, was she …?

He flew to her truck and saw the blood; it was everywhere. The scent of it caused a slight burn of thirst in his throat, but then he saw Bella covered in it. Even her long brown hair was stained dark red.

Why didn’t he feel her? The only thought in his mind was, “She *can’t* be dead!”

She was alive! A faint heartbeat. She was breathing. Barely, but she was breathing. She was unconscious.
How the hell had she lived through that? Her truck sure as hell didn’t.

Thank Christ she was still alive.

Because of the nearly overwhelming scent of her blood and the gasoline fumes, he hadn’t even realized that another vampire had been there before him. He’d seen her and knew she wasn’t going to live through it. He hadn’t thought she would survive until an ambulance arrived.

As Jasper began to pull her from the twisted, crumpled mass of metal and broken glass, he tried to decide if he was strong enough to change her without draining the last of any blood that might be left in her body. It was what she had wanted. He never did understand how Edward could refuse her.

Then he saw the bite on her neck.

He was stunned into complete stillness for the second time in less than five minutes.

That shit just didn’t happen.

It never even entered his mind that another vampire had been there. If he hadn’t seen the bite, would he have known?

He shook his head to clear it. He had to think! Had to fix it. Get her out of there and cover up the crash.

_Suck it up, soldier! You gotta take care of this!_

At that point, he could just make out the indistinct scent of another vampire. Believing it was a male, he couldn’t detect enough of his scent to tell if he had ever run across him before or not.

Some fucking male had been there. Because of the rain, and the blood, and the gasoline, he had almost missed it.
I almost fucking missed it!

Scanning the area, he decided on a likely spot where Bella’s body would have landed if she had been thrown from the truck. He placed her gently on the ground, hidden just inside the line of trees. Her pain ripped through him as he laid her down, and he nearly dropped to the ground beside her. She must have regained consciousness, because her pain and fear pierced his skull. He slapped his hands to either side of his head.

He gritted his teeth and forced himself to stand up. She was starting the change, of course! Along with all of her broken bones, the trauma to her head and face, and every part of her body, there was the burn of the venom! If there wasn’t enough venom in her, it would last even longer. The longest he’d ever seen was seven days. Seven days of utter misery, torment, and burning hell.

Whoever that bastard was, he hadn’t had time to get much venom into her before Jasper showed up.

Dread of her having to endure this fiery hell for that length of time convinced him.

He dropped to his knees beside her. “I will help you, Bella,” he murmured, breathing across her ear.

Kneeling on the wet ground next to her left side, he bent over her, bracing his left hand on the ground just past her shoulder. He carefully placed his other hand against the left side of her face and neck. The venom welled up in his mouth as he leaned across her body and positioned his teeth over the existing marks at her jugular. His teeth sliced through her yielding skin and her blood flooded his mouth. It was … ambrosial. Manna from Heaven. Human blood had always been so much more satisfying than animal blood, temporarily quenching that insatiable craving until the burning thirst built up again and …

But Bella’s blood! The scent, the taste was intoxicating. Her blood filled his mouth, coated his tongue, and he moaned with desire, hunger … the need to take more. It had been so long!

If she was his Singer, how had Edward resisted?

An errant gloating thought rippled through his mind. Jasper had tasted the pure essence of Bella that had enticed, seduced, enthralled, Edward so completely. Jasper had this from her, and he never would.
He swallowed that mouthful and pulled his lips from her throat. Groaning, his entire body shuddered in blissful pleasure.

Despite the exhilarating euphoria of the taste of her blood, the realization that he wanted her in his life more than he wanted her blood broke through the haze and resonated through his entire being.

Determined, he bent to her throat again and forced his venom into her artery. He pushed in more, and then licked over the bite, sealing it in. *His* venom was filling her veins. It was going to be *his* venom inside her.

Perversely, the … *intimacy* of the act didn’t escape him.

“I will take care of you, Bella.”

He bent to bite each of her wrists, afraid to lift her arms and move the shattered bones.

Turning to each ankle, he saw that one was swelling and purple. He bit down and forced in even more venom. Sealing the bites, he sat back on his heels.

“Bella, *I* will not leave you.”

He considered her femoral arteries, but dismissed that thought immediately. He’d have to rip through her jeans to reach them.

There was no time!

He raced back to her truck.

Jasper found a blood soaked jacket (what wasn’t soaked in her blood?) and her backpack. Flinging the backpack toward her, the contents spilled out and scattered along the ground.

Her wallet! Her license and school ID should be in there. Good.
He took her jacket and shredded it with his teeth and nails. He dragged it along the ground from her truck back toward her, leaving a trail of blood, and dropped it nearby. Pulling off her shoes, he tossed one toward her truck and threw one farther into the forest.

Hikers and campers had reported seeing giant bears in the area. Some had disappeared.

Jasper knew the giant bears were those damn werewolves from the Quileute Reservation, and Bella couldn’t have crashed any closer to the border line if she tried. Those damn wolves and their fucking treaty! Well, if she was going to wreck her damn truck, at least she did it on the correct side of the line.

She must have been on her way to La Push to see Jacob Black and those goddamn wolves. Jasper knew Edward wouldn’t have permitted that. He had been presiding over and controlling every facet of her life the past few months. Was she defying the almighty golden child Edward?

Damn!

It was Jasper’s hope that whoever came upon the scene would think Bella had been thrown from the truck and then dragged away by one of those giant bears.

They were running out of time! Jasper couldn’t believe no one had driven by yet and seen the fresh skid marks on the road. One of the wolves could have been there at any moment.

Alice hadn’t seen that? Why hadn’t she seen Bella’s decision to go to La Push?

He ran back to Bella’s truck. It wasn’t easy, but he set it on fire with his lighter, using some of those neon colored papers that were strewn around inside.

My trusty Zippo. Like they say: there ain’t much that some gasoline and a little flame won’t fix.

What the hell was she doing with all those papers? Flyers? Save the Olympic Wolf? That was fucking ironic.
The gasoline helped. It had been leaking from the tank and dripping from the engine. It was splashed everywhere.

He leapt away from the blaze.

*Shit! A car! The trees should hide us.*

He darted back to Bella. Her pain was increasing. Her terror was growing.

Sometimes being an empath really sucked, but he couldn’t stop, sit on his ass, and whine about it. He had to get away from there. He shrugged off his jacket and laid it beside her. The only way he could think of to carry her and keep her as immobile as possible was to try and curl her into a fetal position and wrap the jacket around her.

“She, I know it hurts. I’ll take care of you. I’m right here.”

Her agony was pounding into him. He fought it, pushing lethargy and reassurance at her.

“She, I’ve got you. I’ve got you. I’m right here.”

Sirens in the distance.

That old piece of shit truck was fully engulfed in flames. The fire was even spreading into the wet grass and leaves by the trees. Those pine trees were really going to light up.

He gathered up her curled, bloodied, battered body, tucking her head under the left side of his jaw, and cradled her to chest.

Then he ran.
Chapter 3, I Explain

Jasper's POV

"Bella, I'm right here. I'll stay with you. I'm right here."

Amazingly, she had barely made a sound as I ran through the forest. I didn't recall anyone else going through this excruciating change and not screaming, and fighting, and clawing to try and get away from it.

I knew I was within Edward's range now, if he was home from hunting with Emmett and Carlisle.

Edward! Edward! Get Carlisle! I'm running in. Bring Carlisle!

"Bella, I will help you. I'm right here."

Edward! Bring Carlisle! I've got Bella. She's been hurt. Bring Carlisle! I've got Bella!

"Bella, we're almost there. I got you. I'm right here."

I could feel their emotions before I could hear them running through the forest. Panic, relief, fear, possessiveness, concern, more panic. Apprehension and protectiveness.

They had brought Emmett.

When I heard them running toward me, I stopped in a small clearing and waited for them to come to me. Edward would be distressed, but how would he react to all the blood? She was his Singer. Her blood called to him like no other. His control had always been admirable; he was nearly as controlled as Carlisle. But there had always been an undercurrent of fear. Had he feared losing control and draining her? Had he feared losing her or losing the blood?

Tickling in the back of my brain, I was still surprised at my own reaction to her and her blood. There
had been that slight burn of thirst in my throat, but after I realized some other male vampire had been there, that burn was gone.

And then, that mouthful of her blood…I shuddered in bliss at just the memory of the taste of it.

There they were. Edward, being faster than Emmett and Carlisle, was the first to burst through the leafy cover. He spotted us in that small clearing and skidded to a stop about fifteen feet away. He froze.

Alarm, shock, disbelief, and horror registered as he took a step toward us, his arms reaching out toward Bella. That's when the scent of her blood reached him. The look of shock on his face twisted, and a snarl ripped from his throat. He dropped into a crouch to spring.

There wasn't anything I could do. I couldn't drop her and tackle Edward. Carrying her broken body, I couldn't run fast enough to get away from him and his blood lust. I had to protect her!

"Emmett! Grab Edward!" I shouted and then, with every bit of strength I could muster, I shoved fear, terror, and panic at him.

"So much blood!" he roared. His hands clenched into fists, his arms jerked up, he stiffened, and dropped to his knees.

That dose should have laid him out.

Emmett shot like a bullet from between the trees and tackled Edward to the ground, shoving him into the leaves and mud. I shut off the emotions I was sending to Edward so I wouldn't incapacitate Emmett.

Before Edward could recover from that emotional onslaught, Emmett wrapped his arms around Edward, pinning down his arms, and flipping onto his back. He then wrapped his legs around Edward's and clamped down. If he wasn't so dangerous to Bella right now, the look of astonishment on Edward's face would have been funny. Emmett rarely got the drop on him.

Carlisle burst through the trees and ran right to Bella and me. He turned to look at Edward, snarling and struggling in Emmett's tight grasp, and looked back at Bella.

He instantly understood what Edward's problem was.

"Emmett! Do you have him?"

"I got him, Carlisle," was Emmett's strained reply. "But send Rosie back here to help. I don't want to have to hurt him."

Edward continued to snarl and snap, fighting and twisting to break free and get to Bella.

I could feel the beginnings of anger from Bella. With all the pain she must be feeling, she was feeling angry? She groaned out loud.

"Bella! I've got you. I'll protect you. Carlisle will help you."

Carlisle snapped back to me. "Quickly, what happened?"

"She crashed in her truck near the werewolves' treaty line. It flipped over the guard rail, rolled down the embankment, and hit the trees. Her seatbelt had broken. She has multiple broken bones, and cuts and lacerations. There must be internal bleeding. There was so much blood! I'm doing everything I
can to lessen her pain and try to keep her calm. And she's changing."

Carlisle’s startled golden eyes flashed to mine. "Come," he directed. "We'll take her to Edward's room since she's most familiar with it."

Carlisle turned and disappeared through the trees. I was right behind him. I kept my grip tight on Bella.

-oOoOo-

Carlisle ran into the house first, speaking urgently to warn the others. "Bella has been in an accident. She is bleeding profusely. Rosalie, Emmett needs you to help restrain Edward. Follow our scents back to them. Esme, Alice — Jasper has Bella. They are both covered with blood. I think you should both go outside. We're going to take Bella up to Edward's room."

I heard gasps of shock from Esme and Alice as they ran through the sliding glass doors and into the backyard.

Carlisle raced ahead of me up the stairs. He darted into his study to get his medical bag then continued on to Edward's room on the third floor. He stripped the golden comforter from the king sized bed, then he pulled loose the top sheet. He tossed them both toward the closet.

"Are you ready, Jasper? I know setting her down on the bed is going to cause her more pain. Can you handle it?"

"Yes."

"I'll help you set her down. Then I'll need to straighten out her limbs. I want to make sure her bones have aligned properly. Why did you wrap her like that?"

"It seemed the best way to get her here. There wasn't time to call one of you to come help."

"You did well, Jasper," Carlisle said as he nodded toward me. "You kept her as immobile as possible? Yes? Good. I'll get up on the bed. I'll put one hand on her back and one at the back of her thighs. You support her pelvis and her shoulders and we'll set her down on the bed together."

Carlisle jumped onto Edward's bed and knelt down in front of me as I moved to the left side of the bed. He put one hand on her back and one beneath her thighs, and looked up at me.

I shot him a look of caution before speaking to Bella.

"Bella. I'm right here. Carlisle and I are going to set you on the bed. I have to put you down so he can examine you. It's going to hurt, but I'll help you. I'll be right here."

I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath and steeled myself against the increase in pain I was expecting to feel from her. I opened my eyes and silently nodded to Carlisle.

I eased her body away from my mine and felt her bloodied clothes sticking to me. They slowly peeled away as we lowered her to the bed. I lowered her pelvis first and slowly, cautiously, eased her shoulders down. It wasn't too bad yet. I felt her pain and distress begin to increase, but it wasn't too bad.

Carlisle removed his hands from under Bella. "I'm going to have to cut away your jacket. It's sticking to her."
Carlisle took scissors from his medical bag and proceeded to cut away my jacket, peeling the ruined material away from her.

"Jasper, I want you to move your arm from under her pelvis so I can try and straighten out her legs. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

I gingerly slid my arm out from under her.

Carlisle grasped each of her legs above her knees and started to push down to straighten them.

The pain! Sheer anguish and misery slammed into me and I jerked away, yanking my other arm from under her shoulders. I shot up straight and my hands flashed to my head, clenching at my hair. Oh God, the pain! Such pain! Burning, and fire, and throbbing agony.

I gasped and stumbled away from the bed. How could anyone stand this? How could anyone possibly live through this? How could Bella…?

Somehow I heard Carlisle calling my name. "Jasper, I'm going to straighten her arms now, and then I'll be finished. Can you hear me? It's almost over."

I groaned and nodded my head. I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe to speak.

Molten hot swords pierced through my skull and forced me back.

And when I thought it couldn't get any fucking worse, it surged. It was a tidal wave of lava, and I was consumed. Oh my fucking God! I heard Bella's shrieks as I collapsed to the floor.

-oOoOo-

The fire ebbed and flowed. It came crashing in like a wave and then receded. When I counted the fourth time it flowed away, I grabbed hold of myself and opened my eyes. I was on the floor? I saw the foot of Edward's bed. Carlisle was bent over the left side. Tending to Bella?

"Fuck me to tears," I croaked. "Carlisle, how long?"

I struggled to sit up as he hurried over to me, relief radiating from him. He dropped to one knee in front of me, grabbed my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

"Are you injured?"

I had to think about it. "No. How long?"

"You were unconscious for half an hour."

"I wasn't unconscious exactly. It was the burn. It was her misery. I was surrounded by it. It was like I was going through the change again."

I pushed him away and quickly stood up. I went to Bella's side and studied her still form. "Someone needs to go back and do a bit of reconnaissance at the crash scene. Listen in, if anyone is still there. I'll send Emmett and Edward. I'm not leaving her."

Carlisle was taken aback for just a moment. "Yes, of course. You're right."

"Emmett, Edward," I called. I knew they would hear me.
"Yeah, Jazz?" Emmett answered from somewhere in the living room.

"I want you to go back to the crash scene on the one-ten near the treaty border. She wrecked on our side of the line. If anyone is still there, listen in to them. See what you can find out. You shouldn't have any trouble finding it. We have to hope they think Bella was thrown from the truck and then dragged away."

I felt a flash of annoyance from Edward. "Jasper! How dare you shout orders and expect us to…"

"Shut it, Edward!" I heard Rosalie hiss. "You know we need to contain this…this…disaster as much as we can. We have to find out what's going on."

I swear I could hear Edward's eyes rolling.

"I'm on it, Jasper. C'mon, Edward." I heard the front door close behind them as they left.

I looked to Carlisle. "What happened?"

Carlisle, startled, blinked and began, "When you dropped to the floor, she was shrieking and screaming. I straightened her arms and finished examining her as quickly as I could. She has quieted since then. She has barely moved. Jasper, I think you need a break. You need to get those clothes off and get a shower. Go outside for some air…"

I was shaking my head. "No. I told her I wouldn't leave her. I won't leave her. I've been through this before. First with my own change, and then through hundreds of others that I changed to be soldiers in Maria's army." It's just that none of those were quite as intense as this one.

I grabbed the chair from Edward's desk and placed it by the side of the bed near Bella's head and dropped into it.

I placed my hand over hers and I felt some relief come from her. Relief knotted up by the ever-present pain and misery.

I looked over my shoulder at Carlisle. "Tell me how you think she is." I turned back to Bella and let my eyes roam purposefully over every bloodied inch of her.

Carlisle studied me for a moment before he began to speak. I could feel his curiosity. "I straightened her legs and arms. Compound fractures in her left leg and left arm. The bones had pierced her skin. Her right ankle was broken. They are healing well. I believe her pelvis was broken along with her sternum and several ribs. They are healing. I believe she must have had severe internal injuries. She had a large gash in her forehead along with the lacerations from the broken glass. I think her jaw was also fractured. All those injuries are healing. I've removed the broken glass from her face, neck, chest and arms."

I looked up at him in alarm. I knew she was horribly injured but…

Jesus H. Christ! She broke everything but her goddamned neck!

"She is healing. You know how Esme died. She had similar injuries. Now you know we just need to wait."

"I know." I took Bella's hand in mine. "Thank you, Carlisle."

I concentrated on Bella, sending her calm, peace, and reassurance. I didn't know if it helped her at all, but I was hopeful.
Carlisle went to the other side of the bed to gaze down at Bella. "I'm going to let her rest for a while. As much as anyone can while going through this. There's been quite enough chaos. How long has it been since you found her?"

Again, I had to think before I answered. "It's been about two and a half hours now. I found her at about 9:30. When I found her I could see that she had swerved and hit the brakes, there were skid marks on the road. The truck rolled down the embankment and crashed into the trees. The truck was destroyed. I don't know why she wasn't thrown out. The seatbelt must have held at first and then broken when the truck was rolling."

I took in a deep breath before continuing. "At first I didn't know if she was there because I couldn't feel her. But then I saw her. I pulled her out of the truck. That's when I saw the bite on her neck. I had to stage the scene. I tried to make it look like she was thrown from the truck and something dragged her off. I heard a car drive by. Gasoline had been leaking from the truck. I set the truck on fire then wrapped Bella in my jacket. I heard sirens. I'm sure we were hidden in the trees. I carried her back here."

I knew I would have to tell them that I bit her to force more venom into her. If I didn't tell them, Edward would eventually hear it in my head. I just couldn't bring myself to confess that part yet.
Chapter 4, I Confess

Jasper's POV

"How do you think she is, Carlisle?" I asked. I held her hand in both of mine as my venom burned through her veins and arteries, transforming her.

She hardly moved. She barely even twitched as the fire raced through her body. I remembered how it burned. Even though it had been over 140 years since I had been changed into a vampire, I remembered. It was my first clear memory of this existence.

Carlisle was bent over Bella as she lay in Edward's bed, gently touching her legs. To straighten her limbs, he had cut open her clothes, but he hadn't tried to remove them yet.

His hands moved delicately over each of her arms. From there, he lightly touched her forehead and moved his fingertips around the curve of her jaw and up around her skull.

He stood up slowly and wiped Bella's blood from his hands on a towel that he had brought in.

"It's been twelve hours since you found her and brought her here." Carlisle tossed the bloodied towel into a trash can then ran his hand through his pale yellow hair. He sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. "As you know, there were multiple breaks in her legs and arms. Her pelvis was broken. Her rib cage was nearly crushed from the impact. Or impacts. I suppose it was fortunate that her seatbelt held initially before it broke, or the damage to her body would have been much worse."

Unfortunately, I could imagine more horrific damage to her body. I had seen worse. I shuddered at the thought, thankful it had not been worse.

Carlisle walked slowly toward the windows to look out into the rainy night and sighed again. "I don't know how she lived through the truck rolling down the bank. I don't know how she survived the
impact with the trees."

He shook his head and turned toward me. I was still holding her hand, as I had been for the last twelve hours, trying to calm her and ease her pain. Reassure her. Physical contact helped me to affect emotions more strongly, but I also felt compelled to maintain physical contact with her.

"Jasper, I just don't know how she survived the crash! To still be alive for some vampire to bite her? Who was there? Who was it? How did he not drain her of the blood that was left in her body? As bloody as she is, as bloody as your clothes are... Since he bit her, why did he not take her?"

At that moment, I felt a wave of extreme anguish, grief, loss, and then guilt from downstairs. Edward. That asshole.

Of course, they could all hear us, and I knew they were all dismayed, saddened, shocked, and struggling with their own emotions, but I couldn't divert my attention away from Bella. I couldn't try and soothe Edward's regret and shame. His grief? His loss? She wasn't dead. Well, she wasn't gone from our lives.

I couldn't try to help any of them. I wouldn't. It was taking nearly all of my attention and focus to send soothing and calming thoughts to Bella and combat the agony I felt coming from her. I was unsure if I was having any effect on her, but I hoped that I was. She had not felt any terror in several hours.

I still couldn't understand why she wasn't screaming, struggling, writhing in pain. So far, it was unlike any change I had ever seen, and I had seen many. Far too many.

"But Carlisle, I heard the crash and ran toward it. I hadn't been that far away. Whoever it was didn't have much time before I got there." I stroked her still warm hand and trailed my fingers up her arm. "How do you think she is? How is she physically? Even though she's covered in blood, I can see that the cuts on her face have healed."

Carlisle, concerned and feeling a bit worried, shook his head slowly again and took a deep breath. "The bones in her legs and arms have healed. Her ribs and sternum have healed. She's breathing well. Her lungs don't sound congested any longer. Even with the immense pain she must be feeling, her heart sounds strong. I knew picking the broken glass out of her face, neck and arms would cause her even more pain, but I had to do it."

With Carlisle's brief description of her injuries and status, I was reminded again of my time in the Confederate Army. When relaying or reporting information, it had to be brief, yet complete. Even if much of the information was redundant.

As he came toward me, I felt pride emanating from him. He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Jasper, I am so proud of you. So proud, and grateful, that you found her and brought her back to us. She means so much to us all." Carlisle's warm feelings of paternal love, his concern for her, and his pride in me, helped me to comfort her.

I held Bella's right hand in my left and ran the fingertips of my right hand down her arm and across the back of her hand. I thought it was helping to soothe her.

"I had to. I couldn't feel her at first and thought she was dead, but then I could hear her heart beating. I could see the blood running down her face. At first, I didn't even realize she had been bitten. All I could smell was her blood, and the gasoline leaking out of her truck. When I started to pull her from the truck, that's when I noticed her neck. That's when I saw she had been bitten."
I had to stop then. The memory of it flooded my mind, and I almost lost control. My rage began bubbling up through my chest. I could see that bite clearly in my mind's eye. Whoever did that to her did not rip out her throat as if to feed from her. How easy would it have been for him to break her neck to prevent her from moving if she regained consciousness? How easy would it have been for him to carry her away to hide and finish draining her? She wasn't bitten to be drained; she had been bitten to be changed.

Why would someone do that and not take her?

I was so fucking glad he didn't take her.

Had I interrupted his plan? I had been there so quickly after the crash, perhaps he didn't have time to drag her out of the truck and take her.

Had he left the area, or had he stayed hidden nearby, watching me? I had been so stunned by the utter shock of the sight, by the scent of her blood. Then preoccupied with trying to ease her pain and set up the scene. I had been so consumed with the scent and taste of her blood, I never thought…

Was he planning to come back for her? Was it his intention to return after her transformation and take her from me? From us?

Fear constricted my heart, then pure fury blew that fear away.

No! No one would take her! She was…

Bella's hand tightening on my own snapped my attention back to her. She began pulling my hand toward her chest. Her other arm trembled and curled up, her hand folding into a tight fist. It was my fault she was becoming agitated, and I shut down that fear and fury, and shoved it away.

I forced myself to feel calm. I recalled the relief I felt when I realized she was still alive, and I let it flow from me and over her. I would not let Bella be subjected to my fear and anger. I had to maintain control of myself and help her through this.

"Bella, you're safe with us. It's okay. I'm here with you. It's okay."

Was I trying to reassure her or me?

"What happened, Jasper?"

"I was just thinking about her being bitten and left. I cannot comprehend it. I wonder if he did leave. I became angry thinking it's possible he could still be in the area."

"That is a concern. Any number of times, a nomad could pass through this area, and we wouldn't be aware of it." He patted my shoulder. "We all will have to remain alert. The whole situation is extremely perplexing."

Carlisle headed for the bedroom door but stopped and turned toward us. "But now I think, since all of her physical injuries are nearly completely healed, we should start cleaning her up. There was just so much blood, Esme, Alice, and Rosalie thought they'd better stay away. I think we can get her cleaned up enough that they can come up in a bit and put her in some fresh clothes."

I just nodded my head at him and continued to watch Bella as I heard him move quickly down the stairs. His paternal, loving feelings for her just seemed to strengthen as time went on.

Even covered in blood, I could see the physical changes taking place in her. She seemed less agitated
now, though I could feel her suffering. Distress, defeat, longing, anger, some determination, and a bit of curiosity. Those emotions passed and the pain radiating from her nearly overwhelmed me again. She was fighting it. I knew she was. I had to help her fight it.

"Bella, I'm right here. I'm with you."

Carlisle returned with two large stainless steel mixing bowls from the kitchen and then went to retrieve several towels and washcloths. He filled each bowl with cool water in the bathroom just outside the door, carried them over and set them on the floor beside the king-sized bed.

He worked methodically and carefully. He started gently wiping the blood from her forehead and quickly worked his way around her face. I kept holding her hand, hoping the coolness of my skin would somehow comfort her.

It didn't take long before the water in both bowls was dark and cloudy with her blood, so I placed Bella's still warm hand by her side on the bed and took one bowl to the bathroom to empty and refill it with clean water.

"Jasper." I heard the urgency in Carlisle's voice. "She's becoming agitated again. It's not unexpected but…"

I gasped as I felt her panic beat into me. "She's panicking! Her emotions keep spinning from one to another, but now I feel panic." I hurried back and gave the bowl of fresh water to Carlisle and took hold of Bella's hand again.

"Bella, I'm here. I'm here. I came back. Don't panic. I'm here."

I gripped her hand with both of mine and bent over to touch my forehead to her wrist.

"I'm here. I'm with you. Don't be afraid, I'm right here."

I sat in the chair pulled close to the bed. Through the constant pain, I felt the panic begin to recede. I forced peace and calm at her, repeating over and over that I was there beside her.

"She's definitely aware of us. Earlier, when Edward started up the stairs and she became frantic, I couldn't tell if it was because of the burning. But she reacted to my anger, and just now, I felt her panic when you said she seemed agitated again. When I took hold of her hand, I felt her panic decrease. It's gone now." I inhaled a deep breath and slowly let it out.

Again, I felt curiosity and puzzlement from Carlisle as a small smile appeared on his face. "I had hoped she would become more aware of us. Along with her physical healing, this is a good sign. You stay here and I'll change the water in the other bowl."

-oOoOo-

With care and patience, Carlisle gradually worked his way down her arm and when he came to her wrist, his gentle movements stopped. I felt his surprise and glanced up at him.

"Jasper, there's another bite here. Though now it seems somewhat faded. I didn't notice it before." He placed her arm tenderly on the bed and reached for the hand I was holding. I reluctantly let go as he took hold of her arm and turned it over. "Here's another! What…?"

I dropped my head and closed my eyes, feeling shame well up from deep within because I hadn't told him sooner. I knew I would have to tell him, tell them all, but I just couldn't do it when I first brought her devastated, bleeding body back to the house. I couldn't bring myself to look into his concerned
"When I realized that she had been bitten," I stopped and took a deep breath, hoping it would bolster my resolve to confess. I released it slowly and started again, "When I first saw that she had been bitten, I could tell that whoever did it didn't bite her to feed from her. If he had wanted to feed from her, he could have just dragged her out of the truck. He did it to change her. Of course, I didn't know how much venom he may have gotten into her. I couldn't know. I…"

Carlisle reached over and gripped my arm. "Did you…?"

"Yes. I bit her." I turned away from him and looked at Bella's still face. She was striking. Cleaned of the blood and healed of the many cuts from the windshield being shattered and blown in, she was stunning. Why hadn't I ever noticed it before? I dropped my gaze to our clasped hands.

"From my years in Maria's army, I knew less venom meant the transformation would take even longer. I knew I had to get as much venom into her as I could. Whoever did this didn't have much time before he realized I was nearby. I started at her neck and injected more venom. I bit each of her wrists and her ankles. I know the misery and pain she was feeling already, and I could not allow it to go on any longer than necessary."

Since I just dropped this major bombshell on the family, I knew I shouldn't be surprised that I felt disbelief and shock from everyone in the house. I had previously tried to attack her over one single drop of blood at her birthday months ago, and no one had trusted me too close to her. She had been kept away from me. When she wrecked her truck, she had been covered in blood, and I hadn't attacked. I felt I had to protect her and take care of her. I still didn't understand it myself.

A surge of fury burst through from downstairs and I knew it was from Edward. He had never wanted to change her into a vampire. He had said he never wanted to take her human life away from her. It didn't matter that she was willing to give up that life to be with him. With us. She didn't believe, like Edward, that we were damned. But she was his Singer. Her blood called to him like no other. Could her blood have meant more to him than she did? But if he loved her, wouldn't he have wanted her to be with him forever?

I heard his growl, and I growled back to him, "Would you have let her die? Would you have killed her so she wouldn't be changed into a vampire?"

Feelings of horror and dismay burst from everyone in the house except Bella. They all knew that a human going through that transformation was extremely vulnerable because they couldn't protect themselves, and could easily be killed. I knew the quickest, most humane death was beheading. There were other methods that weren't so… benevolent. Or you could drain them, which would cause their heart to stop. If there was no blood, and no heart beat to carry the venom, it certainly couldn't heal them. Our venom could heal many ills and injuries, but for someone who was still a breathing human with a pumping heart, venom couldn't reattach a head that had been ripped from its shoulders.

Edward gasped and sputtered, "I… I would never… I could never…"

"Then would you have forced her to endure this pain longer than she had to? You weren't there, Edward! And thank Christ you weren't because you would have drained her dry and killed her. I did what I needed to do to save her. And I would do it again."

"Jasper! How can you be so… How could you say such a…a…contemptible… I never wanted her to be cursed like this!" he called from downstairs. "Of course I never wanted her to die, but I never wanted this. And how dare you, Jasper, take it upon yourself to decide to change her!"
I felt his shame, but was that jealousy I felt, too?

What about what she had wanted? Everyone knew she had wanted this.

"Edward," I hissed to him. "I did not choose. She had already made that choice. And she had already been bitten when I found her."

I felt Carlisle's horror shift to shock, and then anger.

"Edward!" Carlisle admonished him. "You know how excruciating this is. Jasper inserting more venom into her was the right thing to do. He saved her. He brought her back to us. He has shown miraculous restraint. You know what she looked like when he brought her here."

The guilt and shame oozing from Edward increased, and I couldn't repress the thought that he wasn't even able to be in the room because of the smell of her blood. Sanctimonious prick. I knew he wasn't feeling guilty because of me. What was causing his guilt?

The sheer volume of blood covering Bella and me was more than he could bear. He wouldn't have been able to stop himself from draining her.

Hell! When he met us in the woods, and the lust for her blood overtook him, it had taken an hour before he could control himself enough to come back. It took hours before he tried to go upstairs and see her, and he couldn't make it past the second flight of stairs. What a pussy.

I considered leaving the bloody clothes on to keep him out.

Again, that gloating, gleeful thought passed quickly through my head — I had tasted her blood, had reveled in it, and found the strength to stop. I'd had what Edward could never have. Could that be what was causing his jealousy? Or was it that my venom was coursing through her body?

Carlisle, gathering his usual composure and serenity around himself like a cloak, turned to me and squeezed my shoulder. I felt pride and respect emanating from him. "My son, as I said before, I am so proud of you. Not many of us could have come upon a scene like that and maintained control, or had the strength to do what you did. I believe you did the right thing. I believe you adding more venom has helped to speed her healing. She is healing so well, and she is with us."

"I had to do something," I whispered. "I had to try and save her."
I Resist

Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by NinaQ and ElleCC of Project Team Beta. But then I get hold of it again.

Posted at A Different Forest, TwiWrite, and FanFiction, of course.

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Chapter 5, I Resist

Jasper's POV

About a half hour later, Bella was as clean as she was going to be without Carlisle removing all of her clothes, and he called to Esme waiting downstairs. "Esme, could you get some fresh clothes for Bella? I think you should be able to come up now."

We heard three sets of feet fly up the stairs, and Esme, Alice, and Rosalie appeared at the door, worry clearly etched on their beautiful faces.

"Esme," Carlisle began, "I've cut her clothes apart so I could examine her and straighten her arms and legs. They are sticking to her, but you shouldn't have any problem removing them. I know you've been listening, but you can now see that Bella is improving. Her broken bones have healed. The cuts on her face have healed. I've cleaned as much blood from her as I can for now. Will you be all right?"

Esme clutched a set of clothes to her chest and moved into the room cautiously, taking shallow breaths. "Yes, Carlisle, I can handle it. There was so much blood! Our poor Bella."

I could feel Esme's heart breaking as she looked at Bella. She considered Bella her youngest child and ached for her.

She turned toward Alice and Rosalie. "Do you girls think you can help me wash off the rest of the blood and change her clothes?"

I could feel Esme's resolve and determination to take care of her youngest child, but I could also feel that Alice and Rosalie were uncertain and apprehensive. They both walked tentatively into Edward's room and stood silently near the door.

"Oh!" Alice gasped. "She is going to be absolutely gorgeous!" Alice darted closer to the bed and exclaimed, "She is lovely. But why Esme chose those clothes ..."
Bella's emotions flared and began to swirl faster. Alice was too close! She needed to back off!

At that moment, Bella twitched and jerked her arms in toward her body again. I felt anger from her. My own started to rise. Did she pick that up from me? Or did I get that from her?

I kept hold of her hand and rubbed my thumb lightly across her knuckles. "Bella," I whispered. "It's just Alice here to see you. It'll be all right. It's okay." I took a breath to force calm into myself and give it to Bella.

I glanced over my shoulder at Alice. "Alice, you should back away. I feel anger coming from her. I don't know why."

The hopeful look on Alice's face fell away as she backed toward the doorway. Her shoulders drooped as she leaned against the frame, watching intently.

Bella began to calm down again as I whispered to her and reassured her she was safe.

I turned to Esme. "Try walking slowly toward us. Perhaps Alice just came in too fast."

Esme eased closer, little by little, until she was right next to the bed. I gave her a small smile. "Bella is about the same. No … I feel some relief coming from her."

The corner of Esme's lips pulled up in a trace of a smile, and she leaned in closer to Bella and spoke softly, "Bella, I'm so glad Jasper found you and brought you to us. I know you're in pain, but I will try to help you. We'll take care of you. I've brought clean clothes that you left here."

Esme put the clothes on the night table and reached for the washcloths that Carlisle had brought in earlier.

"Can I come in?" Rosalie asked hesitantly.

I nodded toward her and she began the slow pace toward Bella.

I patted Bella's hand very gently and told her, "Rosalie is going to help you, too, Bella. Just like Esme, Carlisle, and I have. Remember, I'm right here."

I waited expectantly to feel something different from Bella as Rosalie came closer, but didn't feel anything change. I was surprised that Bella displayed anger when Alice came close, but maybe that was because she stupidly rushed over.

Rosalie and Bella certainly couldn't have been called BFFs, but I knew Bella loved Rosalie, just like she loved all of us. I felt Rosalie's reserved feelings changing for Bella. She was feeling some anxiety and some pity. There was some sadness, too. Rosalie hadn't wanted Bella to miss out on all those human things, like marriage and babies, that had been stolen from her so many years ago. But because Rosalie mourned that loss, did that mean Bella would?

Even if she hadn't chosen to become a vampire, it wasn't Bella's fault she was changing. Her chance at a human life had been stolen from her.

Rosalie stood by my side and gently placed her hand on my shoulder. "Jazz, I know you're helping her, but you look pretty bad. You need to get a shower and wash off all that blood and the gasoline. I don't know how you can stand to smell it."

"Yes, Jasper," Esme added. "You look exhausted. I don't know how you've held up. I remember very vividly what it feels like during the change."
Carlisle had finished gathering his medical supplies and turned toward me, concern showing in his eyes. "Have you hunted?"

"Yes," I answered. "I was hunting when I heard the crash. I don't want to leave her. Last time I left her she became disturbed even though I was just in the bathroom right outside the door."

"Jazz," Alice said from the doorway. "You know you need a break. You need to get cleaned up and get rid of those clothes."

Were the women ganging up on me? I was feeling a little defensive.

"Alice, have you seen anything?" I shot at her. Again, I wondered why she hadn't seen that crash. What good was being able to see the future if you couldn't prevent something like that?

But would I have changed the outcome if I could have?

Alice shook her head as her eyes dropped to the floor. I could feel more sorrow coming from her. "No. I haven't seen anything of Bella's future since I first saw her decide to head for La Push. She made that decision and left so quickly I didn't have time to call Edward back from hunting with Emmett and Carlisle and stop her." She was sobbing with her shame.

I sighed. "Alice, you know you can't see everything," I told her. "Edward's had her under his thumb for months, and I'd warned him to back off. Of course, he didn't listen. I figured it was only a matter of time before she got frustrated and broke loose. Nobody could have known she'd wreck her truck." I was getting mad again, and Edward's irritation floating up from the living room was not helping.

"I saw her until she was nearly at the boundary line, then it went dark. I couldn't see her anymore!" Alice's shoulders shook as she sobbed her tearless cries. "I can't see anything of her future now."

I could feel her dejection and frustration coming in waves. And Edward! That asswipe. I had to push away that shithead's irritation and get control of myself before it affected Bella. "It's not your fault, Alice. It should work out." I bent toward Bella and brought her hand to my cheek. "You know that Emmett and Edward checked the crash scene, and went by the police station. They all think Bella was thrown from the truck and one of those giant bears hauled her away."

Which was exactly what I had been hoping for. When Emmett and Edward had returned from their reconnaissance, they reported seeing a few of the Quileutes at the crash scene. None of them had had any suspicious thoughts. Jacob Black was devastated, but there was nothing to be done about that. I knew Bella cared for him, but it was better if he believed her to be dead. Better for us if they all believed it, especially since I had bitten her. I hadn't bitten her first, but as soon as my teeth touched her skin, the treaty was broken. We would have to be scrupulously vigilant and cover every track. Otherwise, there would be a war between us and the Quileute wolves.

Bella and I were going to have to leave Forks.

"Alice, maybe you could try looking into Charlie's future? Or the rest of the family?" I continued.

"I've been trying! I'm not getting anything that's clear. I can't see Bella."

"Alice. You need to calm down. This isn't helping any of us, especially Bella," I said forcefully.

"I know, Jazz. I'm trying." She took in a deep breath as she closed her eyes. She let the breath out slowly.

"Better?" I asked. I couldn't allow her to make this worse for Bella.
She nodded her head and gradually opened her eyes. "Yes. I'm better. I'll try to do better."

I gave her a short nod and said, "Try again to come closer. Move slowly."

Alice took small, measured steps toward the bed, her eyes shifting back and forth between me and Bella. She was calmer, but it was as if she were trying to hide something.

"Alice, what's wrong?"

"I'm trying to be calm but …"

"But what?" She was getting really close to plucking my last nerve.

"It's … it's your clothes. The blood. It's in your hair, on your face … it's all over you. You're disgusting."

Okay, I've about had it with this little …

She thought that was disgusting? She didn't know disgusting. She didn't know shit. But she always had been like that. She's had it too easy living with the Cullens. She had no fucking clue …

Stop!

It was not the time to lose all semblance of composure and self-restraint. Bella didn't need it.

"Alice," I said, exasperated. My teeth refused to unclench so I spoke through them. "Alice, did you want to try to come closer to Bella?"

I could feel a trickle of fear from her, but she took another deep breath and nodded her head.

Fear? Fear of what?

I couldn't bring myself to speak right then so I jerked my head toward Bella, trying to urge Alice to move.

As Alice came closer to me, I could feel Bella's emotions shifting again. She was distraught, in pain, frustrated, sad, and anxious. Some curiosity came through. It all cycled again. Then I could just sense the beginnings of anger.

"Bella, Bella, I'm right here. I know it hurts, but I'm right here. Alice is right here beside me. She wants to help you."

Bella's anger spiked as I said that, and she jerked her hand away from me. Her legs pulled up, and her heart rate increased. Her breaths came faster. I was dumbfounded. Esme and Rosalie stopped all movement, and even Carlisle held his breath; all of them anxiously watching Bella.

"I just want to help you." Alice said plaintively.

At that moment, Bella shrieked and began to writhe and twist in the bloody sheets. Her emotions were full of anger and resentment. She had been disconcertingly calm up to that point, and I had no idea what had happened to change that. Unless it was Alice being near her.

I whispered quickly, "I think you should leave the room. I don't know why, but I think you being near is upsetting her."

Alice's dejection was immediate. Her shoulders slumped as she plodded to the door. Alice never
"I don't understand it, but I'll go." She turned back to us before leaving the room. "Tell her to remember her parents. Tell her to remember us, and Forks, and high school, and everything." Another sob escaped. She made her way slowly toward the stairs and down to where Edward and Emmett were waiting in the living room.

As I turned back to Bella, Esme quietly cleared her throat. "Jasper, I know you want to stay, but you really do need to get cleaned up."

"I know, but the smell of the blood isn't affecting me," I explained. Again, I wondered at my lack of reaction to her blood.

The memory of the clusterfuck that had been Bella's birthday surged forward.

At her eighteenth birthday, she had managed to get a paper cut opening one of her gifts. Only Bella would find the most innocuous way to bleed in a room full of vampires.

She hadn't wanted anyone to make a fuss about her birthday, but Alice had insisted, and Edward backed her up.

They should have listened to her.

Why start now, right?

Just one little drop of blood had fallen to the carpet. I caught just the faintest whiff of that nectar and instinct started to take over. I wanted her, but I had managed to hold my breath and take a step back.

I didn't know why Edward had pushed her away instead of coming at me, but he growled and shoved her — right into the table stacked with glass plates. Plates for people who wouldn't be eating any damn birthday cake! She collided with the table, breaking the plates, and crashing to the floor. Shards of glass sliced through the soft skin of her arm, and the blood …

Edward's eyes had turned black as he crouched down in front of her. I felt the blood lust from everyone; I couldn't control it any longer, and that was all she wrote. I had to get to her! Carlisle made a grab for me, but I slipped through his arms. I had almost made it to her when Edward snarled and thrust me away. I flew through the air and landed on his piano, smashing it to the floor. I leapt up to run at her again. I had to have her! Emmett wrapped his huge arms around me like a vise, pinning my arms to my sides. Rosalie darted forward, and she and Emmett hauled me outside. I fought. I fought hard to get the hell away from them and get to Bella, but Emmett's grip was too tight.

I couldn't believe I had lost control of myself like that. The fresh air outside helped to clear my head of the scent of Bella's blood, though it still called to me. I nearly trembled with wanting her … wanting her blood.

When I had finally stopped fighting him, Emmett abruptly let go and I dropped to ground. I sat there in the gravel of the driveway, breathing in the cool night air, my head in my hands, trying to clear that scent from my mind. Trying to force down the lust … the blood lust. And one was certainly tied to the other.

"Jazz! Man! That was so fucked up." Emmett had stood with his hands on his hips, staring down at me. "I know you stepped back away from her …"

"Yes." Rosalie glared at me. Anger flowed off her in hot, red pulses. "As Emmett so eloquently put it, that was fucking up. I can't fathom why Edward shoved her into that table. And then you …"
"I know, I know. I don't know what happened. I smelled her blood and I had to have her. I …" I shook my head. Bella's scent was still swirling around my head, but it was easing up. A little. I had to get out of there. I had to get away.

As I jumped up, Emmett and Rosalie tensed again, ready to grab me. I jerked my hands up, palms facing them, to stop them from leaping at me. "I gotta get out of here. Where is everyone?"

Rosalie placed her palm against my chest and spoke softly. "Carlisle is inside with Bella. Edward, Esme, and Alice ran out the back door."

"I'll go this way," and I jabbed my arm to point in the opposite direction from everyone else. I couldn't face them. I could not look any of them in the eye. Especially Bella. "I have to go!"

"Where are you going?" Emmett asked. I felt the concern coming from him. Leave it to Emmett. His initial fury was already gone, replaced with his concern and worry. Concern for who? For Bella? Not for me.

"For a run. I'll run. I'll be back."

Then the entire family had left, at Shitheadward's insistence, to protect her from us. From me, or from him? His eyes had been so black. But there had been no arguing with him. The cussed fool.

I had learned my lesson. I would not leave her behind again.

I was puzzled at the irony. One tiny, little drop of blood had sent me out of my mind with lust … blood lust … a few short months ago. Then, not so many hours ago, I drank her blood, though not enough to affect the color of my eyes, and I stopped. I've been completely covered in it for hours, and …

"Okay, Esme. I'll go wash this off and throw these clothes away," I said as I stood up from the chair I had been sitting in for what seemed like days already. I could barely stand the thought of leaving her, but I knew I had to. Wouldn't do for me to be in the room while Esme and Rosalie were stripping off Bella's bloody, torn clothing, and washing her.

Not that I would mind.

Besides, having all this blood around when she finally woke up was just a catastrophe waiting to happen, even if it was her own blood. Who knew how she would react?

So far, Bella's change wasn't like any other I had seen, but we sure couldn't count on her being anything but an unpredictable, volatile, violent newborn vampire. I knew how they could be. I'd created enough of them.

I turned to look at Bella's beautiful face. I gently squeezed her hand and, with the other, traced the tips of my fingers down her cheek and along her jaw to her chin.

"Bella," I whispered to her. "I won't be far. I'll be right back. Esme and Rosalie are here. I'll only be gone a few minutes. I will be back."

Esme smiled up at me, sending me waves of concern, love, tenderness, and … curiosity?

"You go ahead, Jasper. We'll be fine here. Rosalie and I will take care of her." She turned toward Carlisle. "Carlisle, you can take all these bloody towels out of here and bring us some more. Just set the clean ones outside the door and we'll get them. We'll put Bella's bloody clothes and the sheets in the trash can here and set it outside the door. I think they should probably be burned. Now, Rosalie,
we're going to clean up our beautiful girl."

That was Esme. Taking charge to care for her newest daughter, and no one was willing to argue with her.

I was pretty sure Carlisle and I had just been dismissed.
Jasper's POV

After quickly grabbing some clothes from my study on the second floor, I went back to the bathroom near Edward's room to be close to Bella. In the shower, with the hot water pouring down over me, I could almost relax. Almost.

Bella's emotions were churning and pulsing – anxiety, longing, pain, apprehension, relief, curiosity, yearning, dread, fear, and through the cycle again. Twirling and spinning, like her life's blood swirling in the hot water before it spiraled away down the drain.

That was the last there would ever be of Bella's blood. When the water finally ran clear, there would be no more. Would I regret that? Would I miss it?

No. Never. Because I still had her.

I tried to send her thoughts of strength and admiration. She was fighting so hard! I knew she was. Through that fiery hell, she was fighting.

I watched Bella's blood run down my body and my arms. Rippling over all the scars, then trickling down to the floor of the shower and to the drain. The heat of the water increased the aroma, and I breathed it in. There was just the barest trace of the floral scent Edward was always blathering on about. Sweet, but not too sweet.

Normally tempting, mouthwatering, delectable. Delicious. But most humans were.

Something was different. Some quality had changed. No less tantalizing than before, but now her scent was alluring, enticing, inviting. It was seductive.
I marveled at the difference. I didn't understand it. I didn't know what had changed. Seeing her practically crushed, covered in the bright red blood that was still oozing from her many wounds… that sight, and the scent, should have sent me into a snarling, ripping frenzy, but it hadn't.

That was how it used to be. That was how we had lived with that bitch Maria. It had been one of the tools we had used to control the newborns. If they cooperated, and did what they were directed to do, they were rewarded. Most times with blood. The captured humans didn't survive it. There was no such thing as taking just a sip. Sometimes the newborns were allowed to have sex with the humans. The humans hadn't survived that either, of course.

The newborns who managed to withstand their initial training would be taken to some small out-of-the-way village in Maria's territory and would be set loose.

The sounds still echoed through my mind. Blood curdling screams, shrieking, and begging for mercy. Then there had been the sound of bones snapping and crunching. The heavy thud and splat as some human was thrown into the wall of one of their adobe huts by a blood-crazed newborn.

One of the worst — a woman clutching her infant to her breast, begging her god to save them all, while a snarling, slavering, red-eyed demon descended upon her. Grabbing her head and ripping it from her shoulders, before he fell onto her twitching body and drank the fresh, hot blood pumping from her neck.

Anything and everything that moved was slaughtered and torn to ragged, bloody bits. Though we only drank the blood of the humans, not one creature would be left alive. No humans, no dogs, no horses, no cattle, no goats.

Every building would be painted red with blood and gore.

Then the fires would be set.

Not one thing would be left standing after I led an attack.

There would be the battles with other covens. Some had heard about Maria's army and her ambition to hold even more territory. They had heard rumors about Maria's "Major" or the invincible "God of War" and they would stupidly try to challenge me.

And try they would. It did them no good.

Sometimes, on patrols, a new coven would be discovered trying to take up residence or hunt in Maria's territory. Peter, my second in command, and I would hunt them down. Maria rarely bothered herself to come with us, knowing we would take care of the intruders.

No one fought as hard or as desperately as a coven of vampires who knew they were about to lose everything to Peter and me. I would get thrown through buildings. I would get bitten. I would have limbs ripped off.

But they never beat me.

We would torture them and get as much information from them as we could. Once in a while, instead of dismembering and burning them all, we would let one loose.

What better way was there to propagate the legend of Maria's army and her Major than to let a battered, sometimes mutilated, "survivor" go?

The bullshit propaganda of war.
That was Peter's fucking brilliant idea.

Maria fucking loved it. I knew she did. It stroked her ego.

I fucking hated it. I hated all of it.

But no one ever beat me.

Not even after I allowed Peter to escape with his mate Charlotte. And Maria made me fucking pay for that. Even after that, no one had ever beaten me.

Why the hell was I thinking about that asshole Peter and all that bullshit? It must be because Bella was going to be a newborn. It had been a long time since I have had to deal with a newborn.

-oOoOo-

Bella's anxiety spiked. Though I constantly monitored her condition through a part of my brain, and I tried to keep a steady flow of peace, calm, and admiration flowing back to her, this was different.

Had something happened?

I rushed to finish scrubbing every trace of blood and gasoline from my skin and hair. I slammed off the water to the shower and grabbed a towel to try to dry off as quickly as I could. Screw that! I yanked on a long-sleeved grey T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

I raked my fingers through my hair, and felt anger pulse from Bella.

What the hell happened?

I threw open the bathroom door and raced back to Edward's room. I could see no one was attacking Bella, so I stopped in the doorway to assess the situation before rushing in.

Esme was on the left side of the bed. She was bent over a struggling Bella, her hands on Bella's shoulders, apparently trying to hold her down. Rosalie was positioned next to the right side of the bed, her hands raised up as if to ward off Edward, and her eyes were glaring daggers at him.

Edward, with a petulant look on his face, was standing rigidly, his arms held stiffly at his sides.

I felt rage from Bella. She was gasping out breaths. It was almost as if she was trying to get up!

My own rage exploded through me.

"What the hell is going on here?" I growled, and I took a step into the room.

Edward flinched and backed away.

That was gratifying.

He was too damn close to Bella.

"Now that Esme and Rosalie have disposed of all of the befouled sheets and changed Bella's clothes, I thought I would take this opportunity to visit with her," Edward explained in his pretentious voice.

That pissed me off.

I glanced to Esme. "What happened?" I know it must have sounded like I was shouting orders, but I
couldn't seem to help it. I was amazed I didn't bark, "Report, soldier!" at her.

"Jasper," she gasped with relief. "Rose and I had just finished dressing Bella when Edward came upstairs. She was fairly calm until he came to the side of the bed. Then she became restless and began to twitch and shudder. She started pulling her arms up to her chest again, and then she was gasping …"

"Thank you, Esme." My eyes narrowed, and my gaze shifted to Rosalie. I didn't intentionally cut Esme off but I wanted to hear what Rose had to say. "Rose …?"

She huffed in exasperation. Her eyes had darkened as she glared at Edward, but she maintained her position between Edward and Bella, helpless on the bed.

"This fool," she began, and she stabbed a sharp-nailed finger at Edward's chest, "came charging into this room, and was at the side of the bed before I could stop him. Bella started writhing on the bed, and he started to reach for her. I grabbed his arm and yanked him back. Then you came in."

They had been speaking with vampire speed, though that was hardly fast enough for me, but I got the information I needed. As soon as I was gone, that devious Fuckward was right there in that room. When I wasn't there.

I never even heard him come up the stairs.

What the fuck!

"I don't know what the fuck you were thinking Edward," I said, sneering his name, "but haven't you noticed that when you get anywhere near Bella she becomes more distressed? More frantic?" My hands had closed into fists. My whole body was shaking.

I had to get control of myself. I felt Bella's agony, distress, and rage, and I was very close to losing it. If I went after Edward … I didn't know how that would affect Bella.

But throwing that devious fuck out the window would make me feel better.

I darted to her side and took a deep breath. Her scent helped to soothe my rage. As Esme backed out of my way, I quickly scrutinized Bella. Her legs were pulled up, bent at the knees. Both hands were clenched in tight fists, pressed into her chest. She was panting rapidly. I could hear her heart pounding.

It was bad.

I reached forward and slowly covered both of her hands with mine. My hands were so large they covered her hands and her wrists. I knelt next to the bed and whispered in her ear, "Bella, I'm here. I'm here. I'm right here. I had to leave for a few minutes, but I won't leave you again."

Edward snorted. "Jasper, you have absolutely no discernible reason to be here, and you have no right to be here. In fact, it would be my right, and my sacred duty to be here, by her side, while she's …"

At that pompous pronouncement, Rosalie drew back her left hand and round-house punched Edward so hard, cracks blossomed across his face, and he flew through the bedroom door. He smacked into Carlisle and Emmett with a thunderous crash as they reached the top of the stairs.

I was unable to keep the smirk from my face as I looked out of the corner of my eye at them, and almost laughed as I watched Emmett scramble to keep all of them from tumbling down the stairs.
Esme gasped in shock behind me as I glanced across the bed at Rose. She stood with her right hand on her hip that was stuck out at a jaunty angle and she was examining the nails on her left hand. She flipped her long blond hair over her shoulder and glanced over at me. A devilish smile spread across her face.

That was why she was my sister — a woman after my own heart. I winked at her and sent her my feelings of gratitude and pride.

She winked back at me and said, "I've been wanting to do that."

I turned my attention to Bella.

"Bella, Darlin', I'm right here. It'll be all right. I'm right here."

I tentatively pulled at her hands, but she was still holding them tightly to her chest. Her emotions were still clouded with anger, but I could feel it diminishing.

"Bella, I won't leave you. I'm right here. Let me help you." I thought of my admiration for her, my respect for her. She was so strong to bear this so quietly. Unlike any other I'd seen.

I gathered serenity, and peace, and tranquility and pushed them toward her.

"I won't leave you, Darlin'. I'll be right here beside you."

I could feel the distress and tension begin to leave her, and I tugged on her hands again. She let me move her hands to her sides.

"You're doing fine, Bella. You're doing good. I'm right here. Let me help you."

I kept hold of her right hand, but with my other hand I pressed gently on her thighs hoping she would lower her legs to the bed. She did finally.

"Darlin', I'm right here. I will protect you."

Her heart rate slowed, and her breathing began to be less frantic. In spite of the pain, she was relaxing as much as she could.

Though pain continued to swirl, the rage had begun to dissipate.

I heard Carlisle and Emmett convince Edward to stay downstairs. I was relieved. It seemed Bella was, too.

"Bella, I'm right here. Right here. I'm with you. I will not leave you."

At that moment, I felt a burst of love so strong radiate from her that I gasped and shuddered, my eyes squeezing shut and my head falling back. If I hadn't already been on my knees by the bed, I think she would have dropped me again.

"Jasper! What is it?" I felt Esme's alarm as she knelt beside me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

Rosalie ran around the foot of the bed and dropped to her knees on my other side. She put a supporting hand on the back of my head and another under my arm.

"Bella!" Her name exploded from my mouth, and I fought to suck in another breath. "It's so strong! She loves … us. " I had to gulp in more air. "In spite of the pain … her love …" and I couldn't
speak. I was overcome, feeling completely overwhelmed.

My body went limp, and Esme and Rosalie eased me down so that I was leaning against the side of the bed, sitting on the floor. I was gasping like a fish out of water. My arms were braced on the bed, my hands clutching at Bella's arm. I was hanging on to her as if she could somehow hold me up!

"Jazz! Tell me what do!" Rosalie whimpered.

"It's all right. It's okay. She caught me by surprise." I rubbed my face against the fresh sheets that had taken on Bella's comforting scent.

Esme lightly touched my shoulder. "Here's the chair, Jasper. Anything you need, you let me know." The chair appeared next to me, and I forced myself to my feet without letting go of Bella's hand. I dropped onto it, and Esme patted and rubbed my shoulders. I could feel pride flowing from her.

There was that curiosity again.

Rose stood and shook her finger at me. "If you need anything, anything at all, you let me know. I'll get it for you. Anything."

I felt her determination.

"Thanks, Rose. Thank you, Esme. I know. I know. I'm okay. She just surprised me. Again."

Chapter End Notes

"God of War": credit for that phrase goes to IdreamofEddy from the story "Colliding Meteors."
Chapter 7, I Can't

Alice's POV

Esme and Rosalie were upstairs tending to Bella, trying to wash the rest of the blood off of her. Carlisle had removed quite a bit of it, but there was still so much. She had been covered with it. I didn't think I had ever seen anything as awful as that. Well, Jasper had looked rather gruesome. There had been blood smeared across his face, down his neck, and in his hair. It had soaked into his clothes, and there was a strong smell of gasoline, too.

I heard that he was finally in the shower in the bathroom near Edward's room. It was about time. I didn't know how he could stand being covered in blood like that. It was all over him!

I had always heard that the Southern Vampire Wars had been very violent. Jasper had hundreds of terrible scars from battling other vampires, and I could never stand to look at them. He had told me that the newborn vampires had wiped out entire villages and towns, and I couldn't take hearing anymore.

He had been a part of that. Had he been covered in blood like that before? Was that something you could get used to?

A shiver went down my spine at just the thought of it.

I paced from the sliding glass doors in the living room toward the front of the house.

"I wish I knew why she gets so upset when I'm near her!" I exclaimed. "She doesn't seem to have a problem with Esme and Rose." I crossed my arms over my chest as I went past Emmett sitting on the couch.

He just shrugged his shoulders at me as I went to look out the sliding glass doors again.

Emmett was so upset I didn't think he had moved an inch since he sat down on the couch.
I turned from the windows and made my way to the dining room. Edward had been standing there, just staring out of the back windows. It must have been so horrible for him to see Bella so badly injured and bloody when Jasper brought her back.

There had been so much blood all over both of them, Edward had lost his control. Thank goodness Emmett grabbed him before he attacked Bella. God knows what he would have done to her. I didn't know what he would've done to Jasper. Since right before Bella's crash, my visions haven't been coming in too well. I couldn't see Bella at all.

Edward shuddered and his hand went to rub his forehead.

"What is it, Edward?" I asked him quietly as I stepped closer to him.

He sighed. "It's Jasper's thoughts. They are … unspeakable. He's thinking about the Vampire Wars. Such butchery and carnage …" He dragged his hand through his hair. "How can he live with himself after such …?"

I shivered right along with him, and placed my hand on his forearm. "I don't know. I never wanted to hear about it. What I had heard was horrible enough, and those scars …"

"How could I have ever let him near Bella?" Edward's hands went to his hips and he stared out the windows again. "And now, no one can get him away from her." He let out a ragged breath. "Since he brought her back to the house, I haven't been able to read his thoughts. He's in the shower now and I can … see them. I wish that I couldn't." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I think when he's touching her, I can't hear him."

"He hasn't ever hurt her. Well, that one time almost … but he didn't." I patted and rubbed his arm. "I haven't been able to see anything of Bella's future since before the accident, and Jasper's has been a blur to me. I hardly get anything at all."

He dropped his head to his chest, and I leaned against him and gave his arm a little squeeze. "I don't know why he won't leave her, but I don't think he's going to hurt her. She's going to be alright, Edward. She'll wake up soon and …"

"But you can't see it, can you?"

"Well, no, but you know I've seen her as one of us practically since she moved to Forks."

"I never wanted …" His fingers went to the bridge of his nose, and I saw the muscles in his jaw tighten.

"She'll be okay, Edward." I patted his arm and then made my way out to the living room again. I knew everything that had happened had been so hard for him.

When Carlisle had run back into the house and told Rose to go help Emmett restrain Edward, then told Esme and me to leave the room, I knew it had to be bad. Worse than bad. From what Carlisle had said later, every major bone in Bella's body had been broken.

Esme and I had run out the back door and we hadn't even looked in the windows when Jasper carried her in. I had been afraid to look!

It was about an hour after Jasper had brought her into the house, that Emmett, Rose, and Edward finally came back. Edward hadn't fought that hard against his bloodlust since the first time he saw Bella in their biology class last school year. It must have been just awful!
I just didn't know, really. I mean, Bella smelled especially good, but I hadn't ever lost control around her. I've never run across my singer, though. I didn't even know if I had one. How would I react if I ran across a human whose blood was so potent, so intoxicating, that I went crazy with wanting it? With my visions not coming in so well, would I even see it beforehand if I ran across my singer? Probably not.

It made me shiver to think about it.

When they had come back, all three of them were filthy with mud! There were leaves and twigs stuck to them, and in their hair. They were all dripping muddy water all over the floors, and their clothes were torn to shreds!

The way Rosalie was glaring at Edward … Her face had been like marble, she was so angry, but there had been a deadly fire in her eyes. Edward must have put up quite a fight.

And poor Emmett! He had looked so heartbroken. I knew he loved Bella so much. She was his little sister. They couldn't have been closer if they were twins. He would have done anything for her. I had thought if we could cry tears, he would have been. I felt so bad for him I ran to him and gave him a hug, even though he was a muddy mess. I reminded him that Carlisle would do whatever he could to help her.

That was when Emmett had said, "Jasper said she's changing into a vampire. That must have been why he didn't take her to the hospital."

I had been in shock at hearing that. I hadn't seen any of that! Why hadn't I seen any of that? How could that have happened?

Then Edward had groaned. He actually groaned. He looked shattered, destroyed. His eyes were jet black, he hung his head, and he slowly walked into the dining room. He just stood there, shoulders slumped, and looking completely miserable. I ran over to him and threw my arms around him. He didn't say anything. He just stood there. He wasn't even breathing.

I had seen visions of Bella as one of us for ages. I didn't know why Edward was still so upset. He should have been glad she wasn't killed!

Rosalie told Emmett they needed to get showered, but then poor Emmett had said, "I don't think I can go up there, Rose. The smell of Bella's blood must be pretty strong up there and I don't want to take a chance. It was bad enough seeing Bella and Jazz when we met them in the woods."

I didn't understand why Emmett was so worried about that. Their room was on the second floor on the west side of the house. Edward's room was far away from theirs. It was up on the third floor on the east side of the house.

Rosalie had rolled her eyes at him, of course, but she gave him a little kiss on the cheek, and went upstairs to get showered. Then she had brought down some fresh clothes for him.

It was a good thing Esme had been doing some laundry because I knew Edward wouldn't be able to go to his room and get any clothes with Bella there. I suppose Carlisle could have brought him some, but the smell of her blood had to be on everything. Luckily, there was a small shower in the laundry room. Usually, Emmett and Jasper were the only ones who used it because they got so dirty when they went hunting together.

I thought their so called "hunting" was really just an excuse to wrestle and beat the hell out of each other. Jasper destroyed more clothes that way. Sometimes I thought he did it on purpose. Then he
would put on those awful Levis!

When Jasper had called downstairs to Edward and Emmett to tell them to investigate the accident scene, I thought Edward was going to come unglued! Then Rosalie yelled at him, but she was right. It only made sense to check on the accident scene, and try to find out what people were saying about it. Edward was the best one to do it since he would be able to read their minds. He knew that.

I was sure he didn't want to see where Bella had nearly died. Well, I guess she actually would die since some vampire found her and bit her.

Had he been afraid the blood there would affect him?

I had wanted to go with them, but I didn't think I could stand to look.

When Emmett and Edward had arrived at the scene, there were still fire fighters and police there. There were a few Washington State Patrolmen, and the entire Forks Police force (all three of them), in addition to Chief Charlie Swan.

When an officer's family member was involved in a crash, they showed up in force.

Poor Charlie! I felt so bad for him. I just knew he would be devastated. Bella was his only child. She really hadn't lived with him very long, since her mother had gone and dragged her off to Arizona when she was little.

Edward had said he couldn't really read anything in Charlie's mind because he was in shock. All Edward could hear from him was, "Bella can't be gone. She can't be gone."

Edward had stayed back in the forest away from the crash, but Emmett had moved in closer. He had said it was appalling. He could even tell where Jasper had laid her down on the ground just inside the tree line because of the amount of blood on the ground. The fire hadn't reached that spot yet.

Then he had whispered, "I don't know how the hell she lived through it. That truck was fuckin' crushed. All that was left was burned up twisted steel."

The firemen had still been dousing the area with water, but they had finished soon after. A bunch of the men then began poking around the truck and the ground, searching through the weeds.

A rollback tow truck drove over to it, but the police made the man wait to winch it up on the flat bed. I suppose they had wanted to do their investigation. Someone had been taking pictures.

There had been people combing the area, picking things up out of the grass, and searching through the trees. They had been talking about getting together a search party to track the giant bears.

Humans!

I suppose Jasper did a good job staging it. But how hard is it to fool humans? They see what they want to see, what they expect to see.

There had been a few of the Pack there. At least none of them had suspected any vampire involvement. I guess Jasper must have done a good job. The wolves seemed to think it was nothing but a horrible accident. Between the scent of Bella's blood, the gasoline that had leaked out of her truck, the rain, and the fire Jasper had set, the wolves hadn't picked up any of his scent.

That, and the firemen had sprayed water all over everything to put the fire out. Despite the rain, the fire had burned several trees and had even been burning through the grass and weeds between the
truck and the road.

Edward said Jacob Black had been there. Even though he was a wolf, I felt a little bad for him. Bella really cared for him, and he cared for her, but Edward and I hadn't wanted her to go anywhere near him. Werewolves were so dangerous!

*Why* had she been driving over there? She knew I couldn't see her when she was with the wolves. She* knew* Edward had forbidden her to go there.

Edward was so troubled when he and Emmett came back to the house after seeing the crash scene. He had just wanted to see Bella and tried to go up the stairs, but he couldn't make it all the way because of the smell of her blood.

From the bottom of the stairs, he and Emmett told Carlisle and Jasper what they'd found out. Jasper kept asking both of them questions, to "clarify," he had said. It was like they were reporting to a General or something.

Well, he hadn't been a *General* in the Confederate Army, he had been a Major, but still …

Oh! When Jasper had said he had bitten Bella to put more venom in her, I thought Edward was going to explode. I was surprised he didn't run right up the stairs. He* hated* the idea of Jasper biting her.

Well, at first, we had all been shocked. Everyone had stood as still as statues when we had heard that. Jasper had always had the hardest time controlling his bloodlust, and he had bitten her and hadn't drained her?

Then Edward was pacing, flashing back and forth through the living room, his hands in his hair. It was a wonder he hadn't pulled his hair out!

Edward had stopped by the sliding glass doors. His eyes had turned black and his fists were shaking. "How dare he? How *dare* he bite her!" he whispered.

Esme went to him and placed a hand on his arm. "But Edward, she had already been bitten …"

He spun to face Esme and she had actually flinched away from him. The look of rage on his face was alarming.

He hissed at her, "I never wanted … Jasper had no right …" His hand flashed down in a slicing gesture, and Esme backed away from him. She looked like she was afraid of him.

Emmett and Rosalie had been by the front window and they had both turned around to stare at Edward in shock. I didn't think I had ever seen Emmett look so angry.

He darted across the room to Edward, pointed a finger at him, and hissed right in his face, "He brought her back. He saved her. What if he hadn't found her? What if he hadn't seen the bite, and he left her there, and the cops found her?"

Rosalie gasped, "Jasper saved all our asses. If she had been taken to the hospital …"

Edward snapped his jaw shut and flashed across the room toward the stairs. He slapped his hands down on the bannister, and growled and shook his head.

Jasper couldn't have heard what they had said, but that's when he growled from upstairs, "Would you have let her die? Would you have killed her so she wouldn't be changed into a vampire?"
Everyone was horrified. Even Rosalie, and she hadn't ever wanted Bella to become a vampire.

Emmett was right, though. She had been bitten. Jasper would have had to kill her to prevent her from becoming a vampire. What if he hadn't seen the bite? What if he had just called 9-1-1 and left her there?

The ramifications of that were too horrible to even think about. They would have drawn her blood and found the venom! Carlisle would have seen her, of course, but then he would have had to try and steal her out of the hospital. Being the Police Chief's daughter, she would have been guarded, and I knew Jacob Black and the other wolves would have been there. They would have smelled her! Carlisle could have walked into an ambush! Then we all …

*Oh my God!*

I couldn't bear to think about it or all the terrible things that could have gone wrong, and all Edward was worried about was that Jasper had bitten her? But it hadn't happened. Jasper had brought her back here. It was going to be okay. We had her here with us and it was going to be alright.

I knew it was going to be alright because I had seen that she was going to be one of us one day. I had always thought Edward would be the one to change her, eventually, even though he had kept fighting against it. I hadn't ever actually seen who changed her though.

I wasn't sure what I thought about Jasper biting her. I suppose I hadn't really thought about it before, but Jasper biting Bella seemed awfully … intimate, somehow. I wonder if he had swallowed any of her blood? If he had, it wasn't enough to change the color of his eyes. Honestly, I was shocked he hadn't drained her. He had always had a harder time than the rest of us controlling his bloodlust. I guess it didn't really matter how she was changed, but he wouldn't leave her, and I didn't understand that at all.

Why wouldn't he leave her?

Carlisle had cleaned her up some, but I wonder why he hadn't done it sooner? He could have told Jasper to leave the room.

*Finally,* Carlisle had called Esme to get Bella cleaned up and changed, and Rose and I followed her upstairs. It was certainly past time for Jasper to get cleaned up, too. It had been frightening to see him like that. He was disgusting! I don't know how he could bear to be covered in her blood for hours. Then I think he was mad at me for suggesting he get cleaned up.

Why hadn't Bella let me anywhere near her? I was her best friend.

Jasper had said she was getting more upset. Even I could see that. She had been lying still then she started jerking, and twitching, and pulling up her arms and legs. Then he had said I should leave. It had felt like he was throwing me out of the room. I hadn't known why Bella was so upset, so I left and had gone to the living room to wait.

-oOoOo-

I turned to pace back across the living room again and I noticed that Emmett was fidgeting. I decided to go sit beside him.

"Emmett, you know Bella's going to be alright. She's going to be one of us just like I knew she would. Carlisle said she's healing well. I wish Jasper hadn't bitten her, but Carlisle said the additional venom has helped her."
Carlisle leaned forward in his chair. "Yes, Emmett. I do believe it has helped her. She is doing very well."

"See?" I said to Emmett as I patted his leg. "You know she's going to be beautiful! Esme and Rose should be finished cleaning her up soon. Do you want to go see her in a little while?"

"Yeah, I do." He dropped his head toward his chest. "But she might have another fit if I go up there. The burning is bad enough. It's pure hell. I don't want to make it any worse for her."

"Oh, Emmett!" I couldn't help myself and gave him a big hug. "You know she loves you! You could go talk to her, and tell her stories about being at school, and playing video games together. Maybe remind her about movie night. Just tell her it's going to be alright."

"I don't know, Alice." He stood up from the couch and walked slowly toward the front of the house. He stared out the window near Edward's piano. "When I saw her in Jasper's arms … the blood was all over both of them. It was dripping off of them! I've never seen anything like it. She looked so … she was so …" His hand went to cover his eyes, and he shook his head back and forth. "She was so small, and helpless, and bloody, and …"

"Emmett, she is healing." Carlisle stood from his chair and walked toward Emmett. He took hold of Emmett's arm and gave him a squeeze. "In fact," he continued, "it's remarkable. She appears to be healing at a faster rate than Esme did. She's been so quiet and still. It's very puzzling. I can only attribute it to Jasper's influence."

A small smile appeared on Emmett's worried face. "I'm glad she didn't die in the crash. I'm glad she's healing. I just don't want to hurt her. I know Jazz is helping her, but …"

"Well, I'm going to go see her!" Edward marched into the living room from the dining room. "I'm sure I'll be able to get near her this time. She needs me to be with her. She needs for me to take care of her." He turned toward the stairs.

"Edward, dude, that might not be such a good idea right now," Emmett warned. "Maybe you should wait a while."

"I've waited quite long enough to be with my Bella. She's my mate, and she needs me to be there for her."

Carlisle took a step toward him. "Perhaps you should wait. Things have been rather quiet up there for a while. Bella should try to rest if it is at all possible."

"Carlisle! It's been over twelve hours. I'm going upstairs to see Bella."

And with that, Edward darted up the stairs. Well, she was his mate, and he should be with her. It was probably just all the blood that made things a little tense before. Since Esme and Rosalie probably had her dressed, and Jasper finally went to take a shower, things should have been calmer. We should all have been able to take turns and sit with her for a while. We had two and a half days left to go and …

What was that? There was a crash upstairs and I heard Jasper say, "What the fuck is going on here?"

Did Jasper run out of the bathroom? Did he tear the door off the hinges?

"Oh, shit," Emmett gasped. He and Carlisle raced up the stairs.

Before I could even get up off the couch, I heard a crack as loud as a gunshot, and then a rumbling
thunder that shook the walls! I didn't make it to the bottom of the stairs before I saw that Carlisle and Emmett each had hold of one of Edward's arms, and they were running him down the stairs.

"Oh, no! What happened?" I just could not imagine what had happened. Had Edward somehow fallen?

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, I heard Emmett whisper to Edward, "I told you not to go upstairs right now, but you never listen to anybody!"

I ran over to Edward and grabbed his arms as Emmett and Carlisle released him. "What happened?"

He had a look of utter disbelief on his face.

"Rosalie punched me."

"Rosalie … what? She punched you?" I was stunned.

"Yes. She punched me right out of the room, and I landed on Carlisle and Emmett." He made his way over to the couch as if he were dazed, and dropped to the cushions. I could see the cracks in his cheek healing.

Just then, Emmett started laughing. The laugh got louder, and he shook his finger at Edward. "Man, I told you!" He turned back to me, a big smile on his face. "Bella was all bent up, and twisting, and turning in the sheets and … Oh, Alice, Rose really nailed him, too. It was great."
Chapter 8, I Plan

Jasper’s POV

It was Sunday morning. It felt as if I had been sitting in that chair by Bella’s side for days, but it had only been fifteen hours since I had found her in her annihilated truck. It had been fairly peaceful and I was taking advantage of the quiet to really look at her.

She was … lovely.

“Bella, I’m right here,” I whispered. “I’m here with you.”

The memory of her broken, bloodied body would never be erased from my mind, and my frozen heart clenched with the thought of how close I had come to losing her. How damn close it was that she was nearly stolen from our lives.

My life.

I pushed down the fear and dread that began to form and concentrated, again, on feeling my relief, my thankfulness that I had found her in time. It had been just a fluke that I had happened to be hunting near the boundary line. Just chance I went west instead of north. Just … I didn’t know why I had decided to have a look along the treaty line, but thank God I did. Thank God.

I had never realized it before. Looking at her, I could not imagine the rest of my long existence without the blessing that was Bella Swan.
Beautiful swan.

“I will not leave you, Bella.”

I lightly traced my fingertips across her smooth brow and down along her temple. Cupping her cheek with my hand, I took comfort in the feel of her skin. She was beautiful. She was beyond beautiful. She had always been pale, even for a human, but my venom burning through her body had transformed her pale fragile skin into delicate, translucent porcelain that subtly glowed from within by her own light.

Bella’s long brown hair had been caked with mud and stained dark red with her blood. I didn’t know how they had done it, but Esme and Rose had removed every trace, and brushed a gleaming shine into those silken mahogany strands. One of them had taken a thick strand of her hair and brought it over her shoulder. It curled softly beneath her neck and across her chest, while the rest of her hair fanned out around her on the pale butter colored sheets. The golden light from the lamp on the bed side table enhanced the shimmering chestnut highlights throughout.

She was … exquisite.

Esme and Rose had dressed her in blue jeans and a long-sleeved forest green Henley. The deep green harmonized so well with her skin and hair, she very nearly took my breath away.

She was absolutely enthralling.

My eyes roamed over her full lips, tinted with a blush of pink; around the smooth curve of her cheek, her dark lashes resting on her skin; across her fine nose …

There were fifteen light freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks.

Hadin’t she said her mother had freckles?

“Bella, remember your mother, Renee. Remember your mother.”

Freckles. I had never noticed them before. Had I never looked at the girl before?

Girl?

Not just a girl. That lovely, resilient, and brave being was so much more than just a young girl. The pain I knew she was going through, the agony I had felt, the terror I had seen in her brown eyes … She was so strong to bear it all so courageously.

I would miss her depthless, liquid brown eyes.

She had said she had brown eyes like her father, Charlie.

“Bella, remember your father, Charlie. Remember your father.”

I would miss her rich brown human eyes, but I would take that trade. I would take the blood red eyes of a newborn vampire so I would never to have to live without her. So we would never have to be without her.

Leaning closer to her, I closed my eyes and inhaled, opening my mouth to breathe in and taste her scent again. There was a subtle sweetness, but it was different. It wasn’t as sweet as it had been before. There was a spice. Nutmeg? Ginger? Cinnamon? With just the barest hint of the floral that Edward had spoken about so often. He was an idiot. Her scent was so much more than that. Fuller,
Her scent called up a faint memory of my mother’s spice cake. I had so few memories of my human life, it startled me. That spice cake had been a rare treat. Flour, sugar, and spices were so difficult to get back in the mid 1800’s; even more so after the war started. But it was a scent, and a memory, that reminded me of the comforts of home. The comfort and security of knowing that was your refuge, your sanctuary; it was where you belonged.


Rosalie delicately cleared her throat. “Ahem, uh, Jazz?”

Her curiosity draped over me like a blanket, and I gradually opened my eyes. I saw that the tip of my nose was barely an inch away from Bella’s ear. I blinked and glanced over at Rosalie. Rosalie — who had been sitting quietly across the bed from me, watching me sniff Bella.

It occurred to me that I probably should have been embarrassed, but I wasn’t. Not in the least. Bella’s scent was just so … alluring, and enticing. It was … welcoming. It drew me in. It called to me.

I took my hand from Bella’s cheek and blinked again, gathering my thoughts. There were things I wanted done, and I was sitting there …

“Rose.” I cleared my throat. I sat up straight, never letting go of Bella’s hand. I knew I was stalling a bit, but I needed to get my shit together. But Bella’s scent …

“Yes, Jazz?” A knowing smirk appeared across Rosalie’s face. She was amused.

What was that about?

_Not relevant._

“Uh, Carlisle went to work, right?”

She continued to smile at me with that knowing look. “Yes, he left shortly after I punched Edward.” Her smile grew as she laced her fingers together and rested them in her lap. “He was a little late. He said he’d be home around nine in the morning. If he hears anything at the hospital, he’ll let us know.”

“Yes. Good.” I nodded to her.

I cleared my throat again. I wasn’t really nervous, but there were things I wanted, and you didn’t just _order_ Rosalie to do anything. “I need some things taken care of.”

“I already told you. Whatever you need, I’ll get it. You’re my brother.”

“Thanks, Rose.” I smiled at her in gratitude. “Several weeks ago, in anticipation of Bella’s upcoming _possible_ change …”

“Possible change?” she asked, interrupting me and raising her eyebrows.

“Yes. We all know she wanted it, and the Volturi know about her and will be expecting news of her change. We also know Edward has been completely against it, the ass. Despite that, in anticipation, I called Jenks and had him prepare three sets of basic identification for Bella. I usually add the photos myself, but I think you or Emmett will have to add them. They’ve _been_ ready, I just haven’t picked
them up yet. This,” I said and gestured at Bella, “I did not anticipate. I want you to pick them up.”

Rosalie nodded her understanding.

“The final payment is in a manila envelope in the center drawer of my desk in my study. When you pick them up, study them carefully in front of Jenks. He has always done a good job … exceptional, in fact, but it doesn’t hurt to make him sweat a little.”

Rosalie chuckled. “Fear is a great motivational tool.”

“It is,” I agreed, and couldn’t stop my own smirk from forming. “And you are just the woman to motivate him. I’ll call him right now and let him know.”

“But Jasper, it’s one o’clock in the morning!”

I quirked an eyebrow at her. “Jenks is well aware that he is to answer my calls no matter what time of day. Or night.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the tiny silver cell phone. I pressed in the numbers and waited. It rang eight times before he answered.

“H… he… Hello?”

I believed the man may have been sleeping.

Imagine that.

“Jenks,” I barked in to the phone.

There was a short pause and then a loud gasp.

“Mr. … Mr. Jasper? Uh, how can I help you, sir?”

I was sure Rosalie could hear the quavering in his voice as well as I could.

I kept my voice low and quiet. “You’ve prepared documents for me, and am I to understand they are ready?”

“Yes. Yes, they are. Done to your specifications exactly, Mr. Jasper. Will you be coming to pick them up or, ah, would you prefer that I send them to the usual PO Box?”

“I will be sending one of my associates to retrieve them. She will tell you the code words so that you know she is there as my representative. Do you remember the code words?”

“Uh yes, yes I do, Mr. Jasper. Ah, when can I expect to see your associate?”

I spoke at vampire speed to Rosalie, “Ten o’clock?”

She nodded.

“She’ll be there later today at ten o’clock a.m. I hope that isn’t inconvenient for you.”

“It’s Sunday … but NO! No, that isn’t any inconvenience at all. I, uh, I look forward to meeting her.”

I almost heard the man sweating.
“Very good, Jenks. She’ll be there at ten. As always, it’s been a pleasure doing business with you.” I pressed the button to end the call.

Rosalie’s laugh chimed like silver bells. “Jasper, I just don’t understand why that man hasn’t had a heart attack!”

I laughed with her. “I believe he’s too greedy to have a heart attack just yet. I scare the shit out of him, but he is compensated very well. He also handles a couple of my more ‘legitimate’ business dealings.”

“So what are the code words?” she asked.

“The code words are ‘Gorram Alliance’.”

“What is it?” Rosalie was baffled.

“Gorram Alliance. It’s from a TV show I like. Sort of a space western … Never mind.” I waved my hand at her.

“Now,” I said, getting serious again. “I’m going to need a four-door truck or an SUV. I’d prefer a truck. I’d like for Emmett and Alice to go purchase one for me as soon as possible. Today.”

I reached into my pocket to get my wallet and dropped it on the bed to open it so I wouldn’t have to let go of Bella’s hand. I reached over Bella and handed my credit card to Rose.

Taking the card, Rosalie asked, “If you need a car, couldn’t you use one of ours? Why send Emmett?” She frowned. “Couldn’t you send Edward? It would give him something to do.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Regrettably, I need Edward here to listen for anyone coming near the house. He does that anyway. His taste in cars … never mind. The other cars are too conspicuous, and I’ll need something bigger. Preferably a truck with four-wheel drive that isn’t too new. Emmett will know what I want. Where I’m taking Bella, it will fit in better.”

“Taking Bella? Why would you take her somewhere?” I could feel the anxiety coming off of Rose. “And why would you take her?”

“Rose, I have the most experience with newborns. We have no idea how violent she may be and we don’t know if she’ll remember anything but the burn.” I gently stroked Bella’s arm. “You know having her here is too dangerous — we’re too close to Forks. We can’t take a chance that the wolves might see her, or that she’ll take a snap at one of her friends.”

I took another breath. I hadn’t wanted to tell anyone my suspicions about all those missing persons in Seattle over the last few months. It smelled of newborn activity to me. I had seen it before.

“You know about all those deaths and missing persons over in Seattle?” When she nodded, I continued. “I think that’s newborn activity. It could be a dozen or more. I think someone is creating them on purpose, and they’re not keeping them contained. If this keeps up, the Volturi will notice. If they haven’t already.”

Rose gasped in surprise. “What makes you think that? Why would somebody do that?”

“I can’t imagine why someone would do that here. We don’t fight for territory, and we don’t feed from humans, anyway.” I ran my hand up Bella’s arm. “But remember, in the Southern Vampire Wars, that’s how vampires gained more territory for feeding. That’s how I did it when I was … serving under Maria. That’s why she changed me. Then, when she saw how useful I was, she had
me train and lead her newborns into battle for her. So I could eliminate them when they were no longer useful."

I dropped my eyes away from her to stare at Bella’s hand in mine. I noticed that at some point, I had pushed my sleeves up my arms, displaying some of the scars I had received during my service. They were a constant reminder of training, corralling, and containing those newborns, and fighting other vampires to the death. Those scars had always made the Cullens uncomfortable, and Alice wanted me to keep them covered so she wouldn’t have to look at them. When Bella had heard the condensed version of my story, against Edward’s wishes, she was the only one who hadn’t ever cringed away from the silvery marks. Though human eyes couldn’t see them as well, I knew Bella had seen them.

Because you couldn’t see most of them, it didn’t mean they weren’t there. It didn’t mean that what they represent didn’t happen.

“Jazz, I remember. I’m sorry. I should have realized …”

“It’s okay. None of you had the same sort of upbringing I had and wouldn’t know what to watch for. You wouldn’t know the signs. But it’s bad enough that I noticed it, and we don’t want the Volturi becoming any more interested in this area than they already are.” I stroked Bella’s arm again and shook my head. “Creating a newborn army in Seattle makes about as much sense as a vampire biting Bella and leaving her. None of it makes any goddamn sense at all.” I traced a path with my fingers along Bella’s jaw to her chin, and then looked at Rosalie from the corner of my eye. “Rose, I don’t want her left alone at all. If I should have to leave before she wakes up, and I don’t have any plans on doing so, but if I should, I want someone in here with her at all times.”

Bella’s emotions, which had been fairly steady, began to shift more quickly. Had I let my guard down thinking about Maria’s army again? Was my conversation with Rosalie affecting her? I could feel her pain, some fear, and longing. Was that sorrow mixed in? Then back to pain again. Wait. Was that anger?

“Edward! Stop!” I heard Alice’s frightened voice downstairs.

Dropping Bella’s hand, I sprang from my chair. I landed in a defensive crouch beyond the foot of the bed, facing the door. My hair fell into my eyes, but I didn’t bother brushing it out of the way. I hadn’t been paying any attention to him, but I could feel Edward’s anger and jealousy.

Rosalie jumped up from her chair and stood ready by the side of the bed. That placed her between the bed and the windows.

She had good instincts, but I knew no one was coming through the windows; Edward would come through the door. Strategically, crashing through the windows would generate more chaos, distracting the enemy — possibly distract the enemy long enough to get you in close enough to attack.

Edward stormed into the room and stopped just inside the door. Idiot. As soon as he reached the top of the stairs, he would have been able to see where I was. If he was going to attack me, he should have just kept coming.

His arms were raised, fists clenched and trembling. His chest was heaving with his breaths. Fury, jealousy and possessiveness were boiling off of him. His eyes were wild and nearly black.

He jabbed a finger toward me. “Jasper! You are not taking her anywhere! I will not permit it! She is to stay here, near the family and me, where she is safe!”
A shriek tore out of Bella’s throat. I didn’t dare turn to look at her, but I could hear her begin to writhe on the bed. From my peripheral vision, I saw Rosalie glance to Bella and back to Edward.

I waited. His first mistake was to stop just inside the door. By doing that, he gave me more than enough time to prepare. He should have just kept coming. I waited for him to make his second mistake.

Edward’s fury and jealousy were beating into me from the front, Bella’s rage and hot pain were pulsing in steady waves from the back. I pushed back against all of it, but I didn’t move. I watched him.

Apparently, the child had about reached his limit.

Bella’s gasping screams slapped at my ears.

He took a step forward, and jabbed his finger toward me again. “YOU! I’ve had about enough of you! You barking orders and telling everyone how we are going to behave. Bella is my mate, and she’s not going anywhere with you!”

Bella’s screams and cries were tearing at me, but I couldn’t go to her. Not with Edward about to go ballistic right in front of me. Who knew what he would do? Bella was still so vulnerable and unable to protect herself. I had to protect her.

I felt my own anticipation build. I had been waiting for his outburst; it had only been a matter of time, and I knew just how I could set him off.

Rosalie stepped toward him. “Edward! Can’t you hear Bella screaming? Do you see her thrashing on the bed? You caused that!” Rosalie shouted at him.

She growled at him!

“Bella was doing well until you came up here,” Rose continued in a snarl. “Jasper’s right! We can’t keep her here! We have to move her. You and Alice are about to graduate. Remember? You are the ones who can’t leave. You and Alice need to stay here to keep up appearances. Right? Emmett, Jasper and I are already supposed to be away at school, remember? Emmett and I will go with Jasper and Bella.”

Well, hell, that was a good idea. I should have thought of it.

By that time, Esme and Alice had reached the top of the stairs and were in the hallway outside the room, waiting to see what might happen next, fear surrounding them. Esme flinched at each of Bella’s fresh screams.

Emmett came up behind them. I noted that he was tensed to fight.

The screams! Bella’s shrieks, and her utter fury, were pounding into my head. I needed to end that shit. Fast.

“He dared to change her against my wishes and she’s my mate!” Edward’s voice was straining higher and higher. “We will keep her here, with us, where we can protect her! HE isn’t taking her from me!”

Was he a total fucking idiot? Bella wasn’t staying anywhere near him. That shit was gonna end. I was in war mode, and it had slipped down over me effortlessly, as if those decades I had been away from it had never happened.
I flexed my fingers to draw Edward’s attention away from Rosalie. Edward’s black-as-night eyes had been drilling holes into her, but flashed to me at my movement.

I smirked at him and spoke in a low, quiet voice, “You’ve certainly done a good job keeping her safe, haven’t you, Edward? Yes, it’s my venom that’s changing her, my venom replacing her blood. And Bella’s blood? Her blood was the most exquisite blood I have ever had.”

He roared and leapt at me. I knew he would.

I let instinct take over. Instinct, and a century of fighting and winning in Maria’s own version of Hell.

I saw his fingers curl into claws, reaching for my neck. His venom dripped from his bared teeth.

I leaned slightly to my right, and grabbed his left wrist with my right hand and pulled. That brought his neck directly to my left hand, and I slammed him to the floor, face down. I stomped on his neck with my left foot and heaved, ripping his left arm off at the shoulder with an ear piercing, metallic screech. I threw it across the room, and sent it crashing through the windows to the yard, three floors below. Dropping onto his lower back with my right knee, I grabbed his right arm, twisting it up behind his back, and then leaned my weight down on his arm.

Edward screamed.

Back in the “good ol’ days,” I would have ripped his head off and flung it away. Doing that made the body easier to dismember. Dismemberment made them easier to burn.

But I didn’t. I hoped I wouldn’t regret that decision later.

I recalled the terror and pain, fear and horror I had felt from Bella when I first found her, and I bombarded him with it.

He wasn’t going to move until I let him.

I rose to my feet and stood over him, my scarred arms at my sides. My chest was heaving, sucking in air I didn’t need and forcing it back out. I could smell the fear and anger that permeated the room.

Bella was screaming. No one moved.

Though my head was still bent down to face Edward, I shifted my eyes to look at Esme, Alice and Emmett.

Esme: I could see the shock on her face and feel it in her mind.

Oddly, Emmett was resigned as he stared down at Edward.

Alice: the horror she felt stained her face, and it pummeled me. Her tiny hands were shaking and covered her mouth. Her eyes were wide, but grew larger when she realized my eyes were on her. Disbelief and fear radiated from her and she backed away, shaking her head.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no.” She took another step back, and then another. “No, Jasper, no.”

Her eyes dropped to the scars on my arms and haltingly moved up to my chest, where most of my scars were hidden by my shirt. Then up to my neck where more silvery scars were visible. They moved hesitantly back to my eyes that I knew were onyx black. Fear poured from her. She feared me. She was terrified of me.

She had never seen this side of me before. Not in all the years we had been together. She had seen
my scars before, of course. She knew they were there. That was why she had always insisted I keep them covered. We made love in the dark where they didn’t show quite as much, or she kept her eyes closed so she couldn’t see them. She was aware of my past in Maria’s army. She had also heard snippets of rumors and stories. She hadn’t believed it.

It all just became too real for her.

“I … I can’t … I just can’t,” she wailed and fled down the stairs.

My Bella screamed.


Every muscle in Edward’s body was strung tight as he quaked under my mental assault. I released him from feeling Bella’s terror and pain, and he collapsed.

I turned to Rose. Her anger was sharp and pointed, flaring out from her. Angry at Edward? Alice? Me?

“I’m with you, Jazz.”

I gave her a grateful nod.

Esme still hadn’t said a word, but she stepped aside to let Emmett into the room. Edward was still moaning on the floor, leaking venom into the golden carpet from his wound. Emmett flipped him onto his back and easily scooped him up. He gave me a small, tight smile, and carried Edward away.

I didn’t care where he took him, as long as it was away from Bella.

With Edward out of the room, I returned to Bella and bent over her. I took hold of her quivering arms, pushing up the long sleeves, and stroking her smooth skin. I needed to feel her, touch her.


Her twisting and turning began to slow. The screams had stopped, but she was gasping for air. I leaned closer to her and breathed out, “I’m right here.” I hoped she would become aware of my scent, and hoped that it would help her.

She inhaled sharply, and I felt it when recognition sparked in her.

“Yes, Bella, I’m right here. I’ve got you. I’m right here,” I whispered as I cupped her face with my right hand.

She inhaled deeply, held it for a moment, and slowly let it out.

I felt her relief. “I’m here. I will protect you.”

Her feet stopped pushing against the mattress, and her legs slowly lowered to the bed. Her arms were less tense as I eased them to her sides. I ran my hands up and down her arms, trying to soothe her.

“I’m here, Bella. I did not leave you. I’m right here. I’m staying right here.”

I eased my right hand to her forehead and smoothed her hair back.

“I’m right here. I won’t leave you, Bella. I’m right here with you.”
I took her hand in my left and brought it to my chest over my heart, and placed my right hand against her face.

“I’m right here. I will help you.”

Since I awoke as a vampire, I had been able to feel and sense others’ emotions. I could “collect” the emotions I felt and send them back out. But I had never opened myself completely to anyone’s emotions. I wasn’t sure that I could. I had never done it before, but I would try. For Bella.

I concentrated on Bella and forced my mind open as far as it would go.

“Bella, I will take your pain.”

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Chapter End Notes

Code words "Gorram Alliance": quote from the TV show "Firefly"
I Burn

Chapter Notes

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"I Live" is also on TwiWrite, A Different Forest, and Fanfiction.

"Someday" by duskri123 on TwiWrite

Chapter 9, I Burn

Jasper’s POV

The searing fire, the scorching flames flickered over and through every part of me.

I remembered that burn when it was mine alone to endure.

I remembered feeling the distress, horror, and confusion of those I had changed, but I had blocked those sensations as best I could. I left them to themselves so I wouldn’t feel it or their chaotic emotions. Their hate, their fear, their terror.

Their utter hopelessness.

I abandoned them so I would not hear their screams or their pleas for a merciful death to end the torture.

Later, I had even used that fear, terror, and utter hopelessness against others, but I had never tried to ease it, never tried to help any of them through it, or feel it with them to share their suffering.

I felt Bella’s suffering. Her suffering was my agony.

I took her pain. I took all that I could but I didn’t think it was enough.

That was my torment.

Scalding hot rivers flowed and rippled through every vein and artery, frying every nerve, bursting every cell. I reached for it, grasped it, and drew it from her to me.

It wasn’t enough.

With her suffering and misery, I also felt her relief and gratitude.

I felt her recognition and acceptance.
She knew. She knew I was there. She knew I was trying to help her—to take her pain, distress and anguish. I took all that I could and it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

Bella should not have to endure that. She should not suffer—my Bella.

For Bella, I would have taken it all. I would do it again.
I Ponder

Chapter Notes

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Twilight Rambles, Chapter 25 "Where's Carlisle?" by LJ Summers on FFn and ADifferentForest

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Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Chapter 10, I Ponder

Esme's POV

I hated to see such discord and animosity between my sons, but I didn't see that there was anything I could have done about it. I knew that Edward wanted to see Bella so badly, but his presence seemed to have such a negative effect on her.

I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it.

Her intense adverse reaction to Alice was beyond belief. I just didn't understand it. When Bella wasn't with Edward, she would be with Alice, though I believed much of that was by Edward's design. I couldn't imagine why Alice's presence would upset her so.

That she was so aware of the presence of others was mind-boggling. I recalled being somewhat aware of Carlisle and Edward nearby during my transformation, but it had barely registered — the pain had been so all-consuming.

My poor Bella! To have been in that terrible crash! It must have been horrific. Then to be bitten by some vampire — it was heartbreaking. Jasper hadn't recognized the scent of the vampire — he, most likely, had been a nomad.

But why would he bite her and leave her there? Jasper had said that she had only been bitten once, and it was not a bite to feed.

It was so bewildering.

Thank goodness Jasper had been nearby, or we would have lost our girl.

His restraint! To have been able to bite her to inject more venom into her system, and not be
overcome with bloodlust, was just remarkable. I didn't think that I could have done it. He was so strong.

I got up from my chair by the right side of the bed to check on Bella. She was so beautiful, even when her face displayed small signs of her immense pain. She always had been beautiful. I placed my hand on her arm.

"Bella, everything will be all right. I'm here and I will help you. We all love you so much."

It was such a large bed, I had to walk around to the other side to reach Jasper, though I stopped at the foot of the bed just to look at them.

Overall, Bella seemed so peaceful, and she looked just like a little angel. She appeared to be even smaller lying there next to Jasper. Maybe it was because Jasper was so tall. Even curled on his side, he looked so much larger than her. His shoulders were quite wide.

I continued around the bed and bent toward him. He was lying on his left side, facing Bella, and I really couldn't reach over him to take his hand, so I placed my hand on his hair and smoothed it back from his face. It was such a pretty golden honey color.

"Jasper, I'm right here watching over you. I'm right here. Everything is fine. You and Bella are safe."

Keep Jasper safe? I scoffed because I believed that if anyone could have taken care of himself, it would have been Jasper. Though, I would have protected them both to the very end of my own life. They were both so vulnerable. I couldn't see Jasper allowing himself to be defenseless like that. Unless…

Unless he knew Rosalie and I would protect and take care of him?

I had never seen anyone move like he did when Edward ran into the room and leapt at him. Edward should have listened. It was so obvious that Bella was in distress; Edward should have left the room.

I was very sorry that Edward had to suffer the pain of losing a limb, but, in my heart of hearts, I had to conclude that he probably deserved it. Bella was screaming so desperately, and Jasper did not attack him first.

The way Jasper had been standing there … just the look on his face was chilling. His eyes had been a dull black, and his jaw had been tightly clenched. Then when Edward leapt at him, Jasper slammed him down so quickly and tore off his arm — it was terrifying!

When Jasper returned to Bella, he touched her so tenderly and gently, as if she were made of spun glass. The way he caressed her face and brought her hand to his chest was so sweet, so loving. I had never seen him behave that way before.

Of course, I had no idea what he meant when he had said he would take her pain. It all happened so fast. I hadn't time to react even if I had known what was going to happen.

Not a moment after he finished speaking, Bella had gasped and his entire body shook as if he'd been electrocuted, then he fell to his knees. I knew Rosalie was as stunned as I was, but we both reached him at the same time, just as he slumped to the floor. He must have somehow taken some of Bella's burning pain into himself. Even if that was what happened, he never let go of her hand.

I knew how he had suffered feeling all of our emotions over the years. There had been times when he had to leave because he was about to be overwhelmed. I could not even imagine how he might be suffering if he was somehow connected to Bella and experiencing what she was going through.
Rosalie and I hadn't known what to do. We couldn't just leave him like that, but because Bella was so close to the side of the bed, there wasn't room for him there unless we moved her. And he wouldn't let go of her hand! Even Rosalie had tried to pry his fingers loose with me.

The only thing we could do was to try and move them both at the same time. I went to the other side of the bed and climbed up so I could reach Bella. When Rosalie had her arms in position under Jasper, I pulled on Bella as Rosalie lifted Jasper.

There was something to be said for vampire strength.

We had to leave Jasper on his left side because they just would not let go of each other's hands.

Rosalie! I had to smile at her when all she had to say after picking him up and putting him on the bed was, "He's more solid than he looks!"

Those two were so like true brother and sister at times.

Jasper did seem to be helping Bella. Both of them have been motionless — so still and so quiet. It was certainly nothing like what I had experienced before. I remembered how it felt to be going through the agony of that transformation. I remembered Rosalie's and Emmett's. It was dreadful just to witness it! I had watched over them as they bore the pain, and Carlisle had said, even as horrible as it looked, theirs had been normal.

I patted Jasper's shoulder and ran my hand down his arm. I hoped I was comforting him in some small way.

I heard someone coming up the stairs and stood to face the door. I knew Carlisle was home, and Edward had been told in no uncertain terms he was to stay away.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that it was Carlisle.

"Esme." He smiled as he came in the door. "How have they been doing?"

I grasped his hands, and he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before he turned his attention to Jasper and Bella.

"They have been so quiet. As you can see, they haven't even moved."

"It is extraordinary," he whispered as he leaned forward to place his hand on Jasper's forehead. Next he grasped Jasper's arm then moved down to brush his fingers across his bare foot.

"I don't know what I expected to find, but Jasper feels as if he is the same temperature as always. His skin looks and feels the same."

Carlisle rounded the bed and examined Bella in the same way, starting at her forehead. He gently cupped her face for a moment and smiled before he reached for her arms. Then he leaned a bit closer to her and was still. He stood up momentarily and appeared perplexed. He sat in the chair and began stroking Bella's hand.

I just sat down, clasped my hands together in my lap, and waited for him. I knew he was thinking, trying to puzzle out something, and he would tell me when he had it worked it out.

"Esme," he began. "It's been twenty-seven-and-a-half hours since Jasper first found Bella. Her appearance has changed, as you can plainly see, but strangely, her skin has begun to harden already. Her temperature has lowered. Her breathing and heart rate seem steady and are about the same as
they were the last time I examined her. You said Jasper said he was going to take her pain and collapsed about twelve-and-a-half hours ago?"

"Yes. It was at about 2:30 this morning."

"The first time he collapsed after feeling Bella's pain, he was unresponsive for thirty minutes. I'd been expecting him to come out of it before now. I wonder if he will wake up when Bella does or if he'll awaken beforehand?"

He patted Bella's hand, stood up and turned to face the windows.

"You and Emmett did a fine job replacing the windows," he remarked.

"Thank you. Emmett is quite skilled. Fortunately, we have a few extra windows in the garage. You know how rambunctious he can be at times. I still think he forgets how strong he is." I smiled to think of Emmett. He was the strongest and largest of us all, but there were times when he had the enthusiasm of a child.

Carlisle chuckled at that. "Yes, he can be quite 'rambunctious.' We're lucky he's so handy, since he does manage to break things on occasion. And he's been more than helpful with our remodeling projects. He has quite the eye for design, too. But don't tell him I said that." Carlisle, with a small chuckle, shook his head then turned back toward me.

"How did Bella react when Emmett was in the room? Things remained calm, evidently."

Looking over Bella and Jasper, I smiled and nodded. "She appeared to be the same as she is now. Jasper had no reaction either. I hate to admit it, but it was a relief that they didn't react to his presence. I was a bit nervous having him come in here. He hadn't been in to see her before and I feared she might react badly. I had no idea what Jasper would have done if she had."

The thought of Jasper "reacting badly" had sent chills through me.

"If she didn't react then, I don't think we have anything to worry about if Emmett wants to come back and sit with her … them … when he and Alice get back. They've gone to Portland to look at a truck Emmett saw on the internet."

I nodded. I had heard them leave. "How is Edward now?"

At that question, a look of concern crossed Carlisle's face. "Physically, he will be fine. He's been out hunting. Feeding will help the healing, of course. Emotionally, however …" He sighed and crossed his arms. "You know he was distraught when Alice called him and told him Bella had taken off from work, and was heading for La Push. He was quite angry, also. When Alice couldn't see her any longer, we just assumed she was with Jacob Black. I was surprised Edward didn't run straight there. It's best that he didn't, considering how he reacted when he saw her covered in blood."

Edward had fought so hard to control his bloodlust for her. Seeing her in Jasper's arms so badly injured and covered with blood had been too much for him.

"Bella didn't make it to La Push, though, Carlisle, and Alice still couldn't see her. Alice hasn't been able to see anything of Bella's future. She told me earlier she can't see Jasper's future now either." I lightly stroked Jasper's arm. "What do you think it means?"

Carlisle came to stand behind me and placed his hands on my shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. "My only guess is that since Bella can keep Edward from reading her mind, she has somehow been blocking him. Like a shield of some sort. One of Aro's Volturi guards is his personal
shield — Renata. She can block anyone from physically attacking Aro, but she has to be touching him in order to do it. Aro couldn't read Bella's mind, and he's very powerful. Even Aro's Jane couldn't affect her. Thank God. Jane's power is extremely painful, or so I've observed."

I patted Carlisle's hand and smiled up at him. "Our Bella is quite the wonder."

"Yes, she is!" Carlisle squeezed my hand and started to pace across the floor toward the windows again. He gazed at the cloudy afternoon and took in a breath. "Given that, I would have to say she is a shield for protection or defense." One hand went to rest on his hip, and with the other he tapped his chin. "Perhaps, when she was injured so badly, she somehow caused it to expand and tried to protect herself. We've all heard the stories about how humans, in times of extreme stress, can suddenly gain almost super-human strength. She must be blocking Alice now. I would surmise that because Jasper is touching her, she is shielding him, too."

He turned toward me and gestured toward Bella and Jasper. "It's all mere speculation, of course. We won't know until we are able to experiment and see if she can block them at will or if she can also shield others. Then again, she may never be able to control it."

"You know, Carlisle," I said as I rose from the chair and walked closer to him. Though Edward was out hunting, I didn't want to take a chance he might return without my hearing him and overhear my thoughts and concerns. I didn't know where Rosalie was, but I suspected she and I were of the same mind.

I took Carlisle's hand in both of mine. "Edward told me last night that when Jasper was touching Bella, he could not read his mind. When Jasper left Bella to take a shower, Edward could hear him again. But this morning, when Edward came rushing into the room, Jasper let go of Bella. Edward told me that later he realized even when Jasper let go of Bella's hand, he couldn't read his mind. Do you suppose her shield is getting stronger?"

Carlisle took me in his arms and sighed. "It's certainly possible, Esme. Latent abilities in humans often get stronger when they become vampires. Edward is a prime example of that. He could not read minds before he was changed, though his mother had told him he had been quite intuitive at times. Jasper is another. He had said that he rose quite quickly through the ranks, despite his youth. He said he had been told he was rather charismatic and empathetic, and that would have certainly helped. His innate charisma evidently became his ability to feel and project emotions. Apparently, Bella is innately gifted with a shield. But to shield Jasper when he wasn't touching her?"

"Carlisle, I have a theory," I whispered. I couldn't help myself. I glanced over at the door to make sure no one was there and could hear me. I started to feel a little guilt at my thoughts, but I could not ignore my observations any longer.

Carlisle looked at me, worry showing on his face, and took my face in his hands. "What's wrong? What is your theory?"

I leaned close to his ear and whispered, "I think Jasper and Bella are mates."

He took hold of my shoulders and held me away from him. He gaped at me in shock. "What? Why?" he stammered.

"Let me explain. I've been watching Jasper quite closely. You know I've always been concerned about him and how, even though he's part of our family, he has always seemed to be on the periphery. On the outside, looking in." I had to pause for a moment and gather my thoughts.

"As I've said, I've been watching him very closely. He is very different with Bella now. He never got
so close to her before, he hardly came within ten feet of her, and now he's always touching her and speaking softly to her. He barely even spoke to her before. I attributed that to his concern he might try to bite her, though when he and Alice drove her to Phoenix to keep her from James, he didn't appear to have a problem. He was directly protecting her then. In that ballet studio, her blood did not affect him, and he killed James. He was protecting her again. I can't explain what happened when she cut her finger at her birthday, but when he found her after the crash, she was covered in blood, and he didn't attack her. He protected her again."

Carlisle's hands gently smoothed my hair as I touched his cheek. "Go on," he said.

"Rosalie and I had quite a bit of contact with Bella's skin when we were trying to clean the blood from her. If Edward had suddenly been unable to hear us, he would have said so. You know how he is. He would have mentioned it and tried to reason it out. He is so like you, in that respect. I think that Bella is only shielding Jasper. I think she's trying to protect him. Alice has only complained about not seeing them; she still gets glimpses of the rest of us."

I hugged Carlisle to me and whispered more quietly into his ear. "Can you tell that her scent has changed?"

"Yes, I did notice that. It's quite a bit less floral. It's spicier, warmer, somehow. Esme?"

I was trying to give him all of my observations, all my reasons for coming to the conclusion I had, but I was feeling more guilty by the moment about those conclusions. I just couldn't deny them any longer. Like everyone else, I had thought Bella was Edward's mate. I believed we were wrong.

"When Edward attacked Jasper, and Jasper threw him to the floor and ripped his arm off I was shocked, to say the least, but Alice? She was horrified. She backed away from him and said 'I can't, I just can't' and fled down the stairs. I would have thought she'd go to him and at least ask how he was. Or that he would have gone to her because she was so obviously upset. You know how we seem to feel compelled to go to our mates and comfort them after any sort of trauma — how we have to have physical contact with our mates. But, Alice ran away. She was terrified of him."

"I can understand that she would be terrified. Like the rest of you, she's not been exposed to such … such violence."

"But, Carlisle," I whispered. "Emmett, Rosalie and I stayed. Alice ran away from him, and he just let her go. Instead, he went immediately to Bella to comfort her. You have seen the effect he has on her. She calms down when he speaks to her and touches her."

"One would think that would be his empathic gift."

"I don't think that's all it is, Carlisle." I looked into his eyes and asked, "Did you realize that Alice had taken all of Jasper's things out of her room and put them in his study?"

"No, I didn't. Are you saying …?" Carlisle began, but I placed my finger on his lips to stop him.

"Of course, I don't know what Alice is thinking, but I would think that means she's afraid of him and doesn't want him in her personal space; doesn't want him near her. She has, in effect, thrown him out."

"But, Esme, you know how … intensely … Rosalie and Emmett have fought over the years."

"Yes, I do. But Alice and Jasper haven't ever fought like that. They've had their tiffs, of course, but nothing like this.
"You have noticed Bella's scent is different." He nodded. "All this time, when Jasper needed to be in close contact with her, he didn't try to hurt her, he protected her. I believe that he must have recognized some quality about her that caused him to be protective of her."

I placed my hand over his cheek. "When she wrecked her truck, another vampire had bitten her first. That would have begun the change. That would have begun to change the scent of the blood that remained in her system, though there couldn't have been too much at the time. How else can you explain Jasper not losing control and draining her? How else can you explain his being able to bite her and force in more venom? He must have been able to detect a difference in her blood, even if he was not consciously aware of it."

My hand slid from his cheek to his shoulder. "Even if that were not the case, he strove to protect her once again. He bit her to ensure that she would survive and she would not suffer with the change any longer than she had to. He forced more venom into her, and then carried her all the way back here — to his home. He brought her home so he could protect and take care of his mate."

Carlisle's eyes widened in astonishment again. He looked over at Jasper and Bella lying next to each other on Edward's bed, their hands entwined just as they had been for hours. He looked back at me, his arms tightening around me, and whispered in my ear, "Yes. He has been protective of her, and rather possessive. He has been displaying more of a dominant personality. More so than he ever has the entire time he's been with us." He kissed my temple. "I don't know why I didn't put it all together before. There's no other explanation for how or why he would even attempt to try to take on the pain of her transformation."

I hugged Carlisle to me. "I believe he's been acting instinctively to protect his mate. I don't even think he's really aware of what he's doing. He's ... just doing it."

Carlisle lightly kissed my cheek and inhaled deeply. "He has been quite taken with her scent, also, and scent alerts us to so many things, including our mates. Esme, you have certainly given me something to ponder."
Chapter 11, I Drive

Emmett's POV

Normally, I enjoyed the shit out of driving my Jeep. I'd rather be driving it through a mud bog or up a damn mountain, but I didn't mind driving to Portland to look at that truck for Jasper. My Jeep was fuckin' loaded. But even with all the buttons and switches and dials it had, there wasn't one to make Alice chill out. She had been wound up since we got on the road. Well, she was always kinda wound up, but this was something else. She had discovered a whole new level of wound-up-ed-ness.

Man, she's been cranked off at Jasper.

I thought that maybe I should drive Jasper's new truck back to the house and have her drive the Jeep. She knows better than to do anything to my Jeep.

I hope.

"Um … Alice …"

"Emmett, it was horrible. Horrible! Jasper was horrible!" Alice cried as she brought her tiny hands up to cover her eyes, as if it would prevent her from seeing what she hadn't wanted to see.

"I … I know he's fought vampires before. I know he was in the Southern Vampire Wars. He's got all those … those … those hideous scars everywhere! But … but I never saw him behave like that before!" Her tiny hands flew from her face and sliced through the air. "Even when we would spar out in the yard, I never saw …" She shook her head. "Even when he killed James and tore him apart, I never imagined he could be so … so vicious! So cruel and vicious! He didn't have to rip Edward's
arm off!" She slapped the dashboard with a loud crack.

Vicious? Fuck yeah, it was vicious! I thought it was fucking awesome. It was fucking EPIC!

Jasper was one fast son of a bitch, and he could have ripped Edward's head off.

Besides, how did she think he survived a hundred years of Maria and vampires trying to take a piece out of him and kill him?

I mean, who didn't like the occasional knock-down, drag-out, beat 'em into the dirt fight, right? But a hundred years of it? A hundred years of every fight being a fight to the death? I couldn't even imagine it.

When Rose and I had been traveling, we would run into a nomad vamp or two, now and then. Not real often, but once in a while. Luckily, there really hadn't been any problems after the initial ... wariness. I just couldn't imagine fighting off hordes of them, day after day, year after year.

I didn't think there had been a male yet that didn't appreciate Rosie's "assets." A few females, too. And who wouldn't, right? She was one hot babe.

Once I made sure they understood Rosie was mine, (and I ain't sharin') we had gotten along fine. You just let them know up front you were mates and that usually took care of it. You didn't mess with somebody's mate. That was understood. Having to fight off every male that took a long look at my Rosie would have been ... it would have sucked. I would have enjoyed it now and then, but still.

Well, there was that one time over in Ohio this female wasn't taking the hint that I wasn't on the market. She had been pretty damn persistent. I thought Rosie was gonna snap her into little pieces and zip 'em out into the middle of Lake Erie. Rosie had tackled her and embedded that female right down into that beach, which hadn't been easy because that beach was pretty rocky.

Well, I had stopped her from tearing the bitch apart, but Rosie wasn't satisfied she'd learned her lesson. Rosie started biting her hair off! One of the funniest damn things I had ever seen! She bit big chunks out, too. No way that female was going to be able to do a comb over and hide that shit!

That's my Rose!

That was just that one time though. Most of the time there weren't any problems with running across a nomad or two. Pass along a little vamp news, share a few vamp stories. Not a bad way to spend a couple hours or so.

What was surprising was how many stories we had heard about "The Major" or the "God of War." Once I figured out that was Jasper, I thought it was all bullshit. I thought they were all exaggerated. Just a little. You know how the tale grows with the telling? Hell, that's how ya did it! That's how it was back home in Tennessee — the first liar didn't stand a chance.

But we had heard more tall tales and legends from vampires all over the world, and all the stories were too similar. Details had matched up too well. Living with Jasper all those years, you would have never known he was such a scary motherfucker. I guess all the scars kind of gave it away, and they were all over him. The worst on his chest and shoulders though. I didn't think I had seen him without a shirt on more than a few times, except in gym class. But he changed clothes real quick. That always seemed to disappoint the gay boys. Of course, the humans really couldn't see the scars. It was easy to almost forget about them.

And he was so quiet. Always off to the side or in a corner or something — lurking, almost. Creepy vampire shit. Or reading another damn book, unless we were wrestling, or I was kicking his ass at
He was always thinking. I had started to think all those history classes were rotting his brain. Hell! He had been there! Why would he want to keep taking classes on the Civil War? The outcome sure wasn't going to change. His side was still gonna lose. It wasn't like there were going to be any updates or advances in the technology, ya know? Not like with the medical courses Carlisle, Edward and Rose have taken or those engineering and architecture classes Esme and I take now and then. Believe it or not, there were even classes on the psychology of color and how to use it. Who would have believed that? Alice liked that crap. There were even new-fangled computerized sewing machines. They almost made a dress by themselves. Alice had two. Then there was that serger thing. Whatever the hell that was.

Alice must have seen his scars before. I knew he, uh, "plowed that field" once in a while (no secrets in this family) and he did tend to project those happy emotions a little. Which, if I happened to be with Rose at the time, was like kicking it into warp drive.

He couldn't have been wearing a shirt then.

Could he?

The way Alice had been acting, I could see her making him wear a shirt. I mean damn! He had even worn a t-shirt when we'd gone swimming. That would totally suck.

"Al, I'm pretty sure that whenever we were wrestling or sparring, Jasper let us win most of the time. Which kinda pisses me off, now that I think about it. But hey! You know Edward's going to be all right. I found his arm right away, and Esme and I attached it. 'Course he wouldn't hold still. I practically had to sit on him so Esme could get his arm in the right position." I patted her leg to try and calm her down.

Alice sobbed again.

Is she going to keep this up?

Damn, she was an emotional little thing. Always had been. Jasper had always been so steady and composed. So … stoic. How did he stand it? Must have been from all those years he spent with those screamin' ass crazy newborns.

"Alice, Edward will be fine. There's gonna be a scar, but he'll be fine. Though when Esme sees what happened to her rose bushes, she might start ripping limbs off Edward and Jasper." I had to laugh at that. When Jasper ripped off Edward's arm and threw it through the windows, it wiped out about four rose bushes and broke off three more.

Esme would not be amused.

I was glad I hadn't done it that time.

It was a good thing we had some extra windows. I thought I should order a few more just to keep the inventory up. Just in case.

Alice shivered and pressed her hands to her face. "So where are we going again?"

"Portland. Saw a truck on the internet that I think Jasper will like. It's a 2000 GMC Sierra 1500. Four door, four-wheel drive … looked nice on line, but I'm gonna hafta check it out."

Alice took her hands from her face finally and clasped them in her lap. "Maybe Rose should have
gone to look at it. You know she knows more about engines than anybody."

"Yeah, she does, but Jasper sent Rose to Jenks. I got the impression he didn't want her too far away. Won't take her long to pick up Bella's new IDs."

*And put the fear of God into Jenks.*

Alice stiffened, and I saw her little hands clench into fists.

"Emmett, explain to me why you and Rosalie are letting Jasper order you around. He's shouting orders at everyone!" Her tiny hands waved through the air and clenched into fists again. "Explain to me why no one is allowed to get near Bella unless he lets them. Who put *him* in charge?" Her fists thumped against her thighs.

She turned toward me and anger sparked in her eyes. "Shouldn't we be discussing all this with Carlisle? Shouldn't we be discussing this as a *family* instead of letting Jasper take charge and dictate who does what and when they should do it? Bella is Edward's girlfriend and …" She snapped her mouth shut, squeezed her eyes closed, and turned away from me again.

*Yup. Still pretty damn pissed off at Jasper.*

"Hang on a minute, Alice." I reached over and patted her leg again. "Jasper found her and brought her *right* back to the house. She was about to die, and he bit her to save her without draining her dry! You *know* how good she smells." I sighed. "He did an excellent job staging the scene of the crash. I saw it, remember? This *is* Bella we're talking about here. The Police Chief's daughter! Everybody knows who she is! Because of Jasper, everybody thinks she was killed in the crash and some animal drug her off. Nobody suspects it was anything but a terrible accident. Which is a good damn thing, since we have to make her disappear."

Why was Alice so angry? Because Jasper bit Bella? Alice was the one who had always said Bella would be one of us. She had never said who had bitten her. I just figured since she hadn't said who bit Bella, she hadn't ever seen it. Did it matter who bit her? Maybe it did.

Maybe she was jealous since Jasper wouldn't leave Bella? She was the one who called Jasper disgusting. Well, Rosie had called *me* disgusting, but she hadn't really meant it. I thought Alice had meant it.

She sure seemed to be scared of him, too. Terrified, even.

Could you even *be* that afraid of your mate?

*Was* he her mate if he scared her that bad?

She moved all his stuff out of her room. Funny how everyone had always thought of that room as *hers* and not *theirs*. If that wasn't kicking somebody to curb, I didn't know what was. I didn't even think he knew about it yet.

How could you kick your mate out of your room? Rosie had *chased* me out of our room plenty of times, but she hadn't been kicking me out. There *was* a difference. I had just pissed her off. Again.

As many times as I've screwed up, Rosie's had plenty of opportunities to get rid of me, but I didn't think she could, just like I couldn't do it to her. There was no way I could. We were mates; we were connected. Even then I felt a pull toward her. I knew she felt it for me, too.

"Alice, I'm not understanding you. Jasper hasn't done anything except try to help Bella and protect
the whole family." I waved my hand through the air and then grabbed the steering wheel again. "And he brought her back to us. Besides, she wanted to be changed into a vampire! I don't know why Dickheadward was being such a hard-nosed shit about it." I had to shake my head at that. I still wasn't able to figure that shit out.

*Moot point now, I suppose.*

"She'll need the IDs eventually, and we need to get her away from Forks." I glanced over at Alice and she was still staring out the windshield. "He's right about you and Edward having to stay in Forks, at least for a while, to go along with the story an' all. Jazz, Rose, and I are supposed to be away at school anyhow. We can't let anyone from Forks see us, so it only makes sense that we take her away."

To be fair to Alice, it had *appeared* as though he was only allowing *some* of us in the room. He *had* chased off Alice and Edward, but that was only after Bella had had a fit. She did that the first time either one of them had gotten near her. Otherwise, she had been pretty quiet.

*Which was a little creepy, actually.*

And, to be fair, Jasper had seemed to be a little more … uh, *assertive* than he usually was. Well, *a lot* more assertive than he ever had been. Right damn *aggressive* even.

"Okay, so Jasper's been a bit more, uh, *firm* than he usually is, but maybe that's because trying to keep Bella calm is wearing on him."

Alice smacked the edge of her seat then pointed her finger at me, "Jasper is just *taking over* when Carlisle is the head of our family and should be making the decisions," she snapped. She huffed, crossed her legs and crossed her arms over her chest.

She really *was* mad! My guess was she had been so used to telling him what to do and what to wear, and when he could go here or there, or when he should hunt — she was used to leading him around by the nose. He had never acted like that with us before. It must have been messing with her head.

I sighed again and rubbed the back of my neck. "Jazz isn't really doing anything we haven't done before when we had to leave someplace, uh, *quickly*. Everybody has their job to do and I'm doing what I can to help." My hand scrubbed my face for a second, and I glanced over at Alice again. "I … I don't know why Jasper has taken charge, but as long as what he says doesn't jeopardize all of us, I'll do what he says. If I think he's doing something that would hurt us or expose us, or hurt my Rose, I'll say so. Besides, he has a knack for it. He's good at it. Just something about his voice … I don't know, ya just do whatever he says."

Right then Alice froze and she stared off into space. She must have been having a vision. Hadn't had one of those in a while. Funny how she couldn't see Bella anymore right before the crash, and she couldn't see anything of Jasper's future when he was touching Bella. From what Rose, Esme and Carlisle had said, the only time he didn't have his hands on her was when he was in the shower.

Ya know, I had never seen him touch anybody so much. Had he even touched Bella before? Ever?

Anyway, then Alice said she couldn't see him at all. At the time, he was ripping Edward's arm off, so I don't suppose she had been looking for anything right then.

Rose told me that Jazz had said he would take Bella's pain, and he passed out. Of course, Rose and Esme put him on the bed with Bella, and he had been touching her ever since. Rose said he wouldn't
let go of Bella's hand. They hadn't known what to do with him, and that was a lot of vamp to try and put somewhere.

They were in the same position when I went up to clear out the broken glass and window frames and put in the new windows. Neither one of them even twitched the whole time I was in there, as noisy as all that can be. Maybe that was because Esme had been there, too. Considering how Bella had reacted to Edward and Alice, and then Jazz's reaction, I was glad I hadn't upset her! Jazz was being pretty damn aggressive and protective. He was being a little possessive, too. Sort of. Never seen him act like that before.

Alice gasped then, coming out of her vision.

"What did you see, Al?"

Her hands flew to her head and she put her fingers against her temples like she had a headache. Vampires didn't get headaches.

"You and Rosalie. In the mountains, but not the mountains around here. I didn't recognize the area. You two were in a sort of clearing. A field with tall grass, looking toward mountains. Maybe you were in a valley? There were trees with leaves, and a few pines. I think it was summer. Mid-day. It was sunny. You and Rose were wearing jeans. She had on a light blue collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and you had on a navy blue t-shirt. I couldn't see your feet." She let out an exasperated sigh. "That's all I could see. I just saw you from the back; nothing about Bella or anyone else." She sighed again. "Did Jasper say where you were going?"

"No, he hasn't said yet, and now he's passed out or whatever." It was sunny? I was wearing a t-shirt? Must not have been Forks! Alice rarely ever allowed anyone to wear just a t-shirt, and it was almost never sunny in Forks.

"Standing in a field, looking at mountains doesn't sound very exciting."

"Emmett, you know my visions just come to me. I don't get to choose what I see. I've been trying to see what happens with Bella, or anything of her future, and I see you and Rose in a field. But it wasn't around here, I don't think…" She trailed off, her finger tapping her chin.

"Maybe it's where we're going to be. I would think any place Jazz chooses to go would be pretty isolated so Bella isn't tempted any more than she has to be. You know she wouldn't want to hurt any humans. Besides, it's not like she can make any decisions at the moment."

Alice moved her fingers back to her temples and scrunched her eyes closed. I guess she was trying to see more. Who knows? I sure couldn't explain all this mind voodoo mojo juju shit.

Bella could always block Edward from reading her mind. I had wished more than a few times that I could do that. Though thinking about bullshit to keep him out of my head was fun; you couldn't do that all the time.

She had blocked Aro from reading her mind, and even blocked Aro's little bitch Jane from zapping her. But Alice used to be able to see her future.

Jasper had always felt her emotions and even manipulated them. Jasper's mojo worked better whenever he was touching the person, or the vampire. Must have been why he kept holding Bella's hand. But she had been blocking Alice since just before she crashed. Alice couldn't see anything of Jasper's future either. Whatever it was that Bella was doing must have been getting stronger because of the venom. I didn't understand how all that crap worked. I didn't think anybody did.
"Alice, we'll be in Portland soon. I hope the truck is as nice as it looked online because I think we'll be leaving as soon as possible."

Alice huffed and crossed her arms over her chest again. "I think so, too, but I wish I could see what was going to happen!"

"We're away from Bella and you got a vision. Maybe you'll have some more."

She huffed again and turned to stare out the window.

_Huffy little thing. I guess that's the end of the pleasant chit chat._

Chapter End Notes

"creepy vampire shit": from A True Mate's Heart by mynxi on FFn and The Writers Coffee Shop
Jasper's POV

The agonizing burn and Bella's chaotic swirl of emotions ended abruptly, and I sucked in a ragged breath. Though I felt an immense relief at the end of the fiery pain, I also felt an immediate sense of loss as Bella's emotional touch pulled away from me.

I realized I was lying on my left side, and I still had hold of Bella's hand. I must have been on Edward's bed with her. The last thing I remembered was standing next to the bed, bending over her and grasping her hand, trying to help her with the torment she was going through.

My eyes snapped open, and the first thing I saw was Bella lying next to me. I studied her still profile as I sent my senses outward. She had not yet awakened and was still in immense pain. I remembered trying to take it all, share it, and ease her suffering. Why had I awakened? Why had she pulled away?

Beyond Bella's outwardly peaceful form, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a slight movement. There was someone near us.

I released Bella's hand and sprang up, landing in a crouch on the left side of Edward's bed. Rosalie must have been sitting near the bed, but as I moved into a deeper crouch, she darted out of the chair and across the room to the windows, holding her hands up in front of her.

"Jasper, everything's okay," She spoke softly. "Are you all right?"
"Yes. How long?" I glanced around the room. No one else was in there with us. I looked down at Bella and saw that I had not disturbed her. I carefully stepped down from the bed and stood next to it, still searching the room with my eyes.

"You were out about twenty-and-a-half hours. Everything has been quiet." Rosalie clasped her hands together and just watched me.

I felt that she was wary, but she was not afraid. "What happened?"

"After you kicked Edward's ass, you went to Bella and told her you would take her pain. You held her hand, she gasped, and you collapsed. Esme and I moved Bella over, and we put you on the bed with her because you wouldn't let go of each other's hands. You and Bella were still and quiet the whole time." She took a small step toward Bella and me. "Do you remember anything?"

I inhaled deeply, checking for scents in the room. "Esme, Carlisle, and Emmett have been in here?" I asked her as I continued looking around the room. I could smell Edward, but it was his room. I could also detect Alice, but neither of their scents was fresh.

"Yes. We've taken turns sitting with you. We just thought we'd sit with both of you. You had said you didn't want Bella left alone, remember?" She took another small step toward us.

"Yes, I remember that." Things felt disjointed and I was a little confused. As vampires, we remembered everything, but sometimes we needed to be reminded. It was very disturbing to have a block of time go missing. To have been missing so much time was disconcerting and alarming.

Emmett and Carlisle appeared at the top of the stairs and walked slowly toward the room. They were cautious and wary also.

"Jasper? How are you feeling?" Carlisle asked as he entered the room.

"Physically, I feel fine — normal. Otherwise, I'm a bit disoriented. Rosalie said I was out for twenty-and-a-half hours." I gave them a small smile. "Bella's okay; I'm fine. I won't attack you."

"I can see that." Carlisle returned my smile, and even Emmett relaxed and cracked a bit of a grin. "We have a bit of catching up to do, I think."

-oOoOo-

Carlisle and I were disappointed that I couldn't remember more of my time "connected" to Bella. Primarily, what I recalled was the agony of the burn, and I had wanted her to know she wasn't alone, that I was with her. She had been aware of that, I was sure.

He had been very curious about her "pulling away" from me, but I couldn't explain it any differently, or any better than that. That was what it had felt like. I could still feel her emotions, but they seemed muffled somehow, even though I had continued holding her hand.

Despite that mystery, Carlisle was extremely pleased at her progress and was confident that Bella would awaken any moment. Her breath was coming in shallow pants, and her heart rate was beginning to accelerate. The excruciating fire of the change had lasted for two and a half days.

Maria had told me my own transformation had lasted three-and-a-half days. Those I had bitten had burned from three to five. In the beginning of my conscription into Maria's army, they would burn for four or five days — those I hadn't drained and killed. As I had gained expertise, they would burn for three — never less than three. It wasn't that I had given two shits about any of them or their pain, it was the incessant screaming, and wailing, and begging for death that had been so fucking
distracting. The chaotic emotions would pound into me until I couldn't even hear my own thoughts. I hadn't been able to stand it, so I decided it was better to leave and be as far from them as I could.

That, and we often needed replacements as quickly as possible because the newborn assholes kept dismembering and destroying each other, and too many of them just hadn't measured up to Maria's "requirements."

The fact that Bella would awaken soon, and we were nearing the sixty-hour mark, was extraordinary. It was a relief. It was a relief that her suffering would soon be over.

I was eagerly anticipating meeting that new, stunningly beautiful Bella.

And she was, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Rising from the chair by her side, I held both of her hands in mine and placed tender kisses across her knuckles, breathing in her beguiling and provocative scent. I barely resisted the sudden almost overwhelming urge to touch her hands with my tongue and taste her skin. Barely.

"It's nearly over, Darlin'. I'm here. It's almost over. I'm here."

I heard a soft hiss behind me. Edward. The ass. Okay, so I was a self-centered dick, and maybe I was gloating the least little bit, but his sullen envy of my being able to touch her, when he couldn't, just tickled me right down to my toes.

It was puzzling that he hadn't been able to be in the room without sending Bella into another raging, screaming fit. But since I had tried to share and ease her pain, she had been "calmer," for lack of a better term.

I lowered her hands, placing them on her stomach, and I backed away from the bed. After I awoke an hour ago, I had maintained my position at the left side of the bed so I could see both the door and the windows, but I needed to be in a more strategically-placed location. If she woke up in a frenzy and tried to make a break for it, she might head for the door, or she might try the windows. There was no way to tell what a newborn might do; especially Bella. In the last two-and-a-half days, she had stunned, surprised, and confounded me more than I had been in the last 143 years combined.

I moved around the foot of the bed, ignoring Edward, and went to lean against the closet wall near its outside corner. I couldn't see the door from that position unless I looked around the corner to the left, but that put me between the door and the windows. If she ran for the door, I would catch her. If she went for the windows, I would stop her.

I crossed my arms over my chest, and I shook my head in consternation. I had taken on as much of Bella's pain as I could, and it was... it had sucked. It had felt like I was going through it all over again. But beneath the flaming agony, there had been a constant state of ... awareness coming from her. I thought she knew I was there, trying to help her. Where else would I have been? I had to help her. I had to try. I didn't know why, but I had felt compelled to try, to do whatever I could to comfort her, let her know she wasn't alone with her suffering. I believed she did know.

I didn't know why I woke, or lost the connection. She had been there with me, and then she had pulled away. I hadn't understood it. Maybe it was because she was so close to waking herself? Actually, if she was going to wake soon, I thought I would rather be fully conscious and aware. You never knew what a newborn was going to do, other than be confused, pissed off and afraid. You needed to be alert around them.

I heard a faint sigh to my left. Alice.
Why Alice was in there waiting for Bella to awaken was beyond my comprehension. She had no experience with newborn vampires. We had joined the Cullens after Rosalie and Emmett had been there for several years, and she didn't even remember her own change. She hadn't been able to see Bella in her visions since Saturday, so she hadn't been able to see how Bella might behave. Not that newborns were known for their rational, concrete decisions.

She always did rely on her visions too much.

Perhaps that would explain why she was feeling nervous: because she couldn't see what Bella might do. Or maybe she was nervous being in the same room as me, since she kicked me out. After I woke up, Rosalie wasted no time informing me that Alice had taken my stuff out of her room. I wasn't even surprised.

It was odd how I had always referred to it as her room, but it always had been that way. In every house we had lived in, there had been Alice's room and my study.

I didn't really care that she moved my things out of her room. Not much in there was mine anyway, and the clothes I liked were already in my study. It was just as well. And, ya know, I really didn't give a shit.

After the way Bella had reacted to her, you would have thought Alice wouldn't want to be near her. Alice didn't know how violent newborns could be, how erratic, unpredictable, and downright unstable. They were usually pretty damn motivated to try and rip your head off.

She probably expected Bella to be a submissive little lamb like always. That was what Bella had shown them, and damned if I understood that either. I knew different, however. I had felt her resentment and frustration as they put more and more restrictions on her. I hadn't understood why she put up with it.

As much time as they had spent with her, you would have thought they would have known her better. Hadn't they ever noticed how reserved she was around them, or how happy and ebullient, and loud she was when she was playing video games with Emmett? And my God – the talkin' smack and bullshit out of those two. The taunting, teasing, and gloating over a win — and that was Bella. Emmett had loved that shit. Hell, I had loved that shit. She had been happy, gleeful. She had been so alive. Those feelings had drawn me in like a magnet.

And Edward and Alice hadn't seen it. Or maybe they had been so wrapped up in themselves they hadn't wanted to.

I had an inkling that Bella would surprise us again. In fact, I was hoping that she would. I was looking forward to it.

I could hardly wait.

Knowing Alice, I assumed she wanted to be there because she was positive Bella couldn't possibly be violent or aggressive. Unlike myself.

Alice had often been too optimistic for her own good.

I didn't want her in there, but I chose not to fight that battle, even though I thought there were too many people around. It was too much for a newborn to try to deal with.

But what do I know, right?

Alice, seated on the floor by the door, huffed with impatience.
"Alice," I heard Carlisle whisper from his position just outside the door in the hall. "You must be patient. Though Bella's change appears to be somewhat shorter than normal, there is no rushing this. There is no way to hurry it along. We must wait."

"I know, Carlisle. I just want to see her."

"Remember, Alice," I began. "Do not run toward her. Ideally, you should be standing, unmoving, with your eyes lowered to the floor. Do not make any sudden moves."

Edward snorted. "I don't believe we'll have to worry excessively about Bella. She has always been non-violent and tractable. I don't feel there's any need for undue concern."

I raised an eyebrow at him. Edtard didn't have a clue. Hadn't he learned anything from being around Rosalie and Emmett when they were newborns? Or was he so confident in his superiority and his ability to manage Bella that he couldn't imagine having any … difficulties with her as a newborn?

It was moments like that when I almost wished I could have read his mind to see what the fuck he was thinkin'.

I had been damn pleased he hadn't been able to read my mind since I had tried to help Bella with her pain. Rosalie had let me in on that little tidbit, too.

That it drove him fucking nuts was just icing on the cake.

I repressed my smirk.

Of course, I hadn't even been aware of him, or anyone except Bella, for a good portion of that. All my attention had been focused on Bella.

He was also to my left, but leaning quietly against his desk in the center of the wall of shelves filled with books and music CDs.

I felt his frustration. "You don't agree, Jasper?"

"No, I do not agree."

"Well, why not?" Alice asked. "You know how Bella is."

I sighed, exasperated with them both. "I know how Bella was. I also know how newborns are."

"Jasper, you don't know how Bella will behave." Edward was using his "we're imparting wisdom to the peons" voice. His jealousy was eating him alive.

"No, I don't," I answered him quietly. As if he would, the smug, self-righteous prick. "But we must be ready for anything."

I didn't know how Bella would behave when she awoke, but I did know how she had been feeling the last several weeks — frustrated, smothered, and rebellious. They had both suffocated her until she had begun to feel desperate. Experiencing that had nearly driven me to distraction.

Esme chuckled softly. She was in the hall with Carlisle, Emmett and Rosalie. "I remember Emmett waking up. That was the first room we had to gut and remodel," she said with fondness. "Along with those two or three others."

I could feel Rosalie's amusement and her love for Emmett. "That's my Emmett. It's lucky for us he's so good with a hammer and a saw."
"When I was human, we had to do everything ourselves. Needed a chicken coop, or another room added to the house? Had to build it ourselves, if we could get the lumber. And I've had a lot of practice over the years," he mumbled with some embarrassment.

Rosalie patted his arm. "Lucky for us you aren't just another pretty face."

"That's right, Babe."

Then I heard it. Bella's heart was beating faster. Everyone else became aware of the pounding in her chest a moment later. It wouldn't be much longer. Her heart would cease, she would die, and she would awaken to us.

Awaken to me.

I profoundly wished none of them were there.

I felt everyone's anticipation. Alice was still a little nervous.

Edward seemed eager and even began to lean forward a bit, though he stayed propped against the desk. His emotions were shifting. Anticipation and excitement flowed to eagerness and admiration.

Bella was certainly something to admire. The changes in her physical looks from the venom, my venom, were extraordinary. Her heart-shaped face was the same, but somehow more. Her cheekbones had become just slightly more angular, the curve of her eyebrows were a subtle arch over her eyes. Her lips were tinted pale rose pink that perfectly complemented her light ivory skin. She still had those fifteen freckles across her nose and cheeks, though they were much lighter. Her hair had a shine I'd never noticed before. She was perfect.

Edward's admiration began to shift, and I felt the beginnings of desire coming from him. I didn't know why I was surprised. I had felt it from both of them often enough, though Edward would shut it down almost as quickly as it had begun, and Bella would end up feeling frustrated, angry and then rejected. How he could have turned her down and pushed her away …

I was beginning to feel angry. He had never wanted to change her, but now that she was less breakable …

Okay, I was getting pissed off. Bella was…

Bella gasped, and her entire body went rigid against the mattress. Her thudding heart was beating so fast it was practically a constant thrum. I felt fear and longing from her. Curiosity, puzzlement, then a sharp awareness flared.

There was one last stuttering beat. Her body convulsed and was still. She was not breathing. I felt her bewilderment and confusion, then her relief. Relief that the pain had finally come to an end?

Everyone else had stopped breathing and was silent.

She inhaled a deep breath and blew it out. She inhaled again. Her curiosity and wonder crept through the room.

Alice let out a tiny sigh of relief, and I felt Bella instantly switch to wariness with a touch of fear. Her eyes flew open, and at first, she stared at the ceiling, but then her eyes began to move slowly. She inhaled again, opening her mouth that time to taste the air. She inhaled again and I felt her puzzlement and concentration, then a flicker of recognition.
In a move so fast it was a blur to me, she sat upright and stared intently at Alice.

I heard Alice gulp and felt her fear increase. In another blur of movement, Bella was on her feet, crouching on the bed. Her long hair swirled around her and settled over her shoulders. Her hands were out to her sides, her knees were bent, and she was perfectly still, except for her eyes. Her brilliant red eyes darted about the room, taking everything in, and I felt her wariness and guardedness increase. That was not unusual as a newborn's first instinct was to be wary and try to protect itself. They didn't know what had happened to them, and they often thought they were in danger.

In my experience, they frequently were.

Her eyes moved to Alice, and then to Edward, and I felt her anger rise. I immediately tried to send her a feeling of calm. Her eyes darted to me. She inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled through her slightly parted lips. She breathed in again through her nose and mouth, and her eyes widened as she regarded me. Her anger was replaced with recognition and relief.

"Jasper, it was you. You stayed." My name was barely a wisp of air passing through her lips.

Her first word as a newborn vampire was my name, and I became lost in those vivid red eyes. I wanted to go to her, draw her into me, breathe in her scent, feel her skin against mine …

My God, she was stunning!

I blinked to break the spell. I had to focus. I increased the calm I was sending her, and her eyes narrowed. Then it was as if it bounced back to me, and I couldn't feel her anymore. She had blocked me! Somehow she had blocked me. I tried to show no emotion on my face, and I kept my body still, but I was shocked. How had she done that?

I tried it again, but it just bounced back.

Amazing!

Then, she did about the strangest damn thing I had ever seen. Bella slowly moved her right hand toward her mouth and licked her fingertips, one by one. She stuck out her tongue again and licked her thumb, cagily watching all of us, her eyes flicking from one to another.

Her soft pink tongue trailed up the length of her thumb, curled around the pad, swept over the tip, and slowly disappeared between her lips. I was mesmerized.

That tongue … Bella's tongue … I wanted … I wanted to feel that tongue …

Bella had my undivided attention, and I wasn't surprised in the least when I felt every male snap to attention, like a bird dog on point at a quail.

Her eyes moved between Edward and the others. She glanced at me, and then back to them.

What the hell was she doing?

Her right hand flashed back to her side, and she unhurriedly brought her left hand to her mouth. First she licked her pinky. She shifted next to her ring finger.

I thought I heard Edward swallow.

Bella moved to lick her middle finger, her tongue gliding up the side and over the tip, before her tongue slipped back into her mouth. Next, she put her index finger in her mouth, closed her beautiful
pink lips over it, and gradually pulled it out.

I sucked in a breath. I was so … aroused. That was so fucking hot. I was stunned yet again. I had never had to deal with *that* particular feeling when initially greeting a newborn, and it was … uh … disconcerting.

Did she have any fucking idea how sexy that was? What the *fuck* was she doing? I wished I could have felt her emotions!

It seemed the other males thought it was right damn titillating, too, because I heard Emmett shift uneasily out in the hall, and Carlisle nervously cleared his throat. They went from feeling eager anticipation to slightly uncomfortable fascination. There was a touch of embarrassment mixed in.

Sometimes I forgot how young Carlisle was. Physically, he was only 23, with the libido to match. He usually hid it well, but he wasn't hiding his feelings too well right then.

Edward sighed with his appreciation and his desire increased. Bastard.

Ahhhhh. There was the smidgen of annoyance from Rose and Esme.

I heard Alice make a slight movement, and Bella's eyes narrowed and flashed back to her.

Edward inhaled to speak. "Bella, love …"

Bella snarled and leapt from the bed straight for Alice, the force causing the headboard to thud heavily against the wall. As I turned the corner to try and catch her, I saw Bella extend her hand toward Alice.

*Damn she was fast!*

Alice jerked away from her but the nails of her right hand raked across Alice's throat, and Bella landed with a loud thud right in front of her, emitting a low rumbling growl.

Edward, the fool, stepped toward her, extending his hand. "Love, you shouldn't …"

I almost had my hand on her, my fingertips just grazing her shirt, when she spun away and went for Edward. "Don't you tell me …" she snarled.

He was so shocked at her actions he didn't even try to defend himself. Bella drew up her left hand in front of her chest and reached out, clawing Edward across his face as she shoved him into the desk and shelves. Books and CDs cascaded down from the broken shelves over him and to the floor.

*Oh Damn!*

I almost had my hand on her when she spun away from Edward and caught my left bicep with her right hand. As she crashed into me she caught my right arm against my side and clamped down. Her momentum slammed us into the corner of the closet jutting out into the room, and I felt the dry wall crumble, the wooden studs and door frame buckle and snap.

Thank Christ she didn't shove us through the wall and into the closet.

One of the stupidest things you could do was let a newborn get their arms around you. With their own blood still in their systems, they were so strong they could crush you. You were most likely going to die.

She was the first newborn to *ever* get both arms around me, and that was pretty goddamn stupid on
my part.

She, of course, didn't have the experience, finesse, or the skill of an older vampire, but it was effective, nonetheless.

I had to get my head out of my ass before she gnawed it off.

I reached up with my left hand and tried to grab the nape of her neck as I jerked my head to the left away from her.

Then she bit me.

She bit the livin' shit out of me!

But …

She didn't bite me just under my jaw to decapitate; she had sunk her teeth into the muscle at the top of my right shoulder and latched on.

I felt her teeth sink into me and her venom entering my system, and another low growl began to rumble in her chest.

That wasn't a bite meant for decapitation. She didn't bite and then wrench her head away to cause as much destruction as possible. It was a bite meant to mark, meant to claim ...

Claim?

Once again she had stunned me into senselessness.

Did she have any idea what the fuck she was doing? Christ, (and everyone else) knew Edward would never have told her about …

Fuck me, that growl was sexy as hell!

I managed to seize the back of her neck, but she didn't let go. I couldn't just pull her loose – she would have ripped a chunk out of me. I kicked against what was left of the wall and shoved us toward the center of the room. Our legs tangled together.

Oh shit.

We were going to fall, and she still had my arms pinned!

She was still growling!

I tried to turn so I wouldn't land on her, but that didn't quite work out. I struck the floor on my left side, and she finally pulled her teeth out of me.

"MINE!" she roared, as she raised herself up and away from me, releasing my arms. Her hair and eyes were wild. Her eyes flashed toward Alice, and she growled again. Her hand brushed across my jaw as she twisted away from me, and she sprang up, landing in a crouch between me and the windows.

That ain't good.

I leapt up from the floor and stood, knees flexed, ready for her next move, afraid she would head for the windows. The sting of her venom sank into my consciousness, and I winced and slapped my left
hand to my shoulder. I felt the venom leaking out, soaking my ripped shirt. The bite was deep.

God dammit, that stung like a bitch!

Wait. She had said, "Mine"?

That was …

So. Fucking. Erotic.

Her crimson eyes flew open in shock. Her hands flashed to cover her mouth. "Jasper! I am so sorry!"

She spun in a blur and launched herself at the windows, crashing through them, broken glass and wood splinters exploding outward.

I was absolutely stupefied. Again!

Of course she hadn't gone for the door – too many vampires over there!

Esme said, "Oh dear. We'll have to replace the windows again."

Emmett said, "Damn. She's like a fucking Ninja."

Alice screamed, "My neck! My neck!"

Rose said, "God, she's fast."

Strangely, Edward had nothing to say as his left hand hesitantly rose to cover the deep scratches on his cheek.

Carlisle said, "Jasper?"

Shit.
I Chase

Chapter 13 – I Chase

Jasper's POV

I bolted for the gaping hole in the windows and sailed through. I half expected to see Bella lying on the ground three floors below. She wasn't.

I thudded heavily to the ground and inhaled as deeply as I could to catch her scent. She was heading northeast, away from Forks. Good.

She was in a panic. I could only hope I caught her before she got too far. If only she hadn't blocked me from feeling her emotions. How had she done that?

I had to catch her — stop her.

If I didn't catch her soon, I would have to try and drop her. Fear sure wouldn't have been a good choice.

There! I felt her again! She was panicked, desperate, remorseful, and confused.

I flew through those trees and tried to send her calm and reassurance.

Her emotions felt stronger to me and I knew had to be getting closer, but damn, she was fast! I sent peace, calm, reassurance, and comfort to her as I crested the ridge of one of the smaller hills. Through the trees, I spotted her heading down the other side. I forced myself to go faster, finally gaining on her.

"Bella stop! I won't hurt you! Please stop!"

I lunged for her, tackling her at her shoulders. I slid my fingers down her arms and seized her wrists, folding her arms across her body and holding her tightly. I forced her head down with my chin and
captured her legs with mine, driving them up to curl us into a ball.

We slammed into the ground with the force of a falling meteor and rolled, spinning through the fallen limbs, twigs and pine needles until we crashed into a fir tree, cracking the trunk. The entire tree shuddered and deep green needles rained down around us. We ended up on our sides at the base of the fir, covered in pine needles and leaves.

Her fear, confusion, and remorse were pulsing into me. Inside the cage of my arms and legs, her entire body was trembling. She was breathing in quick, shallow pants.

"Bella, it's okay. I'm right here," I whispered into her ear.

I gathered the comfort and serenity I felt at touching her skin and enfolded her in it. "Relax. I'm not mad. Everything's going to be okay."

She needed to feel safe and secure. I drew from my feelings of protectiveness for her and added security to the mix of emotions I was sending to her and encircled her with it, like my arms around her shaking body.

"Darlin', I'm right here," I breathed into her face, my cheek at her temple. "I know you're confused, but I'm right here. I'll help you." I couldn't stop myself from nuzzling into her hair. "Do you remember what I can do? Do you remember that I can feel your emotions?"

After a moment, she nodded slightly. She whispered very quietly, "I remember you. You stayed."

"Of course I stayed with you."

I wasn't quite sure what she meant by that. Where else would I have been?

"Do you remember that I can manipulate others' emotions?"

She nodded again.

"I'm trying to help you feel calm right now. I know it's all very confusing. I know. I will help you."

Gradually, she began to relax, her breathing slowed, her trembling ceased, and I loosened my hold on her.

"If I let you go, you won't run away from me will you?"

She shook her head and her body relaxed further.

As I straightened my legs, hers did also, and I eased us onto my back.

"Bella, it's all right. I'm right here. I'm going to let go of your arms now, okay?"

"Okay." She spoke a bit more loudly than before, and it struck me that her voice was music. It was the low chime of a perfectly tuned church bell that sang through my mind, hummed through my body, vibrated through my …

What the hell would happen to me if she spoke more than a few words?

I had to stay calm. I had to maintain control of myself. I had to get her body off my body.

"Bella, I'm going to let go now. Everything is okay."
I slowly unclasped my hands from her wrists and eased them away, gliding up her forearms, tugging up the long sleeves to feel her silky skin. I didn't really want to let go of her, but I held perfectly still as she rolled off me and away, settling on her hands and knees. I kept sending her peace, calm, and reassurance.

Bella — on her hands and knees.

Oh!

I slowly sat up, watching her eyes the entire time. They were a brilliant red — a pair of stunning, glowing rubies.

Dipping my head slightly to peer into her beautiful face I said, "I'm going to stand up now."

Wariness stirred into the mix of her emotions, and I moved cautiously so as not to alarm her. I got my feet under me, my hands spread on the ground, and I carefully stood up. Her eyes were intently watching every move.

I stood in front of her, breathing quietly and evenly through my nose and mouth, smelling and tasting the air — drawing in her tantalizing scent; the scent that reminded me of home and belonging.

Her eyes unlocked their gaze from mine and moved hesitantly over my face, studying it, then over my hair. Her gaze coasted down along the curve of my jaw, to my neck, and I could tell when she reached the bite she had given me. Her remorse exploded, and I increased the reassurance and serenity I was sending to her.

Raising my hands, I spoke softly, as if to a wild animal about to flee. "It's okay. You didn't hurt me."

Still on her knees, her eyes left my shoulder and moved across my chest. Admiration crept in, replacing her guardedness.

Oh really? Lord knows I've been admiring her.

Her eyes moved down my torso and came to rest on my right arm, then darted to my left — the scars on my arms.

She would be able to see them so much more clearly! Why hadn't I thought to cover them up? She would be terrified!

But she wasn't. Her eyes widened slightly, pride joined her appreciation, and a touch of lust and desire swirled into the mix.

Lust? That was … unexpected. No one had ever had quite that reaction when seeing my scars, and I certainly hadn't expected to feel that from Bella. I was astounded, but I kept my face expressionless and didn't move one muscle. I waited to see what she would do.

I didn't have long to wait. Her eyes flashed to my groin, and I thought I was going to choke on my own venom when her eyes lingered there.

That was … fuckin' hot.

Focus, soldier!

Her eyes traveled down my legs, to my bare feet, and then more quickly back up to my chest. Her lips parted, and she began to breathe more deeply. I knew she was taking in and tasting my scent. I
remained still and watched her.

Suddenly startled, she snapped her mouth shut and sat back on her heels. Because she was smelling me? It was a very instinctual thing to do. Vampires relied heavily on their sense of smell.

Instinctively she knew it, but she had not learned it consciously yet. She was barely two hours old.

Her confusion strengthened, her eyes flicked to the rip in my shirt where she had bitten me, and her remorse and guilt surged. She flashed to her feet and bolted away from me. I was ready for her that time.

I tackled her again, shoving her face-down into the thick bed of pine needles. I grabbed each of her arms and forced them straight out, away from her body. Thrusting my knees between her legs, I shoved them apart. She kept struggling, so I dropped my full weight on her to hold her down.

"Bella?" I squeezed her wrists to bring her attention back to me. Speaking softly to reassure her, I repeated her name. "Bella ... you said wouldn't run away from me. Be still. I won't hurt you."

As long as she couldn't get her hands and feet underneath her, she wouldn't be able to throw me off. But her twisting and squirming was grinding her ass right against my dick, and it was getting harder.

Getting? The little soldier was at full attention, and I lost my focus again. That reaction to her was unnerving, but I couldn't have said it was unpleasant. Not in the least. As a matter of fact, I found it to be quite pleasant. Beyond pleasant. Like, way beyond pleasant. In fact, it was so goddamn pleasant I had to halt a groan from escaping.

I put my lips to her ear and whispered, "As much as I am enjoyin' this, Darlin', and I am enjoyin' this quite a lot, you need to be still. Now is not the appropriate time."

She registered puzzlement and confusion. Then shock, alarm, and embarrassment flared from her and she froze.

Feeling that was almost as good as seeing her blush. Maybe I wouldn't miss those blushes so much after all.

She gasped and the flood gates opened.

"Oh my God, Jasper! I don't ... I didn't mean ... I'm sorry! I ... I'm so confused! I have no idea what I'm doing! I'm pretty sure I'm a vampire now. What else could it be, right? But I don't know why! I don't ... I'm not sure I remember ... maybe." She sucked in a deep breath. "My mind is thinking about everything and all these thoughts are zipping around in my head. I just can't think. I can smell everything. I can hear everything, and it's ... it's like a tornado in my brain, and there's just too much stuff in there."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I know it was you who stayed with me. I could smell you. I could smell lots of things — and other people, I think. Then I saw you. I knew it was you and ... and your scent is ... uh ..." She was embarrassed again.

"I don't know why I bit you. I'm so sorry, but I wanted to bite you. I had to. That female was too close, and she wouldn't go away, so I had to bite you. I'm so sorry!"

I pushed calm and reassurance to her again, but I couldn't help wondering what she was going to say about my scent. What had caused her to be embarrassed?

That female was too close? Did she mean Alice? Alice had been the closest female. Rosalie and
Esme had been out in the hall.

"Bella," I breathed into her ear, deciding we would deal with one issue at a time. "This confusion is normal even though you know you're a vampire. I went through it. Everybody goes through it." I pressed my lips against her ear. "I'll help you. In time, you'll be able to control it, and I will help you. Though I do think it would be easier to talk if your face wasn't in the dirt."

And your ass against my…. 

Though I wouldn't have minded staying right there in that position one little bit.

"I'll let you up if you promise not to run away from me, okay?"

"I promise I won't run away from you, Jasper," she whispered. Her voice sang to my very center and I did not want to let her go.

I forced myself to release her arms and pushed myself up. At the same time, I got to my knees and bounced up onto my feet.

She rolled over, and I extended a hand to help her up. When she clasped my hand in hers, her eyes flicked up to mine. I felt … It felt like …

I didn't even know what the sensation was, but I … wanted … I needed … I needed to feel her body against mine. I wanted to bring her lips to my own and …

I fought the sudden urge to pull her against my chest, enclose her in my arms.

Where was that impulse coming from? I didn't want to scare her.

I looked at her and inhaled deeply. Even dirty, her hair a tangled mess and covered in leaves, twigs and pine needles, she was stunning. She was beautiful.

She was …

Mine.

She was going to be mine.

She looked at me, then down at herself. "We're so dirty! Jasper, I'm sorry!" Her hands flew out from her sides. "I'm sorry I bit you, ripped your shirt, made you get so dirty, and…"

I shook her hand to get her attention again. "Hey! It's okay. It's part of the territory. Settle down. Listen to me. Listen!"

Her head snapped up, and she stared at me. She seemed to be focusing very hard and trying to pay attention.

"The dirt will come off. I have more shirts. It's nothing that can't be fixed. We'll do one thing at a time. We'll brush off some of the dirt and leaves. Remember, you are very, very strong now. Move your hands very slowly to brush yourself off. One step at a time. Just move your hand very slowly and touch your arm. Gently. Very lightly."

I reluctantly let go of her hand. She intently watched her right hand, concentrating on moving it slowly and carefully, as she touched her left arm near her elbow. She pressed her fingers against the dark green material and slid her fingertips down the sleeve. She was doing well until she reached the cuff. She didn't lift her fingers enough and ripped it. Her hand flashed away from the sleeve.
Anger. Frustration. Disappointment.

"Don't worry about it, it'll just take some practice. With your vampire memory, you'll quickly remember how much pressure to apply. You'll just have to feel it first, then you'll remember. It's okay. You'll also have to work on your speed and learn to slow it down. Just not right now. Watch me."

I pulled down the sleeve on my left arm, and began to brush off the dirt and leaves starting at my shoulder. When I finished with that sleeve, I moved to my right. As I twisted a bit to reach my shoulder, the sun chose that moment to peek between the clouds, and a ray of light broke through the pines.

Bella sucked in a breath.

I froze, and my eyes slid to hers. She was staring at me with wide eyes, her mouth open. Her surprise and wonder fluttered around me. I raised an eyebrow at her and asked, "What?"

She breathed out "Jasper" and took one step toward me. "I don't think I've ever seen you in the sun like this. I saw … I saw … somebody …" She frowned and shook her head then looked back up at me. "But you … your hair, your skin … Jasper, you're beautiful."

She thought I was beautiful?

Her bright red eyes turned to black in an instant. As I snapped back to face her, she launched herself at me, crashing into my body, her arms slipping around my ribs, and driving me back against a tree. I grabbed her upper arms and …

Lust. A solid wave of lust crashed over me and I groaned, throwing my head back against the tree. Then her lips were on my neck. Her tongue was at the hollow of my throat, and I shivered as it glided wetly along my skin. She reached a spot just beneath the corner of my jaw and began to suck and lick the skin there.

A jolt of desire raced through me. Longing blossomed within my chest, spreading throughout my body, and a breathy moan escaped my throat as I bent my head toward her. Her want and her need flowed over me, I pressed my lips to her hair, and I groaned.

I should have probably stopped her there. Knowing Edward's Victorian, prudish, goddamned prissy-ass moral code and the way he had pushed her away time after time, I was pretty damn sure, and would've bet, she was still a virgin and … and I couldn't just …

Why the hell was I thinking about that?

Because I wanted her.

I want her. Right now.

Licking and nipping, she worked her way down and back up my neck, then her lips trailed hungry, hot kisses over my jaw. She pulled herself up my body and mashed her lips to mine. I let go of her arms, slid my hands around her back and pulled her in, crushing her body against me. I felt the tip of her soft tongue slide across my lips and …

Oh!

I opened my lips to her and sucked in her tongue.
Her taste! Her taste was so much better than her scent. Her scent was alluring, inviting, and captivating, but her taste! I had to have more. My left hand flashed to her head, my fingers spreading to hold her, and I pulled her more tightly against me as I forced my tongue into her mouth and tasted her again. More — I just wanted more.

It was … kissing her was like coming home! I had waited for this my entire life, and I never knew what I was waiting for. That was where I belonged. I belonged right there, with Bella. Wherever she was, that was where I needed to be. I wanted … I should …

I should have stopped. What the hell was I thinking? She was …

She was licking my face! Her tongue stroked my lips, and she kissed the corner of my mouth. Again, her tongue darted out to lick my jaw before placing more wet kisses in a smoldering trail on her way to my chin.

Her hands were in my hair and pulling, grasping. She slid her hands down the sides of my face and spread her fingers, dragging her nails down my throat. When they reached the neck of my shirt, she grabbed the collar and stripped it from me. She dropped the shredded pieces to the ground and her hands were back on either side of my face. I flung away the remaining torn pieces of the sleeves and wrapped my arms around her, trying to feel as much of her as I could. My left hand grasped the back of her neck, and my right slid up under her shirt to feel her silky skin.

Her lips were on my neck again, and she peppered light kisses down to my shoulder until she reached her bite. Her velvety tongue caressed the edges of her bite, and I shuddered at the sensual pleasure that shot through me.

More. Just … I needed more.

A rumbling growl started deep in my chest, and I tightened my grip on her before I spun around, pressing her against the tree. I couldn't get close enough! I could not get enough. I grabbed her hips and thrust against her, pressing my rock hard dick into her hip. She moaned into my mouth, and her legs curled around my hips, pulling me closer.

I should have stopped …

"Oh, Bella," I sighed and I moved from her lips, kissed along her jaw to her ear and then down her neck. I wanted to claim her. I wanted to bite her as she had bitten me. I wanted to mark her as mine — make this sexy, hot, wild creature mine!

I pulled the neck of her shirt out of the way, and I licked over the spot on her neck where, days earlier, I had bitten her to force my venom into her. She quivered in my arms, tilting her head to the side and exposing more of her neck to me. I licked over that sensitive spot again, breathing in her spicy and lightly sweet scent that invaded and took over my senses completely.

The scent of her arousal wove around and through me. It percolated in my brain until I was dazed.

It was … complete intoxication.

She closed her eyes and breathed out slowly, "Yessss."

She had exposed her neck to me, inviting me in, and I needed to make her mine. I let just the very edges of my teeth graze along her shoulder and neck. The venom welled up in my mouth, preparing to claim her, preparing to force my venom into her and mark her, as she had marked me, and ensure my scent would be forever part of her. I licked her shoulder and neck again, tasting her. I wanted to sink my teeth into her as badly as I wanted to sink my dick into her hot sex.
"Jasper," she sighed. Sliding her legs up to my waist, she squeezed me more tightly and groaned. Her lust, want, and need crashed over me again. The force of it stunned me and I snatched my teeth from her skin, sucking in a deep breath.

Oh goddamn, I wanted her! I buried my nose in her hair, and my fingers dug into her hips as I dragged her down my body until I felt her pubic bone pressing against the head of my dick. I gasped against her neck, and shoved my jaw against hers. I rolled my hips against her, shuddering at the sensation. The pressure, the friction, was exquisite. I groaned and rolled my hips against her again, hissing into her hair.

She was panting, and I felt her tongue gliding wetly up my throat until she reached the corner of my jaw. She kissed me and began nipping the skin there. She moved to my ear and I felt the tip of her tongue trace a line around the edge.

Her hands were like fire, singeing every part of me she touched. They slid down the sides of my neck, over my collar bones and across my chest, brushing over my nipples. That lit another scorching flame within me.

That was … that was …

"Jazz, dude, aren't you jumping the gun a little? And, uh, you're projecting like crazy."

That was fucked up!

Snarling, I wrenched myself away from Bella and twisted around into a crouch, keeping one hand back to hold her behind me. I was prepared to rip to shreds whoever dared to come anywhere near my Bella.

It was Rosalie and Emmett, standing about thirty feet away. How the fuck had they gotten so close without me hearing them?

Emmett raised one eyebrow, stepped in front of Rosalie, and flexed the muscles in his powerful arms. "That was a pretty hot show, Jazz, but have you taken her to hunt yet?"
I Hunt

Chapter Notes

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Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

In the Stacks by wonderwoundedhearers on FFn (this one – whoa)

Little Red by wiblywoblytimeywimey on FFn (and this one - whoa, again.)

Chapter 14, I Hunt

Jasper's POV

I stared blankly at Emmett as he shifted his weight from his right foot to his left, and crossed his arms over his massive chest.

Realization at what I had done, and hadn't done, broke over me, and I groaned inwardly. I should have taken her to hunt! Instead I was …

… I was a dog in heat.

I had been as distracted as a newborn — worse than — and there was absolutely no excuse for that. I was supposed to know what the hell I was doing. Instead I … I had been letting my dick lead me around like I was fuckin' hormonal teenager.

It wasn't even like I could say, "Well, she started it," because I was the one who was supposed to be in charge. I was the one with all the experience with newborns. I was supposed to be able to handle them, control them, and contain them. Instead, Bella was so distracting, all I had to do was touch her, smell her, and my dick was so hard it hurt, and my brain turned to goddamn mush. I was a flaming asshole.

"Well?" Emmett raised an eyebrow at me and cocked his head to the side. "Have you taken her to hunt?"

"No, I haven't," I answered as I straightened out of my defensive crouch. Bella was huddled up against my back and growling softly. She had one hand at my right hip and the other on my left arm. She peeked cautiously around my arm.
"Emmett?" she asked.

Emmett smiled without showing his teeth and uncrossed his arms, bringing them to his sides. "Hey, Bells. Yeah, it's me. Rose is right here, too."

Rose stepped out from behind Emmett and stood beside him. "Hi, Bella," she said as she smiled and raised her hand in a little wave.

Bella's reaction was instantaneous. Jealousy and possessiveness erupted from her, and she stepped to the side to get around me. As she started to leap I spun, catching her around the waist with my right arm, and I threw her to ground.

"Bella, stop!" I stood in front of her, poised to catch her again.

She rolled over the pine needles in a blur and sprang to her feet. Her legs were spread apart, feet planted solidly on the ground, and her arms were held out from her sides, her fingers curled into claws. Her chest was heaving with her rapid breaths.

She was glorious!

Her right hand sliced through the air. "Dammit, Jasper, get out of my way! That woman —" She surged forward.

I lunged to capture her again, but she veered to her left and leaped.

I caught her by her right ankle and dropped her face down on the ground. I scrambled to fall on her, to hold her down with my weight. Grabbing her wrists, I straightened out her arms so she couldn't get her hands underneath her. As before, I shoved my legs between her knees and forced her legs apart.

She was pissed off. I could still feel her jealousy and possessiveness and tried to block it, though I was strangely gratified by it. Bella was feeling possessive over me? I had been feeling the same way over her practically since I found her at the crash site, and it had only increased since she awoke. I wanted her to be mine.

She growled and tried to jerk her hands free. It was taking all of my strength to hold her down. She continued to struggle to get away and, once again, her ass was pushing and shoving against my groin.

I bit my lip and sighed. "Darlin', like I told you before, it's not that I don't enjoy this rough housin' an' all, but you gotta be still."

She instantly stopped moving. Humiliation poured out of her, and she huffed into the dirt.

"But Jasper, that woman there … I … I don't want her near you," she mumbled into the dirt. "I don't know why, I just don't. It's just … weird. I don't know what's wrong with me."

I didn't know how, but her embarrassment and discomfiture increased.

"Darlin', that woman is Rosalie. Do you remember Rosalie? She's Emmett's mate, and she'll stay right over there until we say so, alright?"

I heard Emmett begin to chuckle.

"Wow! That's Rosalie? My God, she's gorgeous!"
Rosalie started to laugh.

My lips moved to her ear and I whispered, "Yes, she is, but she has nothing on you."

Where did that come from? Not only had I lost control of my cock, I'd lost control of my mouth. Not that it wasn't true.

How she could possibly be even more embarrassed was beyond me, but at least she wasn't still pissed off.

Bella was on the ground, beneath me, my body covering hers, and every little movement, no matter how slight, was another form of torture. I was beginning to feel the strain of trying to maintain my composure. "I'll let you up if you promise not to try and attack Rosalie. Do you promise?"

"I promise. I just didn't realize that was her. She … uh, is a female and, uh … looks different to me. It's hard to remember … but I remember her, and Emmett, too. Everything looks different to me. There are all these sounds … everything feels so … there's just so much …" she stuttered, feeling overwhelmed.

"I know. It won't be like this forever. You'll get used to it." She snorted. "You will get used to it. I'm going to get up now. No running away. No attacking. Right?"

"Uh, right."

I let go of her left wrist and braced my hand against the ground to push myself up. I hovered over her as she moved to get up in case she decided to run again. As I stood, I held on to her right hand to keep her near me. "See? Rose and Emmett haven't moved." I gestured toward them. "Everything's fine. They just want to say hi."

"Rosalie, I'm sorry! I didn't realize that was you and …" She dropped her eyes to the ground, ashamed.

Rosalie laughed again. "That's okay, Bella. Honestly. I remember waking up and being so confused. Well, mostly I was angry, but I was still extremely confused. I understand. And, Bella, family calls me 'Rose' you know."

"Yes, okay. Thanks, Rose." Bella glanced at Rosalie, nodded her head and lowered her eyes. "Hi, Emmett. I'm sorry I tried to attack Rosalie." Bella continued to stare at the ground, and was poking at the pine needles with her toes.

"Bells, I know you didn't mean it. I remember how it was, too. Except when I woke up, I saw my Angel, and I wanted to jump her bones, not rip her apart." Emmett hugged Rose to his side, chuckling, and kissed her temple.

Bella rolled her eyes at him and shook her head.

I gently squeezed Bella's hand and pulled her toward me. "Bella, do you realize you said 'dammit'?"

Her eyes grew wide and flashed up to mine. Her free hand flew to her mouth. "Oh shit, I did?"

Her eyes got even bigger, and I had to laugh.

"Yes, but I think we can excuse it." I winked at her. "This time."

"I knew you had it in you!" Emmett said with a laugh.
Unbelievably, she was embarrassed again. But it was such a Bella thing to do. I'd never seen a vampire become embarrassed as often as Bella, and if she were human she would have blushed thirty shades of red in just the last few minutes. "Bella, it's okay." I pulled her into my arms and hugged her to me, resting my cheek on top of her head. Feeling her against me was simultaneously exciting and soothing. When she snuggled into my chest, I never wanted to let her go. But, I had responsibilities to take care of — we had to get her fed.

I grasped her arms, held her away from me, and looked into her darkening eyes. "Are you thirsty?"

She squeezed her eyes shut, and her hand went to her throat. "Yes, I think I am. Now that you mention it, there's a burning in my throat. I didn't know what it was." She looked up at me, worried. "I don't know how to hunt."

"It's instinctive. You'll do fine. But since we were rather noisy here, and scared off all the big game, we'll have to move farther out to find something besides those chipmunks over there."

"Chipmunks?" Bella turned to find them.

Emmett laughed again. "Yeah, they're brazen little bastards. Can't hardly chase them off."

I pointed toward an old moss covered fallen tree about thirty feet away. Perched on top of it was a little striped chipmunk busily gnawing at some nut or seed he had found.

Bella smiled at seeing him. "He's so cute!"

Emmett snorted. "But hardly even an appetizer. The stupid things will spot you and make all kinds of noise to warn off the other animals."

"Appetizer? Ew." She turned back to me. "You don't really eat them, do you?"

"No." I chuckled. "They're too small. Emmett, quit complaining. If you didn't play with your food, you wouldn't have to worry about chipmunks blowing your cover." I smiled at Bella. "That one came back because our scent isn't blowing toward him. Besides, we don't have to worry about them, we're the fastest things out here." I glanced up the ridge. "We'll follow the ridge north for a while until we hear or smell something bigger." I looked back into her eyes. "Do you want to hunt animals?"

She blinked, seemingly confused for a moment. "Yes. I don't want to hurt any people." She looked worried. "Will you help me?"

"I think we'll all help you with that." I gently squeezed her hand. "We can run, if you like."

Bella smiled up at me, suddenly eager to get started. I kept her hand in mine, and we turned together to head north, running silently over the moist earth.

She was so graceful. Running as a vampire was freeing, and running beside her, holding her hand, was nearly perfect. I felt her delight and basked in it. I had often felt the same way.

I heard Rose and Emmett behind us, though they kept their distance. If we ran across prey, and Bella went for it, it wouldn't be a good idea for any of us to be too close to her. Newborns were notoriously protective over their kills.

After about another mile, I scented elk and tugged on Bella's hand to stop her.

She turned to me, a question in her eyes. "What is it?"
I held my hand up to stop Rose and Emmett, and whispered to Bella. "I smell something you could eat. Can you smell it?"

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. "I think I smell everything. There are so many scents, how do I know which is which?"

"You'll learn. It's a process of elimination. Move this way, behind these trees." I nudged her over behind yet another large fir. "We're not that far from the prey. We don't want them to see us. They won't smell us yet — we're downwind of them. Do you smell the trees?"

Eyes still closed, Bella thought for a moment and nodded her head.

"You know the smell of the pines and dirt? You've had your face in it enough today." I smirked at her.

Her eyes flew open. "Jasper! That's not funny!"

"Shhh. They'll hear you, and it is funny. Now, what else do you smell?"

She closed her eyes again and turned her head slightly. "Leaves. Rain. I think I even smell the rocks."

I could tell when she caught the elks' scent flowing down from the ridge. She was on alert, and turned her nose right to where the scent was coming from.

"What do you smell?" I asked. I let go of her hand.

"It's weird but it smells warm and … musky. For my first meal, it doesn't smell so great." She frowned.

"I know. That's them. Now, listen for them. Can you hear their heartbeats?"

"I think I can! Four or five? What are they?" Her body turned completely to face the scent.

"There are four elk beyond those boulders up there — three large ones and a smaller one. We can't see them yet, there are too many trees." I stepped back away from her. "You go ahead. Keep listening and keep smelling. When you spot them, go for it."

She turned back to me. "Aren't you coming with me? When I see them, what do I do?"

"I'll be behind you, Bella. I won't be far. Newborns are usually very protective of their kills and can be very aggressive. When you see the elk, do whatever comes naturally. Don't be nervous, they can't hurt you."

"But I can't help being nervous. Why aren't you helping me with that?" She turned toward me and I felt her anxiety.

"The more you feel your emotions as they are, the sooner you'll be able to control them yourself. I'll only try to influence you if I think I need to. Or if you think I need to. Listen, you can hear them moving to the right. Now go." I waved her along. She needed to do this.

I squatted down as she moved off, bracing my hand against one of the pines. I turned to locate Emmett and Rosalie and saw that they had also stopped and crouched down about fifty feet behind us. I raised my hand and signaled to them, wanting Emmett to go toward the northeast, Rose to go northwest, while I would follow directly behind Bella. I didn't want her to feel surrounded, she might
get defensive and attack, but we needed to be near just in case. We were deep into the Olympic National forest, but you never knew where or when a human might show up.

Emmett crept to the right, as Rose disappeared through the trees to the left. I saw Bella moving ahead cautiously, crouching down before stalking silently forward. She was nearly to the large rocks. I followed soundlessly behind her.

Beyond her and to the right, I saw the elk — three cows and one small calf. I knew when Bella spotted them. She stiffened momentarily then broke into a sprint. She was a blur as she raced toward them and pounced, her arms outstretched, her hair flying out behind her.

Snarling, she tackled one of the cows around the neck and bowled it over, both of them crashing to the ground with a heavy thud. Bella must have snapped its neck when she slammed into it because it didn't struggle to escape. Probably a lucky hit. Once again, not pretty, but very effective.

Bella scrambled to her knees, snagging the elk's neck in both hands. She jerked it toward her, slicing through the thick hide and flesh with her razor-like teeth. Deep red blood spurted out, splashing across her face and chest. Another snarl ripped from her throat and she crushed her lips to the gaping wound.

As Bella had tackled that cow, the calf and the other two cows scattered — a cow to the left, the other cow and the calf to the right. They were bellowing and snorting, their hooves carving jagged furrows through the ground. The calf was clumsy and struggling to keep up. It must have been a newborn itself.

I crept closer to Bella, riveted by her muffled growls and sinuous movements as she took deep pulls from the elk's neck. She was feral, wild, and ferociously intent on her kill. I couldn't take my eyes from her. When there was no more blood to be had from the elk, Bella dropped the limp neck she had been clutching to her chest. In a flash she was standing over her kill, taking in deep breaths. She slowly turned toward me.

I was staggered by her primal, savage beauty, and I braced my left hand against the rough bark of the fir I was next to. A slight breeze from the ridge lifted her hair and it flowed around her, curling over her shoulders and around her arms. There were streaks of blood across her face and chest. She raised her right hand to the shining wet blood on her lips, and drew the back of her hand across them, smearing the deep red across her cheek.

As I gradually stood, the breeze swirled again, bringing her beguiling aroma and the scent of fresh blood to me. I inhaled deeply, her scent filling me, permeating my mind. It coiled around me, binding me, and I instantly desired her. My body hummed with wanting her.

"Bella," I whispered, and her crimson eyes snapped to mine.

Alice had never allowed me to be near her when she hunted. She had often seemed embarrassed about feeling the need to hunt, and she never came to me, wanting me, afterwards. For me, after hunting and satiating one kind of hunger, there was the other kind. When I would catch up to her later, she would always insist, at the very least, I change my clothes before attempting to make love to her. I hadn't always been successful in that attempt.

Then there was Bella. She felt elated, victorious, and powerful. It was extremely seductive, and I burned with want for her. I wanted to taste that blood, kiss it from her lips, lick it from her face and her throat. Without thinking, I began to stalk her, inching closer, hunting my fierce huntress. Then I stopped, frozen in place, feeling unsure and self-conscious. Bella may not want me near her. The scars across my body may frighten her, despite her feelings of pride and admiration earlier. The
disparaging emotions were at war within me. Because I was … sexually stimulated by watching her hunt and taking down an animal that weighed so much more than she did, it didn't mean she would react the same way. Seeing the fresh blood on her lips, I ached with wanting her, but I couldn't just stalk her. I couldn't approach her and take her, as badly I wanted to.

Her eyes widened as they traveled from my mine, down my body, and slowly back up. The brilliant crimson darkened to near black, and her blood-stained lips curved up at the corners. She stepped over the fallen elk toward me. My breath caught in my throat as she made another slow step forward.

I was enthralled by her, and I whispered, "My Bella." Without conscious thought, my right hand reached out toward her. My own lust and desire steadily grew, but I contained it with an iron grip, stopping it from projecting toward her. I would not influence her with my own need, no matter how badly I wanted her, and I wanted her so fucking bad my hands began to shake.

Bella took one measured step, and then another, and I saw her muscles bunch, preparing to leap. Springing toward me, Bella crossed twenty feet in a single leap, crashing into my arms. She attacked my mouth with hers as her hands firmly gripped either side of my head, holding me to her. I couldn't have broken her hold if I wanted to, and I didn't want to. Her lust flowed over me, hot and demanding, as she wrapped her legs securely around my waist.

My left hand went to the back of her neck and my fingers wove through her hair, tightening in those thick locks, and I held her lips to mine. My right hand went to the small of her back and slid down over the curve of her ass, crushing her body against me.

I urgently licked the blood from her soft lips and groaned. Tasting my Bella, and the blood from her first kill, sent a fiery, sensuous jolt through me, and I staggered back and dropped to my knees. Lowering her to the ground, I covered her body with mine, my left arm beneath her head. I slid my thigh between her legs, and she hissed. I shifted my hips to press my screaming hard dick against her thigh. A growl started low and rippled up through my chest.

I licked the blood from her chin, tracing a broad line with my tongue across her jaw and to her neck. She moaned, captured my tongue with her own, and drew it into her mouth. She shoved her pelvis against me, and I very nearly lost control. I ached to be inside her, thrusting into her, tasting the blood, tasting her.

She growled, a deep throaty sound, and with her newborn strength she flipped me onto my back, her legs straddling my hips. She planted her hands against my chest and sat up, her eyes closed, her blood splattered face lifted toward the grey sky. I froze again, drinking in her fierce beauty. Her long tangled hair framed her face, falling below her shoulders. Streaks of scarlet painted her throat and trailed down to her shirt, dyed deep red from the blood of the elk. I grabbed her hips and ground into her. Her eyes snapped open and she bent her head toward me, her hair falling over her shoulders and tickling my arms. Her hands slid down my chest and her eyes followed their progress, her fingers tracing over my scars.

"You are so beautiful," she whispered and a trace of a smile formed on her lips.

Her longing, and need washed over me and I gasped. Never before had anyone had that reaction or felt those emotions after seeing my scars. They had always been a symbol of warning, a beacon of danger to anyone who saw them. Hundreds of females had desired or lusted after me over the last century and a half, until they saw those silvery crescents and slashes. They had cringed away in fear, instinctively knowing those scars meant I was deadly, dangerous — a threat. I had ways to distract them, but the initial reactions had always been negative. But Bella saw them and felt desire, and want, and … and yearning. I was in awe of this magnificent being.
Her eyes grew wide and her head jerked to her right. She inhaled and snarled in anger and warning, baring her teeth. I instantly sat up to scan the area and did not see any threat. I tested the air, but all I could smell was the spicy scent of her arousal mixed with the blood of the elk. My mind was saturated with it. Rage and possessiveness pushed aside her want and lust. Her rumbling growl grew louder and her hands clamped onto my shoulders. She yanked me against her, and her razor sharp teeth sank into the curve of the left side of my neck!

It hurt so fucking good, my body jerked at the sharp pain and I grabbed her upper arms, forcing her body to mine, and I spun away from whatever had set her off that time.

She threw out her arm, halting our descent away from the ridge, placing herself on top of me again, but her teeth didn't let go. Her growl continued to rumble through her chest, and her lust burst over me again. She ground her sex along the length of my throbbing cock, thrusting against me, and I came.

Oh my fucking God. The acute pain of her claiming bite, the sting of her venom, her throaty growls, the sensual grinding pressure — I came so hard there were bursts of light behind my eyes.

I growled and groaned as my hips strained up against her, my heels digging into the earth, my venom erupting through my throbbing dick. I completely lost control over the all-consuming sensations of my pounding orgasm, and poured it into her.

She snatched her teeth from my shoulder, flung her head back and howled as she squirmed against me. Her hands tightened on the outer curve of my shoulders and her fingers dug into my skin. I could feel my granite hard skin cracking under the pressure of her grip but there was nothing I could do — I was trapped in the throes of her pulsating orgasm. She ground her throbbing sex against me and curled forward, her forehead thudding against my chest. I clutched her desperately to me, one hand at the middle of her back, the other on her ass, pressing her against me. My body quaked with another shuddering release, and I clung helplessly to her. Each of our orgasms flowed into the other and echoed back, amplified — exquisite torture.

She shuddered and collapsed against my chest. I dropped back to the ground, feeling completely spent. I hadn't even realized I had nearly sat up.

We were both panting so heavily I didn't hear Rosalie's and Emmett's approach.

"Well, that looked like it was the most fun you could have with most of your clothes on," Rosalie commented airily.

I glanced to the left toward Rosalie standing up the ridge a ways, hands on her hips, a smirk on her face.

A slight cough to my right, and there was Emmett below us, arms crossed over his chest, eye brows raised, shaking his head. He was amused — and a little angry. "Some mud or a little jello would've made that a bit more interesting. Well, at least now you have a matching set of bites." He sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. "Do you two think you could knock this shit off for a minute?"

Bella gasped and was immediately mortified, covering her face with her hands. "I can't believe I did that," she whispered. "I don't know what the hell happened. I … I don't know what came over me …" she trailed off.

Maybe it was because those were two of the best, most intense, painfully delicious orgasms I'd ever had, or maybe it was because I was utterly spent and completely, brainlessly addled, but I had to laugh. I just couldn't resist. I whispered in her ear, "Essentially, we came all over each other, Darlin'.
I just wish you weren't tryin' to kill me while you were doin' it."
Jasper's POV

"Oh my God! What the hell have I done!?” Bella sprang up and was sprinting away before I could shake off the orgasmic stupor.

Holy shit, that was incredible. And that was pretty much what my brain had stuck on repeat.

Holy shit.

My entire body was as limp and wrung out as a wet dish rag, and I could have just lay there in the dirt for a week. But, I needed to get my head out of my ass and catch her. After a moment, I leapt up and took off after her. "Em! Rose! Run parallel to her. We'll catch her."

At least she was running back in the direction of the house. Why the hell did she keep running? Most newborns just wanted to kick your ass.

Well, she had been kicking mine all over creation and back since she woke up.

Goddamn, I want that woman!

Her emotions had been all tangled up but were starting to separate from each other, and I was able to pick out her individual feelings. She was embarrassed again. There was a bit of fear, confusion, a spark of lust, and embarrassment again.

Ahhh, guilt. I guess I should have expected that. I would have to ask her what the guilt was for specifically. As soon as I caught her.

Seeing a blur through the trees, I knew I was closing in on her.
"Bella! Stop! Stop running!" She was just ahead of me, running like her ass was on fire, but I was gaining on her.

"Bella! Stop!" I commanded and her steps faltered just a bit. I leapt, tackling her like I did before, wrapping my arms and legs around her and tucking her head down with mine. We rolled and bounced over the uneven ground, smacking into another fir tree — a smaller one that time. Our impact cracked the trunk, and the tree shuddered, began to sway, and started to lean over us. It creaked and tipped further. I rolled us away from it, and we landed beside another larger tree.

The thirty-foot fir we broke moved as if in slow motion, its branches bending back as it fell gracefully through the other trees. Limbs snapped and cracked. Twigs and needles began to rain down as the fir swept through the dense green. The other trees appeared to be trying to hold it up, but it dropped through their limbs, bending some and breaking off others. More cracking and snapping — some as sharp as gun shots — and the fir dropped to the ground with a loud whump.

Falling trees really were quite graceful.

Silence settled all around us, though I could hear Rose and Emmett edging closer.

Bella was trembling in my arms, and her emotions were a tangled knot again. Fear came to the forefront, and I hugged her to my chest.

"Bella, it's okay. You're okay."

I shimmied around to a sitting position and began to gently rock her. "Shhhh, Darlin'. It's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll protect you."

Her guilt rose up above the fear, and she whimpered. I turned her in my lap and tucked her head under my chin.

"Why do you feel guilty, Darlin'? You have nothing to feel guilty for," I whispered into her ear. I ran my hand over her hair, brushing away some of the pine needles.

"Jasper," she sobbed. "I'm horrible! I … I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I've ... assaulted you. I'm not supposed to do that because I think there's somebody else." Her embarrassment welled up, outstripping the guilt.

I spotted Rose through the trees to our right. I knew Emmett wasn't too far away. I held my hand up toward Rose to urge her to wait.

I hugged Bella closer to me, bringing her head to my chest. "It'll be okay. Everything'll be all right." I gently stroked her hair and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, trying to comfort her.

Had she been mortified at what she had done, or because Rosalie and Emmett had witnessed our mutual … ah … gratification? Again, I probably should have been embarrassed, but I wasn't. I wanted her and some part of me felt the impulse to … display it? Act on it?

She had wanted me as much as I had wanted her, and I didn't think it would have mattered who was nearby. The urge, the need, to have her, feel her, was overwhelming, and I couldn't have controlled it if I wanted to.

I hadn't wanted to.

She shifted a bit in my lap, snuggling farther into my chest. I ran my fingers down her back and continued to gently rock her as thoughts raced through my mind.
The contradictory actions of a newborn — or was it just Bella? I'd been the cause of her embarrassment, and she had run away from me, but here she was, allowing me to hold her and comfort her. Would she have gone to anyone else if they had been with us? Would she have sought reassurance from Edward if he had been there?

She didn't remember everything concerning Edward or Alice. That wasn't unexpected. Most newborns remembered very little of their previous human lives. How would I explain any of that to her? What did I explain? She had bitten me twice, and that had been her newborn instincts taking over, telling her to claim her mate.

Her mate?

At first she hadn't recognized Rosalie, and her jealousy and possessiveness when she saw Rosalie had been an instinctive reaction to a female coming too close to her mate. She hadn't been able to control the intensity of it because of her newborn status. That reaction was startling and, if I was being honest with myself, it was … flattering. Alice had rarely shown any jealousy and never to that degree.

With my left hand on her back, I held her to me. I ran my right up her arm and over her shoulder, pressing her into my chest.

Mate? I knew I wanted her. I had to have her and make her mine. When I had found her bloody and so badly injured in her truck, I had wanted to protect and take care of her. But wouldn't anyone want to do that? If a human had found her, that was what he would have done, but any other vampire? Any other vampire would have drained her and left her. They wouldn't have been able to resist all the blood — resist her blood. She would have been a delicious, easy meal, and it wouldn't have required much work to cover up the fact that a vampire had been there. With all that sweet blood coating her and the inside of that truck, who could have resisted? How had I resisted?

When I had realized that another male vampire had been there, I had been enraged. I still couldn't believe he hadn't dragged her off. I was still astonished that I hadn't gone in for the kill. But, I just couldn't. There was no way I could have.

Bella remembered there was somebody else. Did she remember Alice? Remember who she was? Bella hadn't seemed to recognize her when she awoke. Had Bella been reacting to her as an unknown female?

What about Alice? Since I had tried to take away Bella's pain while she was transforming, it was like I just didn't even care about Alice. I had hardly given her a thought because thoughts of Bella had entirely consumed me. I was such a bastard. How could I not care about her? We had spent over fifty years together. We were married.

I knew she had taken all my things out of her room, but I didn't even give a shit. In fact, I was glad she had. It relieved me of having to go back into that lacy, ruffled pink nightmare.

Speaking of nightmares …

What about Edward? He thought Bella was his mate. He had told Bella she was his mate. But if she was, how could he have abandoned her? I never did understand that. How could he possibly not want her to be with him forever? Why had he continuously refused to turn her? It seemed the mind reader didn't have a fuckin' clue. Considering the way she had reacted to him while she was going through that transformation, she hadn't been thinking loving thoughts about him.

She seemed to remember something, but what? How much?
"Edward!" Bella hissed and twisted in my arms. Her anger was pointed and sharp.

"Bella, he's not here. Edward's not here." I tried to calm her but it had no effect. I held on to her with one hand and rubbed her arm with the other. "He's not here, Darlin'."

"EDWARD!" she roared and flung herself out of my arms, landing in a crouch about ten feet away. She spun to face me as I stood up. Her bright red eyes were beginning to darken, and her teeth were bared. Her hands, clenched into tight fists, shook with her fury.

I kept my eyes on her, but in my peripheral vision, I could see Rosalie moving closer. I still couldn't see Emmett, but I heard him behind me.

"What about Edward?" I asked her, keeping my voice low and soft. I raised my palms toward her. I took a step forward. "Bella, what about him?"

"That son of a bitch!" she shouted. "I remember! I remember that rat bastard tried to tell me what to do, and where I could go. He wouldn't allow me to do anything!" She spun and punched the tree next to her, knocking a good sized chunk out of the side. "And I let him!" she screeched. "I could kick myself!"

"Rat bastard," was it? Her vocabulary had certainly expanded. Must have been from hangin' with the fuzzy wuzzies over on the Reservation. Lord knows, Esme never allowed us to speak like that in front of Bella, and that repressed, pubescent pansy ass wouldn't have said shit if he had a mouthful.

That poor tree. That was another one that was about to fall soon.

"Did you know he kept telling me when I should eat? Did you know he told me what I could eat!?” She punched the tree again, knocking a softball-sized chunk out of the other side.

Being only about eighteen inches wide, that tree wasn't going to hold up to that kind of abuse for very long. I inched closer to her.

"Bella, I'm aware of some of the things …" She punched it again, and I took another step closer. "Maybe you should move away from the tree now."

She punched the tree again, and as I stepped forward to try to get my hands on her, she spun toward me and punched me square in the chest. I flew straight back and crashed into Emmett, sending both of us to the ground in a heap.

Bella appeared, standing over both of us, hands on her hips. Her chest was heaving with her breaths. She bent over and pointed a finger directly at my nose. "Don't you even try to tell me what to do, Jasper Hale. I've had enough of that bullshit to last me the rest of my life." She paused for a moment with a thoughtful look on her face. "I guess that's going to be a pretty long life now." She shook her head and flung her hands out as if to brush away that thought. "But that's beside the point. And you, Emmy-Doll." She pointed a stiff finger at his nose. "You quit laughing at me or I'm going to punch you, too!"

I could feel Emmett's surge of delight. Calling each other stupid, cutesy names had been a game they used to play when they had been arguing over who was cheating more at video games. It was actually nice to hear it.

"You remember that?" he asked, overjoyed.

"Tree's going to fall," Rose said.
"Tree?" As Bella turned to look back at the tree she'd been beating on, I rolled off of Emmett, jumped up and grabbed her, forcing her arms down against her sides. I hopped about twenty feet to the side.

The tree didn't crash exactly where we had just been, but it was close enough.

Emmett had rolled away, and he was now standing next to Rose, not far from where the tree landed. He was still laughing.

"Wow," Bella said incredulously. "That could have hit us."

"Yes, Darlin', it could have. Not that it would have hurt us, but if you're going to knock down trees, you should pay attention to where they're going to fall."

"Uh, right. I see."

"And it's 'Whitlock.'"

Still in my arms, she turned to me, the curiosity showing clearly on her face. "What's a Whitlock?"

I couldn't help smiling at her. Easily distracted newborns …

"It's my last name, remember? I've used Hale before, but not for a while. I've been using it again since we've been here in Forks."

"Hale? Rosalie Hale … You're supposed to be her twin; I remember that." Her eyes had a faraway look for a moment. "Emmett is a Cullen because he's Edward's …"

Her rage came thundering back. She threw my arms off, launched herself at another tree, and started punching, kicking, and clawing at it. Pieces of dark greyish brown bark and pale yellow wood splinters were flying in every direction.

"That goddamn Edward! If he ever tries to tell me what to do again …" The tree, beginning to lean, started to groan and creak. Bella leapt away from it as it fell. Small limbs, twigs, and pine needles fluttered down and through the other trees.

She immediately attacked a sapling and tore it from the ground. She snapped it across her raised knee and threw the pieces up into the tree tops.

I went to stand over by Rose and Emmett before Bella tried to snap something off me.

"You go ahead and work that out, Darlin'. Me, Rose and Emmy-Doll are gonna be right over here. We're not goin' anywhere."

"Jazz," Emmett said and chuckled. "She's always been entertaining and funny as hell, but now she's freakin' hi-larious. Who would have thought that the venom would burn away the nice girl filter between her brain and her mouth? I love this!" He laughed again. "I do remember that newborn shit, but I don't remember tearing up so many trees."

Bella was on her fourth one, muttering under her breath, with an occasional "Edward" and "asshole" loud enough for us to hear. It was right entertaining.

After the fourth one crashed to the earth, she started stripping the limbs off and flinging them away.

"You didn't tear up so many trees." Rosalie sighed. "You preferred knocking down walls and punching boulders."
Emmett laughed again and his hand went to rub his chin. "Yeah, Esme wasn't real pleased when I took out that screened-in porch at that house in Maine."

"Well, she wasn't really in love with that house anyway, but she got to close-in the porch and extend the kitchen." Rosalie smiled and wrapped her arms around Emmett's waist. "As I recall, it added quite a bit to the price of the house when they sold it."

"Jazz, how long are you going to let her tear up the woods? You know, we should probably get her to hunt some more. Fill her up and maybe she'll calm down a little." Emmett pulled Rosalie in a little closer to his side and kissed her temple.

I had been enjoying watching Bella. I was happy just watching her tear shit up. She was radiant in her fury — her eyes blazing, her wild hair flying. She twisted, and jumped, and leaped through the fallen trees, yanking limbs loose and then cocking her arm back before propelling them like javelins though the trees.

God, she was beautiful.

Okay, probably not a real good time to get another hard on.

"We'll give her a little longer. There isn't much that calms down a newborn, and it's not like she's going to get tired, but you're probably right." I crossed my arms over my chest. "The blood volume of a full grown elk is more than twice that of a human, but maybe we should try and get her to hunt again."

"And, Jazz …" Emmett smirked as he elbowed me in the ribs. "When she's done feeding this time, try to keep your hands off her."

"I …" Stunned, I didn't know what the hell to say to that. Bella with blood on her face? That was eminently erotic. I came so hard I thought my eyes were going bleed.

Unfortunately, he was right again.

"I, uh, really don't know what happened there." My hands went to my hips. "When she finished that elk, she stood up and turned toward me. There was blood on her face. There was blood on her lips and … and then she looked at me and …"

"Yeah, well, we saw what happened there." Emmett clapped his hand on my shoulder, and his voice took on a more serious tone. "I know exactly what you're saying, man. I've never seen anything more exciting than my Rose. Except my Rose after she's chased down a mountain lion. The way she looks when she leaps for it … and if there's any blood on her face …" His golden eyes took on a faraway look.

"Yes." Rosalie snuggled against his chest. "There's something raw, something primal about it all. It's like when you see your mate hunt and conquer the prey, it touches some deep part of you. We're so ruled by our instincts at times, and hunting certainly is instinctive. You get caught up in it and …"

Emmett sighed. "And it's fucking sexy as hell."

That was no shit, but I just nodded at them, keeping my eyes on Bella. Too many times I'd been hunting near them and was nearly overcome by their emotions. The thrill of the hunt followed directly by the surge of lust. You learned pretty damn quick not to go anywhere near Rose and Emmett, or even Carlisle and Esme, when they were hunting together like that.

Hunting and fighting had certainly affected me in a similar way. When I'd been in Maria's army, after
a battle or after attacking some human village, it was expected, more often than not. Fight to the
death then fuck your brains out. The urge was even stronger as a newborn. Newborns were all about
feedin', fightin' and fuckin'. Not necessarily in that order either. It was one of Maria's "rewards." We
might have lost more than a few newborns during a battle, but I never lost. If Maria had been
particularly pleased … the sex could last for days.

I'd known enough vampires to know that was normal for us — human drinkers or animal drinkers.
But then there was Alice …

I had often wondered why it hadn't affected Alice in the same way. Was it because she woke up
alone and had no one there to help her? No one to teach her about what she was? Or was it because I
didn't have that effect on her? She had felt fear at the sight of my scars the first time she ever saw
them, and she had never gotten over it. After the first few times hunting together, she avoided me
right afterward so she wouldn't see any fresh blood on me. I'd even tried hitting her with a dose of
lust back in the beginning, and she panicked and ran away. Odd damn thing to have done, I had
thought at the time.

Rosalie had said, "… watching your mate …" Why didn't Alice react that way? Because she wasn't
my mate? I'd always thought …

Bella whirled to a stop and abruptly dropped the branch she was preparing to cast into the foliage.
Her anger flared again. She raised her fists up and shrieked, "Alice!"

Was she reading my fucking mind?

She viciously kicked a log she'd hacked out of one of the trees, sending it hurtling past us.

"… holding me hostage and making me wear that crap … and I let her," she mumbled as she bent
down to snatch another log from the forest floor. She hoisted it above her head. "Alice and that damn
…" She heaved the log away from her with a grunt. "… life-sized human dress-up doll, Barbie Bella
bullshit. All she needed was a Ken …"

She froze. Her eyes snapped to mine, a shocked expression on her face. "Ken … Barbie and Ken
…"

Guilt erupted from her. Her hands flew to her mouth. "She's your wife!" Bella spun around and
bolted so fast she was nearly invisible.

I sprinted after her, Emmett and Rosalie hot on my heels. I sighed inwardly. She was so right about
that shit. Alice dressed my ass most of the time, and she was my wife. I had no fuckin' idea how to
try and explain that. Or justify it. Or rationalize it.

Emmett's amusement bubbled over. "Sure looks like she remembered something else. She's got you
pegged, Jazz. You're Alice's extra-large size Ken doll! She dressed you up just like she dressed up
Bella." He was laughing so hard I was amazed the asshole could still run.

"Shut the fuck up, Emmett. It made Alice happy. And anyway, we don't know what the hell she's
remembered … well, she obviously remembers the clothes, and she remembers Alice is my wife. She
felt guilt right before she said that. She must be thinkin' she cheated with a married man."

"But you are a married man." Rose glared at me as she gracefully cleared a fallen log. "Edward
couldn't be her mate or he never would have been able to leave her like that all those months ago. If
he was her mate, I don't think she would have gotten so angry when he came near her, and she
would have gone to him when she woke up, not try to rip his face off. Not that I don't think that's a
perfectly natural reaction. *I've* wanted to rip his face off countless times."

"We all know Eddy boy is an over-educated idiot," Emmett remarked. Then his smile broadened across his face. "Oh, and that shit's gonna leave a mark!" He guffawed. "Messed up his pretty face! I wish I knew what made her lick her fingers. That shit was diabolical!"

*Indeed.*

I felt Emmett's pride and affection for his little sister, and I couldn't help feeling a bit of pride myself. A brand new vamp, just woken up, and she had managed to distract everyone by licking her fingers. Then she attacked, making sure they'd never forget it. As a distraction, it had worked so well she had pinned both of my arms and bitten *me*, and I knew better.

Fucking brilliant.

Rose dashed around a fir and curved in a bit toward me. "And the way she bit you, Jazz. You know what kind of bite *that* was." She winked at me.

"Yeah!" Emmett laughed again. He swooped in close to punch me in the arm again and then veered off. "She put her mark on you, Jazz, that's for damn sure. She was pretty damn violent, too. Females usually don't bite first and aren't quite *that* aggressive. Our sweet little innocent Bella is getting in touch with her inner hellcat! Who'd a thunk it?"

Bella *was* a little hellcat, but that fuckin' Emmett was enjoying all this shit way too much.

"And it's not like her snarling 'mine' wasn't, ya know, *obvious* or anything."

I glared at him. "Emmett, your mouth is talking. You might wanna look to that."

She had bitten the shit out of me twice. Then there *was* that little "Mine!" she had roared out the first time she bit me. That *was* pretty damn aggressive, and it was so fuckin' hot that shit went straight to my dick. God knows I could barely resist the urge to bite her. If she hadn't hit me with another dose of lust, and if Emmett and Rosalie hadn't interrupted …

Then after she finished with that elk … Jesus Christ, I came *so* fuckin' hard. Twice! It was almost scary to imagine what it would feel like if I came inside …

I shivered as I ran and ordered myself to move away from those thoughts.

Was that what it felt like to finally meet your mate? Was she my mate? I *knew* she wasn't Edward's. God, I wanted her *so* bad. I wanted to rip her clothes off and …

I felt a swell of mischief coming from Emmett as he veered toward me again.

"I'm thinkin'…" he began. "Ya know, I'm thinkin' that our sweet little Belly-Boo is *way* too much woman for Pussward."

I had to agree. I had always thought so, too, but before I could reach out and throttle him for being a smart ass, Rose darted between us.

"She's turned toward the house," she warned.

"Yep." I kicked it into high gear and just caught glimpses of her between the trees. I considered letting her reach the house, but Christ alone knew what she might have done to it. There might not be any house left.
Emmett laughed again. "We should let her get to the house. Could be fun to watch."

"Emmett!" Rosalie smacked him across the shoulder. "She might attack everybody again and get hurt!"

"I don't know, Rose. She kicked Jasper's ass."

Damn, I wanted to punch him, but he wasn't close enough, and she had been kicking my ass. Was it wrong that I had been enjoying the absolute shit out of it?

She slowed a bit when she came up on a rock fall, and I had her. Once again, arms wrapped around her, my head tucking hers down, and we rolled over the leaves and pine needles. I threw out a leg to stop us, and we plowed through the bracken. We didn't hit any trees that time.

_Somethin’ different._

"Bella! You gotta quit running like that." I held her head down against my chest. I knew she could bite me again, but I didn't think she would. She hasn't bitten me when she was feeling _anger_. Yet.

I forced a bit of lethargy at her and could see that it was working when she relaxed just a bit. I moved my mouth to her ear. "What happened? Tell me what you were thinking. I know you were feeling guilty, but I don't know why unless you tell me."

Her guilt, followed by dark shame, pushed against me as she shook her head.

"Bella, tell me what it is and I'll try to … I'll try to help you. You can tell me whatever it is."

Emmett and Rose walked up slowly but stopped about ten feet away. They crouched down and waited.

I rolled us to a sitting position, but I didn't release her. Her emotions were a storm battering against me, and I feared she might try to run again. I couldn't stop myself from moving my nose through her hair and closer to her ear, breathing in her scent.

"Bella …"

"She's your _wife_, and I am a whore!"

"No!" Rosalie gasped. "Bella, you are _not_ a whore!"

"Then I'm a slut, and I don't know how any of you can even stand to look at me!" She drew in a shuddering breath. "Jasper is _married_ to Alice, and I … I … I _molested_ him. Then I remembered Edward. He told me I was _his_ mate, and that's like being married, and I … I'm nothing but a common slut!"

Alarmed, I tightened my arms around her. I didn't know what to do. "No, Bella, no! You are _not_ a slut or a whore. It's … uh … you're a newborn. Everything is new and confusing. Our instincts are very strong and hard to control." I hugged her more securely and drew my hand up to her head. "I know there's a lot going on. It's a sensory overload, I know. But you'll learn to block things out. Like when you turn on a fan. After a while you don't even hear it anymore."

"But she's your _wife_, Jasper." She sobbed into my chest, and she clutched her hands together up under her chin. "She's your _wife_, your mate, and I …" Her guilt bubbled up. "You said everything is instinctive but what instinct would make me want to … why would I … She's your _wife_!" Her hands moved to cover her face.
Once again, I had no fucking idea what to say to that. If anyone should feel guilty, it should have been me. Like Rose had said, I was the married one. I shouldn't have been having all these damn erotic thoughts about Bella, but they just... they were just there. I seemed to have no control over it. Even then I was enjoying feeling her body pressed to mine. I was running my fingers across her hair and breathing in her exciting, and paradoxically, soothing scent. Without even thinking about it, I had bent my head down so that my lips were nearly on her neck, and all I wanted to do was run my tongue down her neck, taste her, smell her, and I shouldn't. I shouldn't have been dry humping her back there and cum so hard I...

Rose huffed angrily at me.

Oops.

I looked to Rose, silently pleading with her to help me. Thank Christ Emmett was keeping his mouth shut.

Rosalie crept a bit closer. "Bella, Alice moved all of Jasper's things out of her room," she said softly.

Bella's head twitched slightly and she peeked at Rose through her hair. "Why did she do that?" She tilted her face up toward me. "Where did she put your stuff?"

I guess I had to try and answer that. "There wasn't much, but she put my stuff in my study. I don't really know why she did that other than I think she was afraid of me. She's always been afraid of my scars."

"But she's your mate. Why would she be afraid of you?"

I sighed. "Do you remember when Edward tried to come in the room while you were... while you were burning?"

Her curiosity took a back seat to the anger that flared up. "I knew it! I knew he was there. It's like I could tell when somebody came near me. I could almost feel that they were close. Then I could smell them. He... came near me and I just got so mad!" Her hands pushed against my chest. "I don't think I knew it was him, exactly. I just knew I was mad, and I didn't want whoever it was near me. I didn't realize it was him until I woke up."

"We could tell that he upset you." Rose crept a bit closer and lightly touched her shoulder. "Jasper and I had been talking, Edward rushed into the room, and you became upset, Bella. Very upset. It was the second time he had done that."

Bella huffed and pushed against my chest again. "Okay, what are you not telling me? What does that have to do with Alice? What else is there? What were you talking about?"

Okay, she might have been a confused newborn but she hadn't missed a thing. At least we had distracted her from calling herself a slut.

I took in a deep breath to begin, and Bella tilted her head back, and stared straight into my eyes.

"Look, Jasper, don't even try to keep anything from me. Edward did that shit all the time, and it just pissed me off!" She exploded out of my arms again and landed about fifteen feet away, her hands clenched into fists again. She held them rigidly at her sides. "There's so much he would never tell me. To protect me. For my own good. To keep me safe," she sneered.

Her anger was throbbing, and Rose, Emmett, and I jumped to our feet.
"He didn't want to scare me," she snarled as her arms waved about furiously. She started to pace in front of us. "That is utter bullshit! What's scarier than a crazy ass nomad tracker-vamp who decides you're his next game piece to hunt down? What's scarier than being out in the middle of the woods, and you run across a red-eyed vamp who wants to eat you? He very nearly does, and then he's attacked by wolves the size of freakin' horses!" She kicked a tree. "What's scarier than being stalked by a psychotic red-headed bitch who wants to torture you?" She punched another tree and spun around to trudge back toward us. "What's scarier than being left human, weak, and abandoned, and at the mercy of that crazy psycho bitch?"

She stomped over toward me and poked me right in the chest. Her eyes had darkened to a fiery black, and she glared threateningly at me. "Don't you even try to treat me like some weak little squishy human and lie to me. I am a goddamned vampire, and even if I wasn't, I. Am. Not. Stupid!" She punctuated each word by stabbing her finger into my chest.

I was starting to get mad, and I grabbed her hand so she'd stop poking me with it. "Bella, I know you're not stupid. And I am not that pussy Edward. I have not, and I will not lie to you."

I could feel Rosalie's astonishment. "Bella, how do you remember all of that?"

"I don't know. It just popped into my head." She yanked her hand away from me. "Jasper, if you're not getting ready to lie to me or edit the shit out of what you're going to say, why don't you just fuckin' tell me!"

She pulled her fist back, and it snapped forward to land a punch, but I caught it and yanked her to me. I spun her around so her back was to my chest, wrapped my arms around her and held her tightly. She began to struggle, but I wasn't letting her get away from me this time. She wouldn't be able to bite me in the chest, but she might try to take a chunk out of my arm.

She started thrashing around and was trying to hit me with her head. "Stop! Quit fuckin' hittin' me!" With my jaw I forced her head against my right shoulder and held her there. I was surprised she wasn't trying to kick me. "Bella, quit this shit!"

"Goddammit, Jasper!" she growled and she pulled her right arm loose. She elbowed me in the ribs at the same time she took her left foot, hooked it around my left ankle and heaved. We went down like a ton of bricks. Or the last forty-foot fir she knocked over.

To the soundtrack of Emmett's roaring laughter, I landed on my back and flipped us over so Bella was beneath me. Once again, I grabbed her arms and pulled them out straight away from her body. I forced my legs between hers and spread them apart. Before it occurred to her to head butt me, I forced her head down into the pine needles and leaves with mine.

I was panting like a human that had just run a marathon, and Bella was still growling at me.

"Jasper, I never knew you were such an asshole!"

"Well, we all got new shit to learn, now don't we? And I've always been an asshole — you just never got to experience it before. Now settle down, Darlin', or I'm goin' to knock you out."

Emmett chose that moment to walk around in front of us. He squatted down to peer into Bella's face half buried in the forest floor. He was still chuckling. "Our very own baby vamp. I love this shit. Bella, I gotta say, you waking up as a newborn has been, like, the best day ever!"

"Shut up, Emmett," she hissed at him.

"Damn! I'd pay real money for a show this good."
It was my turn to hiss at him. "Shut up, Emmett."

Rosalie sauntered into view. "So, Jazz …" She batted her eyelashes at me and fingered the collar of her pale green button down. "How come you haven’t knocked her out?"

Straining to hold Bella down, I narrowed my eyes at Rosalie and huffed. "I wanted to avoid having to do that. It might just piss her off."

Emmett and Rosalie burst into laughter and Bella snorted.

"Look, Darlin’, you need to calm down, and quit tryin’ to kick my ass. We don't get tired, but you are wearin’ me out." I sighed. "It's only been a few days, but a lot of shit has happened. A lot of shit."

Chapter End Notes

"…your mouth is talking. You might wanna look to that." — Quote from Captain Malcolm Reynolds to Jayne Cobb from the Firefly pilot episode.

"feedin’, fightin' and fuckin’." — I can't remember where I first saw that!
Jasper's POV

Bella squirmed underneath me, huffed again and was still. I guess she finally realized she wasn't going to get away.

"Okay! Okay! Uncle." She sighed, exasperated. "Let me up out of the dirt. Jeez! I've been in the dirt all day."

I started to lift myself off of her, but I didn't let go of her wrists yet. "You won't try to run away again? You know I'll catch you."

"No, Jasper! I won't try to run away again."

"Okay, Darlin', I'm going to let you up." I eased up away from her, letting go of her wrists, and stood up slowly. It wasn't that I didn't believe her, but with newborns, you never knew.

She sighed again and drew her arms slowly to her sides. In a flash she was in a crouch right in front of me. She looked so surprised.

"Damn! The speed is just so damn cool!"

I felt her delight. As she straightened out of the crouch, she looked down at herself and wasn't so
delighted any more.

"I've destroyed my clothes!" She whimpered.

"Yeah, I kinda liked that shirt, Darlin,' but newborns are pretty hard on clothes."

"She's been pretty hard on your clothes, too." Emmett poked my shoulder and smirked.

Rosalie punched him in the arm. "Emmett!"

Instantly, Bella was embarrassed, and her hands flashed up to cover her face. "Oh God, I ripped your shirt off because I …uh … I ripped your shirt off you. Jasper, I'm sorry! I'm such a …"

I darted toward her and took hold of her arms. "Bella! It's okay. Like I told you before, I have more shirts."

Rosalie stepped toward her, lightly touching Bella's arm. "You have some more clothes back at the house, and we can get you more. It'll be fine. I went through quite a few outfits before I had enough control to keep from tearing them apart. And I swear it was nearly a year before Emmett could dress himself."

"A year!? A year? It'll be a year before I can dress myself?" she wailed. "Oh my God! How am I going to get dressed? Who's going to dress me? I don't want to run around naked!"

The thought of a naked Bella drifted through my mind, and I drew in a breath. The look on my face must have given it away. Or it could have been that I was projecting a little bit of lust because Bella's hands dropped from her face and her eyes were wide.

"Oh, no! No, no, no. No way in hell are you going to dress me, Jasper. That's just … that isn't …" She jerked her arms from my hands and backed away from me.

I stood rigidly, squaring my shoulders, and held her eyes with mine. "Do not run. I will catch you."

Bella quickly looked away from me, her eyes darting here and there as if searching for an escape route. Her hands flew together and she nervously scrubbed them against each other. "Uh, I wasn't going to run. I wasn't. I just … I mean, I …"

Rosalie stepped in front of Bella, blocking my view of her, and placed her hands gently on the curve of her shoulders. "Bella, I will help you dress and undress. I will help you in the shower. It only took me a couple of months to get it down. It was just Emmett that took nearly a year to dress himself. He seems to think everything is made out of cast iron." She tilted her head toward Emmett.

"Um, yeah. That was just me, Bells. I forgot real easy how strong I was. But you'll do fine." He smiled at her, and then his face brightened. "Oh, hey! We're pretty close to the river. Why don't we go hop in and you and Jazz can rinse off some of the blood and mud and stuff?"

Thankfully, Rosalie seemed to reassure Bella about that little clothing issue, though Lord knows I wouldn't mind helping her with that. And Emmett skillfully diverted her attention away from why she ripped my shirt off, which, naturally, brought it right to the front of my mind.

Oh, yes, Bella could rip my clothes off me any time she wanted.

Emmett jabbed me in the ribs and whispered at vampire speed, "Jazz, rein that shit in. You're projecting again."
Bella peeked around Rosalie, one eyebrow raised. "I can hear you now, you jerks. No more of that sneaky Secret Squirrel shit." Her eyebrows drew together, and her eyes narrowed. "Yeah, Jazz, rein that shit in."

Then her face lit up and she beamed a smile at Rosalie. "Did someone mention the river?"

"Why yes, Bella, someone did mention the river. We should head that way. Speaking of hearing and jerks … can you hear it? The river, I mean. Not the jerks." Rosalie placed an arm around Bella’s shoulder and turned her away from Emmett and me. "We'll walk slowly so you can practice human-like walking and we can talk a bit — a bit slower than you have been. It'll be good practice, too."

They started walking through the trees in the direction of the river. With her other hand, Rosalie waved us off, wanting us to hang back a bit.

Temper tantrum averted for the time being, I was actually looking forward to getting in the river and rinsing off as much as I could. Wearing wet jeans sucked, though I suppose I should have considered myself lucky I still had them.

When the girls were about 100 feet ahead of us, Emmett leaned toward me. "I'm glad we got her off that 'whore' and 'slut' crap." He sighed as he whispered to me. "She's not — she just doesn't understand." He turned to me. "Though, if anyone should feel guilty, it should be you, manwhore."

"Hey! I couldn't help …" And I had to shut my mouth because he was right. There was no excuse for my actions. I put my hands on my hips, dropped my head, and stared at the ground. Once again, I was being reminded of my lack of restraint, good judgment, self-command, and common fuckin' sense. I had to try harder to control myself. Not just try — I had to do it. Bella needed for me to be able to restrain myself, and not be the cause of any more distress or confusion to her.

I looked at Emmett out of the corner of my eye, gave him a nod, then took in a deep breath, and blew it out. "How bad do I look?"

Emmett crossed his arms, bringing one hand up to his chin. He stroked his chin and studied me for a moment, a look of deep concentration on his face, as his eyes moved slowly from my feet up to my head.

I rolled my eyes at him. I swear I was going to beat his ass down into the ground.

"Emmett, quit fuckin' around and just tell me already."

"Sorry, Jazz, couldn't pass up a chance to bust your ass a little." He grabbed my shoulder and pushed me to follow the girls. "I didn't want to say anything in front of Bella, might set her off again, but both of you absolutely reek of sex. Not that she smells bad. She kinda reminds me of ginger snaps now. Sort of. I always liked ginger snaps." He broke a small limb off a tree and tossed it away. "Before, she smelled kind of like flowers. What did Edward call it? 'Freesia'? What the fuck is a 'freesia'? Well, anyway … She did smell really good, though a bit sweet. Now, she smells … she smells so much better than before. Well, I don't know if it's better exactly, it's just more … 'homey,' I think. She smells, uh, cozy and warm and … and why the hell are you growling at me?"

The low growl in my chest stopped abruptly. I hadn't even realized I'd been growling at him. "Uh …" What the hell was he doing smelling Bella anyway? Though she did smell warm and cozy and like home. I could just bury my nose in her hair and breathe in her scent all day. Have it wrap its soothing comfort around me and pull me into her, closer …

I didn't know why I was growling at him. Of course, they all would have noticed her scent was different. It's just that he never went on and on about it before, and I didn't think I liked him noticing.
"I don't know."

"Well, quit being an asshole. I thought it might be a good idea to try and rinse some of that mud and stuff off before any of the others come looking for us. I expect they will about any time — we've been out here for hours. Besides, you gotta be getting tired of those jizzy pants." He smirked at me.

Oh, that was it. Motherfucker was goin' down.

I struck, straight out from my left side, punching him in his right shoulder. He stumbled to the side, spun, and lunged at me. I ducked, grabbed both of his wrists, and fell back, planting my foot in his stomach. When my back hit the ground, I curled my body and shoved with my legs, throwing him over my head. I leapt up, but before I could turn completely around to face him, he tackled me, slamming me to the ground. He reached up, grabbed my right wrist and twisted it up behind my back, and I heard him laugh. I spun under him, grabbing his forearm with my right hand, and hit him with a left jab right on the point of his chin.

He flew back away from me, but he kept hold of my arm as he dropped onto his knees. As he scrambled to his feet, I jumped up and cocked my left fist back, ready to punch him again.

He just looked at me and shook his head. "I knew it!" He shoved my arm away. "I knew it! Every damn time we sparred out in the field and I won, you let me win, you bastard. You could've had my head."

"It wasn't every time. And I could've had your head three times. But you could've had mine."

"Yeah, only after …" He huffed and glared at me. "Anyhow, let's get to the girls."

He looked off into the trees, turned back to me and grinned. "So, as I was sayin', Mr. Stickybritches …" He cackled and jumped away from me, holding his hands up in surrender as I snarled at him.

"Alright, Jazz, okay! I'll stop, okay? Now chill." He pointed ahead of us. "Get your ass to the river."

Jesus Christ, he wasn't ever going to let me live that down. I guess I should have been embarrassed. I haven't shot my load in my pants like that since … hell, since I was a newborn vampire myself. And I couldn't even be embarrassed, it felt so fucking good. It hurt so fucking good. Bella stood on the ridge above me, blood smeared across her face, her bright red eyes on mine. Her eyes suddenly turned black, and she leapt at me. Her mouth was on mine, and I licked the blood from her lips.

Emmett punched me in the arm. "Jazz! For Christ's sake, you're worse than a buck in rut. Think with your brain, not your goddamn dick for a minute, and put a lock on that shit. Every few minutes you've been projecting lust. You need to control that. At least for now. Or at least block it so everybody else doesn't feel it."

I growled at him, and punched him back. He was right. I hated him being right all the time.

Since Bella woke up, I've had either a semi-hard on or a raging hard on, and it had been distracting as hell. Bella had been distracting as hell. I just wanted to wrap my …

"Jasper! Goddammit!"

"You're right! You're right!" I said as I threw my hands up in the air. "I need to get my head off my head." I sighed. "So, tell me now — how bad do I look?"

"In addition to all the dirt, mud, pine needles, and leaves all over your sorry ass, you've got blood smeared across your face, in your hair, around your neck, down your chest, and on both arms. Hell, you weren't even the one that was hunting." He shook his head in exasperation. "Better hope Esme
doesn't see you, you'd scare the shit out of her. That and the smell …"

"Alright! Christ! Race ya to the river, asshole." I bounded ahead of him.

It only took about thirty seconds to get there. I was ahead of him, of course. When I neared the edge of the bank, I spotted Bella and Rosalie in the water about 100 yards down river. I skidded to a stop and just stared at them. Only Bella's freshly clean face showed above the surface of the water. Rosalie was standing beside her, combing through her long dark hair with her fingers. Her hair flowed gently with the rippling current, and I caught myself wishing it was my fingers combing through her hair. Rosalie bent over to say something to her, and she smiled.

Bella's arms came up out of the water, and her hands went to her face, smoothing her hair back as she stood up. She swept her hands over her head, and brought her hair over her left shoulder, squeezing the water out of it. She laughed at something Rosalie said, and I could just make out the tinkling chimes of her laughter.

A wet Bella was a whole new experience. Her stained and ripped long-sleeved shirt clung to the swell of her breasts, followed the curve of her waist, and flared out at her hips. I wanted to explore every inch of those curves with my hands, my lips, my tongue …

I hadn't noticed when Emmett came up beside me until he slapped me in the back of the head.

"What the fuck, Emmett?"

"You're doing it again."

Right. It was time for a deep breath. It was time to get my shit together and stop thinking about Bella wet, and maybe naked and wet, and…

Emmett kicked me right in the ass, and I flew out over the water. I tucked in my arms and legs and did a cannonball at about the middle of the fifty foot wide river.

We could feel the cold water, but it certainly didn't have the same shocking and libido-inhibiting effect as when a human dove in. I let myself sink to the bottom and started scrubbing away at the mud, dirt, and blood. A reddish brown cloud, dotted with pine needles and bits of leaves, formed around me and was carried off in the gentle current.

Before Emmett decided to try and drown me, I needed to rinse out … ahem, my pants. As I reached to shove my hand down the front of my jeans, I thought I spotted movement downstream. I turned and saw Bella swimming toward me. She was smiling at me. I was stunned by her grace in the water, her hair flowing around her shoulders and over her back.

I slammed down the door on my emotions, holding them firmly. I smiled at her and pointed toward the river bank near where Emmett had kicked me in. She nodded, so I pushed off from the bottom and swam toward the bank.

When I was close enough to the bank, I stood up, the water reaching to my waist, and Bella stood up beside me. I could feel her happiness and excitement, and it made me smile again.

"Jasper! This is so great! I can actually get in the water and not have to worry about drowning! Or getting washed down the river, or catching some weird disease from the bacteria, or sea serpents eating me or …"

"Bella! Slow down!" I had to laugh at her. She was elated, and I hadn't seen her that happy in months. That fucking Edward had been crushing the life out of her. I could have ripped his other arm
off for that, and not let him have it back, either.

"Gosh, Jasper, I don't think I've ever heard you laugh like that before! At least I don't remember if I ever have. I like it."

"It's because you're so happy. I feel joy coming from you. It feels good." Without a thought, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and drew her into my side. Her happiness felt so good, and having her against me felt even better. I couldn't seem to control the urge to touch her.

"I'll try to talk a little slower. Rose said it's good practice." She smiled up at me. "It's so exciting!"

She bounced against my side. "I can walk on the bottom, and I can see through the water. I can't hear so well underwater, but I can see! And Rose told me if I exhale I'll sink right to the bottom. If I want to swim on top of the water, it's easier if you take in a deep breath and fill your lungs first, but you could still do it without any air, but you have to swim harder or faster." She finally took a breath. "And then she said we could actually swim across the ocean because we wouldn't get tired, and we wouldn't have to worry about sharks because they'd stay away from us, and …"

She was talking faster than a mile a minute. "Bella, Bella, Bella! Yeah, it's great!" I wrapped both arms around her and hugged her to me as she laughed again. Having her in my arms, her head on my chest, felt so good. She felt warm to me, even though she was soaking wet — warm, and soft, and her curves fit right against me. Having her body against mine filled me with a sense of well-being I didn't recall ever feeling before.

"You know, I could try and wash your hair like Rose washed mine. My hair was a mess!"

"Sure, Bella, if you want to. Just don't pull too hard."

She smiled as she backed away. "I'll be careful. Wouldn't do to have a bald Jasper. I didn't even pull out my own hair." She tugged on my arm. "Lean back in the water."

I kneeled down and leaned back, feeling the water flow over me and around the sides of my face. I felt Bella's fingers pulling at the ends of my hair, picking out the leaves and twigs.

"Rose said picking all the stuff out of my hair would be good practice for touching things gently. I'd probably crush the twigs — and I did — but I wouldn't rip my hair out, if I was careful. That's good to know."

She was behind me and leaning over me, smiling. As I felt her fingers pulling gently through my hair, my eyes gradually slid shut. It was so relaxing. When her fingers would catch in a knot, she would lightly pick through the strands until the knot was gone, then she'd move to the next. I started to relax further. It was so soothing and calming, feeling her work her way across and down my head. Until her fingers brushed the skin at the back of my neck. I felt a shock run through me, and I gasped. My eyes snapped open, and I saw the concern in her eyes.

She snatched her hands away. "Did I hurt you?"

"Uh, no. I … I was just surprised. It was so relaxing and then … uh, I'm fine." I was a fuckin' vampire and I was stuttering! "Everything's fine, Bella. You didn't hurt me."

"Okay." She smiled at me again. "Your hair should be fairly clean soon. Just a little bit more to go." Then her fingers touched me at my temples, and she dragged her fingertips across them, around my ears, following the hairline to the nape of my neck. I closed my eyes and melted into her hands. I could have stayed right there, just like that, forever. I sighed.

I made sure I had blocked my emotions, but I still felt her sense of peace and her concentration on
her task. All I was able to pay any attention to was the feel of her fingers on my skin. She moved so softly and gently.

Her fingers lightly touched my forehead, and she drew the tips back over my scalp. Her slow breaths increased in frequency as she combed through my hair. The light pressure against my scalp increased, and what was initially a kind gesture to help me remove all the dirt and leaves, rapidly turned into soft caresses as I felt the beginnings of desire radiate from her.

My eyes snapped open again, and I looked at her eyes. She had bent closer to me, and her eyes tracked the movement of her fingers through my hair.

"Jasper," she whispered. "Your hair isn't just one color. There's light yellow, honey, golden wheat, and amber mixed in. It's so pretty." She moved around me until she was beside me, her waist touching my arm. She leaned over me and brought both of her hands to the sides of my face. Her left hand slid slowly over my ear, her fingers threading through my hair, and I shivered.

"Uh, Bella, maybe you should …" I couldn't help it. Her touching me, running her fingers through my hair, her soft voice — my near constant semi-hard on swelled and grew harder, and I gulped.

Her fingers continued through my hair, across my scalp to the back of my head, then slid down to my neck. Her fingers curled around my neck, and her grip tightened. My own lust for her increased, and I tightened my hold on that, trying not to project it.

"Your hair is so soft. It's like silk. Like golden silk." Her eyes flicked to mine. The brilliant red had darkened to deep burgundy.

Her formally peaceful and happy emotions, with just a touch of desire, were beginning to whirl and pick up speed. Appreciation, and then want and lust swirled into the mix.

"Jasper …" Her pupils widened. The irises were nearly black, with just a thin circle of red showing around the edges.

My eyes were drawn to her mouth as she bit the corner of her lower, full, pink lip. I was ensnared in her thrall, and I couldn't move. I didn't want to. Ever.

"Jasper," she whispered again, and her spicy, sweet, intoxicating breath flowed over my face. I inhaled deeply.

Her grip tightened further on the nape of my neck. The fingers of her right hand skimmed down my cheek, and she traced the curve of a scar over my jaw and down my neck. I gasped at her delicate touch. Her eyes went to my mouth, and she licked her lips.

Oh God. I knew if she kissed me again I was going to fuckin' explode right there. I suddenly realized I couldn't find a shit to give about it either. She could do anything to me she wanted to.

Her lust, hunger, and need draped over me, and coiled around me, drawing me closer to her. My hold over my own lust was beginning to falter, and I struggled to keep my hands at my sides.

"Jasper, I just don't know why I didn't see it before — you are so beautiful." Her finger began tracing lightly over my mouth, and it sent electric tingles all through me. Her body pushed against my arm. "I want …"

Emmett burst from the shallows beside us, forcing water up into the air like a geyser. As it started to rain down, he grabbed my upper arm and wrenched me away from Bella.
"Dude! You look clean enough to me. We need to show Bella some real hillbilly water fun! 'Specially since we can't drown her now."

Bella snarled and launched herself at Emmett.
I Declare

Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by fmfg and Jcat5507 of Project Team Beta.

A/N: Wow, this one is 7609 words. Chapter 18 has been sent to the betas. I also happen to have caught up on AO3. ;)

Jackson Rathbone announced his next solo single, "Indian Drums," will be released 12/07/2012. *squee*

"I Live" is posted on TwiWrite, FanFiction, A Different Forest, and Archive of Our Own (AO3).

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Letters by givemesomenvamp on FFn

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 17, I Declare

Jasper's POV

I knew Emmett was only trying to save Bella from herself, or maybe save her from me, but the ass-wipe should have known better. She was on him like that alien on that spaceman's face.

The leap was elegant, graceful, and so damn quick she was hardly more than a blur. Bella led with her fist and nailed him right between the eyes. As Emmett fell back into the water, a look of complete shock covered his face. She planted her hands on the outside of his shoulders, slid her palms down his arms to force them to his sides, and locked them in place with her legs. She pulled her right fist back for a second blow.

With another rippling snarl from Bella, and a gigantic splash, they disappeared under the water.

I was instantly beside myself with anxiety and anger. That son of a bitch had taken my Bella! I was about to dive in after them when a hand caught my left wrist in an iron grip. I twisted my hand, grabbing the arm that was holding mine, and lurched around to punch whoever the hell it was. It was Rosalie, with her left fist cocked back.

"Rose!"

"Let 'em go, Jazz. You know he won't hurt her."
I snarled, baring my teeth, as I yanked her to me, and took the punch to my chin.

_**Damn, she hits hard!**_

I grabbed her left wrist, and pushed her away from me, holding her at arms' length. Rosalie was the _first_ one I would expect to take aim at the little soldier.

"He took her!" I growled. "I have to get her back! She's mine!"

A startling possessiveness over Bella, stronger than ever before, grew from some unknown place within me. It blended with my rage and pulsed outward. Then fear nearly overwhelmed me. I couldn't see her. I couldn't even _feel_ her. Where was she?

"Jasper! Calm your ass down! You're being irrational. You know he won't hurt your mate. He'll bring her back."

"I can't feel her! Where is she?"

He took her! I had to get to Bella! I momentarily struggled to remember what lethargy felt like, and then hit Rosalie with a weighty dose of it. She collapsed, and I caught her before she dropped into the water, scooping her up in my arms. She was already going to be pissed. No point in making it worse by getting her hair wet.

I twisted around to search over the surface of the river to try and catch any sign of Bella.

There was no disturbance in the water — no splashing, no out-of-the-ordinary sounds. About thirty feet downstream, I saw the shredded remains of Emmett's blue polo shirt, and I nearly panicked.

Where was she? I still couldn't feel her! I didn't know if the fucker that had bitten her first would be back to find her and ...where the fuck was she?

About one hundred feet downstream, I saw movement. It was Emmett and Bella breaking the surface. Her hands were on his shoulders, her knees were bent, and her bare feet were braced against his stomach. Emmett's large hands were on her hips, and then he threw her up into the air.

She let out an ear-piercing shriek, and her exhilaration hit me. She reached the apex of the throw at about fifty feet and screamed.

"Bella! Cannonball!" Emmett shouted up at her.

She tucked in her arms and legs. Her hair was streaming out above her. Still screaming, she hit the river in a mighty splash.

She surfaced a few feet away from Emmett — a look of pure joy on her face.

"Emmy-doo!" she shrieked again. "What a rush! That was excellent! Do it again!" She surged through the water to reach him.

_Thank God._

She _looked_ all right. She was happy. She was ecstatic. I had to get to her!

Rosalie was going to kick my ass.

I halted the steady wave of lethargy I had been shoving at Rosalie's limp form, and lowered her feet into the water. When I felt her feet hit bottom, I said, "Rose, I'm sorry."
Her eyes fluttered open. She was confused. She looked at me and recognition, then anger, flashed through her eyes. I let go of her, and got the hell away from her, heading for the rocky shore.

"Jasper, I am going to Rip. You. Apart." Her voice was low, quiet, and deadly.

I splashed onto the river bank, and hurtled toward Bella and Emmett. I could run faster than I could swim, even in wet jeans, and I didn't want Rosalie to get her claws on me just yet.

Rosalie stalked through the water, heading for the bank, her eyes flashing. "When I catch you, Jasper …"

"Look, Rose, I said I was sorry. I didn't mean it. I was, uh, concerned about Bella and …"

Rose had made the bank and was running after me. "You mean you were fucking petrified. I felt that, Jazz. That's no excuse for knocking me out, you stupid piece of shit."

Bella screeched again and that sound sent an icy trickle of fear straight through me. Emmett had launched her up into the air — it had to be near seventy feet — and she was soaring in a graceful arc out toward the middle of the river. Her hair was flying out behind her, arms out-stretched, legs arrow straight, and toes pointed. Then she started screaming like somebody was stripping the meat off her.

I leapt off a rock near the water's edge and plunged into the river, racing toward Emmett. When I reached him, I grabbed his arm and spun him to face me. My rage had boiled to the surface again, and I could not stop the growl that tore through my throat.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"What the hell, Jazz? I'm playing with Bella. She loves it!" His grin practically split his face. "I never knew she could be so goddamn loud."

Bella tucked in her chin, pulled in her arms, and curled up her legs to do another cannonball. The splash was huge. The spray nearly reached us.

Another growl ripped through my chest. "If anything happens to her …"

Emmett was startled and confused for a moment, but then he grabbed my arms. "What are you talking about? She's fine. She's a fucking vampire. There isn't anything out here that could hurt her except us."

"That's what I'm afraid of, asshole."

Emmett cocked his head in bafflement. "But I'm not hurting her." He sighed in exasperation. "Jasper, she jumped off a hundred foot cliff over at La Push, into the ocean, during a storm, when she was human, for Christ's sake. She's fine! She's having a blast."

As if the thought of her jumping off a cliff when she was human didn't make me cringe.

"Then where is she?" I jerked back away from his hold on my arms, and collided with Rosalie. She snaked her arms through mine and yanked, forcing my elbows together behind my back.

"I don't know where she is — out there somewhere." Emmett waved his hand in a dismissive gesture out toward the middle of the river. "She'll be back in a minute. She'll probably want to do it again."

I shut my eyes in frustration, battling the fear that was churning through my gut. I had seen that she was fine. She was happy. She was giddy, but I couldn't seem to convince myself of that. I leaned my
head back toward Rosalie. "Rosalie, you know I can break this hold." I was trying to control my anger and anxiety, and keep from projecting them, but I was having a little difficulty.

She tightened her grip, shoving my elbows closer together, and arching my back even more. She whispered in my ear, "And I know you're not going to. You need to quit acting like a psychotic mother hen on crack and chill the fuck out. Take a deep breath, or ten, and reel in the rage and fear before Bella gets here and feels it. Just be glad she's having fun and not beating your ass again."

Hell! At least if she was beating my ass, I'd know where she was!

Okay, so maybe I was a little, uh, nervous. Maybe. But there may or may not be another vampire out there, Bella was a newborn, not quite six hours old yet, all this shit was new to her, and she had been driving me out of my goddamn mind. "Where the fuck is she?" I jerked against Rosalie's hold.

Emmett grabbed my jaw in his massive fist, and tugged until my eyes met his. "Look, Jasper, I understand how you feel. I do. But I am sure she is fine. She probably saw a pretty rock on the bottom, and is looking for more." He sighed at me again. "You once commanded armies, and now you can't even handle one little newborn. You need to calm down. It will affect her since you can't seem to quit projecting that shit." He shook my head hard enough to nearly rattle my teeth. "Another thing you need to do is quit being the Queen of Denial or I'm going to get you the skirt. Admit you're acting like a fucking moron right now because she's your mate. That's half the battle. All the other shit will work itself out. Now breathe, dammit, or I'm going to punch you."

I narrowed my eyes at him, and took a deep breath. The rage had abated but my anxiety was building. Rosalie still had my arms in a vice, Emmett still had his damn paw on my face, and Bella still hadn't come back yet. I felt my nerves starting to vibrate throughout my whole body. If they didn't let me go soon …

I felt Rosalie at my ear again. "Don't even think about knocking us both out. I'm going to hold you until Bella shows up. You just keep breathing."

Thank Christ, Bella chose that moment to burst through the water.

"Ta DAH! Look Em! I found a hubcap!" She flung her arms up in the air like she'd just made a perfect dismount in gymnastics, holding the rusted hubcap tightly in her right hand.

Her glee turned to bewilderment as she took in the scene.

"What are you guys doing to Jasper?" She dropped her arms, splashing everyone.

"Okay, so it's not a rock, it's a hubcap," he whispered to me. He turned to Bella. "We're just playin' with Jasper, Belly-babe."

Emmett let go of my jaw as Rosalie released my arms. At seeing Bella, relief flooded me, and I would have fallen down from the shock of it, but I desperately needed to touch her. I craved it. I lunged at her, swept her up in my arms, hubcap and all, and squeezed her to me.

"Thank God you're all right," I whispered in a rush, burying my face in her dripping hair. Her arms went around my shoulders, and her legs wrapped around my waist. I frantically clutched her to me, and turned toward the river bank. I needed to get us out of that water and away from them.

"Do you think he's going to have a nervous breakdown?" Emmett stage whispered to Rosalie.

"Not yet," she replied. "The hysterical ass will be all right in a minute."
Hysterical? That wasn't … I wasn't …

Dismissing them from my mind, I jumped up on to a large, flat rock shelf hanging over the edge of the river, and sat down, my back to those assholes, and settled Bella on my lap.

"Let me look at you," I whispered. She was confused and starting to feel anxious, but she held still. My left hand drifted over her back, and with my right I gathered her hair together, and set it over her shoulder. I trailed my fingers over her shoulder and down her arm until I reached her hand, bringing it to my lips. "I am … relieved."

Her worry and concern flickered around me. "Jasper? Are you okay? Did something happen? Are you hurt?"

She finally dropped the hubcap, and it landed with a clang on the rock. She brought her hand to my face, and leaned back to look at me. "Are you hurt? Did you get hurt?"

"I'm not hurt." I stared into her eyes. "I'm not hurt. Don't be anxious." I released her hand and cupped her cheek, needing to feel more of her skin.

"Then what's the matter? You're upset. Why are you upset?" I saw the distress in her eyes and felt it emanating from her.

"When you jumped at Emmett, and both of you went underwater, I couldn't see you. Then you didn't come back up, and I became a little … concerned."

Behind me I heard Rosalie scoff. "A little?"

"Then I saw pieces of Emmett's shirt floating down the river. I couldn't feel you, and I became … worried."

"Jesus Christ, Mr. Understatement." Rosalie hopped up on the rock beside us. "Bella, he was practically in a panic because he couldn't see you. I told him you were fine with Emmett, but he wanted to look for you. I held him back, and he knocked me out."

Bella's eyes widened in shock. "You punched Rosalie?"

"No, I didn't punch her. I, uh, hit her with a shot of lethargy. I caught her before she fell in the water!"

Rosalie glared at me again. "I will pay you back for that." She shook her fist in my face.

"But I didn't let your hair get wet!"

"Shut it, Whitlock," she said through clenched teeth.

Rosalie closed her eyes, inhaled deeply through her nose, and her lips curved up in a small smile. "Now," she began as she slowly opened her golden eyes. She leisurely strolled a few feet away, and lowered herself gracefully to the rock. She sat Indian-style and placed her hands on her knees. Rosalie schooled her features into a bright smile and looked at Bella. "Bella, Jasper has been a bit emotional." She smiled at me, displaying a bit more of her teeth than was absolutely necessary. "He was just concerned for your safety and over-reacted — just a teensy bit. I would say it was a natural reaction, but he went a little overboard with it."

Emmett joined us then, a big shit-eating grin on his damn face. Dripping wet, he flopped down next to Rosalie. Lying on his side, he propped his head on his hand and patted Rosalie's thigh with the
"Yeah, Jazz has been a little stressed out. Ya know, I don't think I've ever seen him so agitated."
Emmett's eyes twinkled with his mischief. "As a matter of fact, I know I haven't ever seen him act like that before, and I've known him for decades."

"Emmett," I growled.

Bella glanced suspiciously from me, to Rose, to Emmett, then back to me. I could feel her frustration as she peered more intently into my eyes. She drew her fingers down my cheek, and then lightly poked me on the chin. "No, you hush. Now let me up."

I gripped her waist, and lifted her from my lap. As she pulled away from me and stood up, I immediately felt a sense of loss and wanted to pull her to me again. She crossed her arms, brought her hand to her mouth, and tapped her lips with her finger. Walking between Emmett, Rosalie, and I, she moved slowly toward the edge of the rock to the right, turned and paced back.

I reached toward her. "Bella."

She frowned at me and pushed my hand away. "I'm thinking." She walked past me to the left, turned and moved back to the right, brushing my shoulder as she passed.

She reached the far edge of the rock and turned back, extending her arms. "See? I'm walking slowly. I know I've got this super-duper mega-whatever vamp brain now, but all these thoughts and images and … everything … just keep filling my head, and flipping around in there." Her hands moved in a circular motion. "Though, I just noticed I wasn't hearing the river until I thought about it."

She moved back toward me and as she passed by this time, she reached over and tugged my hair. She went to the other edge of the rock and turned again. As she neared me, she lightly drew her finger over my shoulder and continued walking.

Pushing my hand away? Okay, maybe that one didn't count. Brushing my shoulder? Perhaps that was just a fluke, but she tugged my hair then, when she walked by again, she touched my shoulder. That was two more times and that constituted a pattern. I was thrilled. It seemed as though she couldn't keep her hands off me either.

Across from me, Rosalie raised an eyebrow and smirked at me. She clasped Emmett's hand that had been resting on her thigh and squeezed. Emmett smiled up at her then looked to me, quirking one of his eyebrows.

Their amusement and stupid grins were starting to get on my nerves, but at least they kept their mouths shut while we waited for Bella.

Bella took in a deep breath and crossed her arms over her chest. "Okay, look. I know you guys aren't telling me something, and I'm starting to get a little … annoyed. There're all kinds of things that've gone on that I don't know about, but I know there's something else. Little grins, those 'significant looks' behind my back. You say things but then don't explain them. You guys are dancing all around the mulberry bush, and … and I'm gettin' aggravated."

She didn't miss a damn thing. I started to get up, and she held up her hand.

"Just sit right there, Jasper."

Emmett coughed something that sounded a lot like "Whipped."
Out of the corner of my eye, I glared what I hoped looked like a death threat.

Bella sighed heavily and shook her finger at both Emmett and me. "Both of you stop it. Now..." She put her hands on her hips. "I feel calmer than I did a while ago. All of you just sit still and tell me what's been happening. I want to know. I need to know, and you need to tell me."

Emmett turned to her. "It's gonna be dark in a couple hours, Belly-bub, and sitting around in these dripping wet clothes ..."

"Em? Seriously?" Bella crossed her arms over her chest and frowned prettily at him. "You're going to try and stall me some more?" Anger sparked in her eyes and she took a step toward him, her arms flashing to her sides.

He quickly sat up, and held his hands up to ward her off. "No, Bella, I'm just sayin'."

I felt the barest glimmer of someone's awareness, and was on my feet in an instant, scanning down the river.

Bella gasped and focused on me. "What?"

I held my hand out toward her. She came directly to me, and I pulled her into my chest. "Someone's coming."

Rosalie appeared at my right side, and Emmett stationed himself a few paces behind me and to the left.

"Get behind me, Bella," I whispered. Again, thankfully, she just did it without arguing. I felt her trust in me, and her wariness and curiosity, but she was doing well — she wasn't feeling any fear. She placed a hand on my lower back, and I felt the fingers of her right hand curl around my right arm just above my elbow.

Because of the bend in the river and the density of the trees, I wasn't able to see anyone yet, but I felt that they were getting closer.

"Humans?" Emmett asked.

"They're moving slowly, but no, I don't think so."

Then I caught their mental signatures. It was them — Carlisle, Esme, Edward and Alice. When I thought about it, I was surprised they hadn't come looking for us sooner. Since I felt them, I was sure Edward could hear us, or would soon.

"It's Carlisle, Esme, Edward and Alice."

To my side, I saw Rosalie's tense stance relax, and I heard Emmett breathe a sigh of relief, but Bella's fingers tightened on my arm. Her left hand slid across my back to my hip and she pulled me closer to her. She was feeling nervous and guarded. I reached across with my left hand, and patted her fingers wrapped around my arm.

"It's okay, Bella. I think we should have a seat, all right?" I was feeling a bit apprehensive, and sitting down would make us look less aggressive. Correction: make me look less aggressive. Especially since I didn't have a shirt to cover my scars anymore.

She peered up at me around my arm, and nodded her head.
I moved closer to the edge of the rock shelf, and lowered myself to sit. Moving closer to the edge didn't leave them any room to sit there with us. They'd have to climb or leap over us. I really didn't want them too close just yet. I didn't know how Alice and Edward would be feeling, and I sure as hell didn't know how Bella would react to seeing them again, if she recognized them at all.

Emmett moved to sit by Rosalie and stretched his long legs out toward the edge of the rock. He leaned back on his elbows. Rosalie scooted closer to him and patted his thigh.

As soon as I was down and had my legs crossed, Bella scrambled onto my lap. I had hoped she might sit next to me, but I was surprised, and extremely pleased, that she chose to sit on my lap. There might have been a little smugness mixed in there, too.

I rubbed her back with my right hand, hoping to keep her calm. "Bella, do you remember Esme and Carlisle?"

The swirl of her emotions was picking up speed. She was nervous, anxious, and wary, but there was still a bit of curiosity.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I think I do. Carlisle's a doctor?"

I bent my head to hers but kept my eyes focused downstream. "Yes, he is." I reached for her hand with my left, and she grabbed it and pulled it up to her chest, placing my hand just below her throat. Her grip on my hand and forearm almost hurt it was so tight, but then she relaxed her hold and started slowly stroking my forearm. That felt amazing.

"Jazz," Rosalie whispered, "play with her hair. That relaxed her before."

"Would you mind, Bella?"

"No, I wouldn't mind," she said absently as she stared downstream. "Do you see them yet?" She was distracted, looking for them, and still nervous, anxious, and a little worried.

I stroked her hair and ran my fingers through it. "No, I don't see them yet, but they are coming closer. I expect they heard us and are moving slowly so they don't startle you."

I breathed in her spicy scent, calming myself, and sent a little peacefulness out to everyone around me.

"Jasper, I know when you're doing that. I can feel you." She was irritated.

"You can feel that?"

"Yes. I can feel it when you … uh … touch my mind."

What? Most vampires couldn't tell when I sent emotions to them, except those who knew me very well, but even then not unless it was strong.

"I'm just trying to keep everything calm, but I'll stop if you want me to." I couldn't resist breathing in her scent.

"I want you to stop with the Jazzy-Whammy, but you can keep playing with my hair."

"Yes, ma'am." I smiled. More surprises from my little newborn.

Rosalie chuckled at that. "Do you remember Esme?"
"Yes, I think I do, Rose." She was curious again. "I think I remember her cooking. Did she used to cook? Why would she cook?" She turned her face up to mine.

Her mouth was so close. I glanced down at her soft pink lips, but forced myself to raise my head and look back out at the trees.

"Esme would cook for you. She enjoyed it very much. You would often cook together." I smiled again and ran my fingers through her hair, starting at the crown of her head. Her eyes slowly closed, and she tipped her head back. She began to relax against me, and rested her head against my chest. I felt peace and contentment replace her wariness. I slowly pulled my fingers through her long hair, the tips of my fingers brushing her back.

Through my arm and chest, I felt a slight vibration from Bella as she began to purr.

Rosalie's eyes grew wide, and Emmett's mouth fell open. I felt wonderment and surprise from them. I was astounded and incredulous. I was dumbfounded.

Rosalie recovered first. "She's purring!"

Alice had never purred. I could make her cum until she screamed, but she never purred for me. I had never purred for her, or for anyone. It was said truly mated pairs would purr for each other, but I'd rarely heard it. I had heard Emmett purr for Rosalie once or twice. Of course I refrained from teasing him about it — for about a week. I'd even heard Esme and Carlisle purr.

With seven of us living in the same house, and with our hearing, there was almost no privacy. Though we tried to be as considerate as we could, there were times when not knowing what was going on was damn near impossible. But hearing those soft purrs from the other couples was rare.

And Bella was purring. She was purring. For me.

Emmett sat up with a wide grin on his face. "Hot damn, Jazz! You got her purring, you sly dog."

Bella, radiating contentedness, snuggled into my chest while still holding my arm. "What's wrong with purring?"

Rosalie blinked a few times and a huge smile lit her entire face. "Nothing is wrong with purring, Bella. And yes, some vampires do do that. Don't they, Jasper?" She winked at me.

I was speechless. It was as if my brain had crashed, and I needed to do a hard shut down and reboot. Yet there was a part that found Bella's soft purrs absolutely charming, infinitely appealing, and just fucking adorable.

Bella's low-pitched purring continued. "I can remember hearing Rose and Emmett purring."

Rosalie cocked her head to the side, bemused. "You heard us purring?"

A surge of emotions hit me like a slap in the face — fury, resentment, jealousy, possessiveness, and hate. My eyes zeroed in on the movement I spotted at the tree line along the shore, about fifty yards down river. Edward had appeared through the trees. Carlisle was beside him with a hand on his arm in restraint. I saw them speaking, but I couldn't hear them.

I managed to keep stroking Bella's hair, but shot a warning look to Rosalie and Emmett. They each gave me a small nod, and their eyes found Edward.

Bella stirred slightly. "What's wrong, Jasper?"
Keeping my voice even, I bent to her, not taking my eyes off Edward, "Carlisle and Edward are here. Esme and Alice are not far behind."

That peacefully content purr abruptly stopped, and Bella straightened as she tightened her grip on my arm. Her wariness returned, but she was also curious again.

"That's Carlisle? I think I remember him stitching up … my … arm …" she said hesitantly as she raised her right arm and stared at it, deep in thought. Even though most of the long sleeve was still there, she continued to stare. She let go of my hand to reach over and take hold of the dark green material. She ripped the sleeve from her arm, dropped it to the rock in front of us, and grasped my hand again.

I stopped running my fingers through her hair, and put my right hand on her waist above her hip. I waited anxiously to hear what else she would say, to see what she might do.

"It was above my elbow. A long cut … and a bunch of little ones. Carlisle cleaned it off and stitched it up. It was after …" She trailed off.

Rosalie, Emmett, and I held our breaths. Did she remember what those cuts were from?

Bella looked up at me. "Those scars are gone. But this one …" She raised her arm to look at the bite on her wrist from the nomad vampire James. "This one is still here. Because it's a vampire bite."

I looked down at her cautiously. "Yes."

"It was James. James bit me. It was a bad one."

"Yes, it was there quite a while before you were changed. That's why I think it's still there — why it wasn't healed."

I felt the first stirrings of anger from her while her body tensed. "But the others … were from glass."

Her face became as hard as chiseled stone, and she turned from me. She looked to Edward and Carlisle who were walking slowly toward us.

Carlisle still had his hand on Edward's arm. Edward's face was a cold mask of fury as he glared at me. His emotions — rage, jealousy, and resentment — were a prickling vapor trying to seep into me, and I brushed them away, holding them back.

Bella was breathing slowly and steadily as she stared at Edward. "I remember." Her voice was barely a breath. "I remember that birthday party. I didn't want it, but he never listened."

A worm of fear began twisting and flipping around in my belly. Did she remember all of it? She remembered that part, but did she remember that I had tried to attack her and bite her?

She turned back to me and placed her right hand on my cheek. "Jasper, I remember." Her voice was the softest whisper. Concern showed in her eyes and I felt her affection, understanding, and sorrow. Then warm admiration flowed out from her.

"I remember that I cut my finger and it bled. I saw you hold your breath and take a step back. I knew you didn't want to hurt me. Then Edward growled and shoved me into the table with the glass plates."

"Bella, I'm so sorry."

She placed a finger on my lips. "You have nothing to be sorry for. I told them to tell you that I
forgave you, but there wasn't anything to forgive you for. I know you think it was your fault that Edward left me. It wasn't. Edward lost his control, and threw me into those plates to get me away from him. I know what happened, and I sure understand it better now. Feeling that thirst from all of them, especially Edward, must have been ... so overwhelming."

I couldn't believe she was saying that. "But, Bella …"

"Shh. Don't you feel the sincerity of my words? Don't you feel that I'm telling you the truth?"

"Yes, but …"

She raised her eyebrows at me. "No buts. He let you think it was your fault, and then he left because he was a coward, and he didn't want ..." She pressed her lips together, closed her eyes, and gave her head a small shake. There was a small flash of bitterness, and then it was gone. She opened her eyes again, and a mischievous glint appeared. "When I talk like this, they can't hear me, right?"

"No, they can't hear you yet. They aren't close enough. What are you doing?" I truly appreciated what she said to me, and was very curious about what she didn't say, but I started to get a little suspicious when I felt that mischievousness, touched with a bit of animosity.

She smiled a devious smile at me and turned toward Edward and Carlisle. Her anger and hostility came back, though I could tell she was controlling it.

Carlisle was projecting his usual serenity and composure, but there was an undercurrent of anxiety. He still had his hand on Edward's arm when they stopped about twenty feet away.

"Bella." Carlisle smiled in greeting. "It is so good to see you. Do you remember me?"

"Yes, I don't remember everything, but I do remember you." She smiled faintly.

"We … heard screams a while ago and became concerned. As we got closer, Edward was able to determine that no one was injured. Though he still couldn't hear your or Jasper's thoughts. Do you remember that he can hear thoughts?"

"Yes, I do remember that, and I remember he can't hear me."

I was starting to get worried. What was she thinking?

"Emmett and I were playing in the river." Bella's smile broadened, but her hand clasped mine more tightly. Her eyes glanced to Edward and back to Carlisle. Her anger was still there, but the mischievousness was back.

I was becoming a bit more uneasy. Rosalie and Emmett were definitely on alert, and both of them had shifted to lean forward.

Edward's face was still blank, but his anger, jealousy, and resentment clouded the air around us. His hands had a barely perceptible quiver.

"It was great!" Bella continued. "Emmett grabbed me and threw me up in the air — it had to be fifty or sixty feet — and I started screaming. Then I hit the water so hard!"

Edward's eyes shut, and his arms began trembling. His anger was building.

"Then, of course, I had to do it again, so Emmett grabbed me again and threw me up and over his head. I soared out toward the middle of the river. It was like flying. It was the coolest damn thing!"
She squeezed my hand. "It was even better than jumping off the cliff at La Push!"

Oh shit.

She had jumped off the cliff at La Push after he left her — after we all had abandoned her. In a vision, Alice had seen her jump, but hadn't seen Jacob Black pull Bella from the water. Alice thought she had drowned. Rosalie had called Edward in South America to tell him Bella had died. That whole situation had been fucked up. The guilt Edward had felt over being the cause of her jumping, whether she had meant to kill herself or not, had battered against me so hard, I hadn't been able to block it completely. I had to leave the vicinity whenever he wallowed in that particular misery.

Emmett's eyes popped, and he stared at Bella in disbelief. Rosalie gasped. I was … well, I was fuckin' flabbergasted. She said that on purpose. She said that intentionally to try and get a rise out of Edward. Or hurt him. Or piss him off or … Was she taunting him? I didn't know what the fuck she was doing, but my already pretty damn high level of respect, admiration, and appreciation for that little vixen just shot through the fuckin' roof.

Carlisle's worried eyes went from Edward to Bella and back to Edward.

Edward twitched, took a halting step forward, growled, and glared at Emmett. "Emmett! What do you think you were doing!? Bella could have been …"

"Edward ..." Bella's voice was like ice.

Ignoring her, much like he always did, he continued. "And where is your shirt? Where is Jasper's shirt? Why are you running around half dressed?" Edward took another step forward, staring intently at me.

Emmett got that innocent look on his face he tries to use on Rosalie, that never works, and he pointed at Bella.

Bella's anger was rising. "I ripped their goddamn shirts off." Her voice was low and she was speaking through clenched teeth.

Edward turned slightly to face us and took two steps forward, dragging Carlisle with him. His eyes had turned a dull black. His anger was quickly morphing back to fury, and his resentment and jealousy were thrumming at new levels.

I was trying to send out tranquil thoughts and feelings of peace, but it wasn't having any noticeable effect.

Edward broke Carlisle's hold and darted forward, stopping just ten feet away from us. His head was level with the height of the rock shelf. His body was quivering with his storm of emotions.

"Bella, where is this language coming from?" He glared at me accusingly. His eyes widened, and then quickly narrowed to dark slits. "Two fresh bites?"

I could not stop the smirk from forming on my face. I was pretty damn proud of those two new scars.

Edward's eyes squeezed shut, and his nostrils flared. He slowly opened his eyes and stared at Bella, apparently examining her for bites. His eyes flicked to Emmett and back to her. "And Emmett throwing you up in the air? You shouldn't do such hazardous things. I won't allow …"

Edward just screwed himself right there. Did he not pay any attention to her? He should have kept his mouth shut. I squeezed Bella's hand, and with the other on her waist, I pulled her a little closer to
me. She was beginning to quiver, her eyes narrowed, and her own anger was swelling. I tightened my grip on her.

Carlisle came forward, raising a hand toward Edward. Fear showed in his eyes.

I amped up the peace and tranquility. If Edward's emotions continued to escalate, I would have to drop everyone there.

But, if I let it play out …

I decided I couldn't do that. Bella could be hurt. I could hurt someone. Shit. I would hurt someone.

Edward shook his head and glared up at me. His eyes snapped toward Bella again and she stiffened. Her anger was sparking and crackling around her.

He jabbed a trembling finger at me. "Is that scarred fiend compelling you to sit in his lap? He is nothing more than a vile, brutal, barbarous …" His eyes then bored into mine. "If you dare to influence or manipulate Bella with your corrupt and perverse …"

"Fiend!? Perverse!?!" Bella roared.

That was what you called the shit hitting the fan. How fucking stupid was he? Bella's fury blazed white hot, and she launched herself from my lap. I grabbed hold of her left wrist and tried to swing her out of the line of fire as Edward leaped toward me.

Seeing him in his rage, arrowing toward Bella and me — something in my brain broke wide open, and my own anger exploded in a furious maelstrom. The thoughts, "He wants to take her from me," and "She's mine," shot through my head like bolts of lightning. They thundered and echoed through my mind.

I was on my feet, snarling, and thrusting my left hand toward Edward's throat.

Emmett and Rosalie were up off the rock shelf and reaching to catch Bella, but she kicked Emmett in the chest, propelling him over the rock shelf toward the bank of the river. His flailing arms caught Rosalie across her chest and sent her sprawling.

Bella landed heavily on her feet, planting them squarely on the rock. When she yanked her arm from my grasp, she underestimated her newborn strength, and sent herself tumbling toward Emmett.

Edward managed to block my left hand, but I caught his right arm. I swung my right around, and my fingers went unerringly to his throat. He snarled and brought his fist crashing down on my arm to break my hold. When he couldn't, he grabbed my wrist and snarled again.

I spun 180 degrees and slammed him to the rock — the crash reverberated across the river and through the forest. I brought my face to his and roared, "She's mine!"

"Jasper!" Bella screamed.

My head whipped around toward her voice. She was bound by Emmett's thick arms around her torso and arms. As strong as he was, he was struggling to hold her to his chest. Rosalie was on her legs, trying to hold her down. She was thrashing, spitting, and snarling. I realized with a start I couldn't feel her emotions.

Edward kneed me in the right side, and we rolled until he was above me. He straddled my thighs, and drew back his left fist to punch me.
Even through the constricting grip I had on his throat, he still managed to spew his bullshit. "You are nothing, Jasper." The hateful words rasped through his throat. "Nothing but a hideously scarred, depraved heathen. Bella is too good for the disgusting likes of you."

I smirked at him. "I can still crush your throat, and remove your head, and you're catching up with the scars."

He punched me, and my head snapped to the left. There stood Carlisle, his back to the river, and his hands reaching for us. He was alarmed, confused, afraid, distressed — obviously unsure what to do to separate us, or to keep me from removing Edward's head from his body.

I turned back to Edward. He was still growling, and his chest was heaving with his breaths.

I smirked at him again. A welcome feeling of undeniable certainty settled over me, and I spoke with a deep-seated conviction. "She is too good for me, but she is mine."

There was a blur from my right and Bella rammed Edward, ripping him away from me.

"Don't you touch him!" she snarled, and they plowed into Carlisle. All three of them toppled over the edge of the rock shelf, and out of sight.

I had a chunk of Edward's throat clenched in my fist, and threw it away from me as I leapt off the rock toward the sound of their splash.

I saw nothing but a foaming mass of violently boiling water and flashes of white limbs as I sliced through the muddy water. Fear for Bella's safety squeezed my heart. I was nearly on them when Bella's enraged snarls pierced the air, followed by an exultant hoot, and she leapt away from the bedlam, Edward's right forearm held triumphantly aloft in her left hand.

I slammed into her and crushed her to me. I was so fucking relieved. All I knew at that moment was I had to get my mate away from that fucking chaos and that fucking asshole.

I shot back out of river, splashing and drenching Rosalie and Emmett. Esme and Alice had finally arrived, but I ignored them as I flew by. I didn't know what I was looking for, but as I made my way up the rise and through the trees, I spotted a thirty-foot tall rocky cliff and ran to it. I put my back to the rock wall, and set Bella down on her feet so I could look at her. I still couldn't feel her emotions, but on her face was a look of relief and happiness.

"Are you all right?" I couldn't stop myself from examining her from head to toe. I noticed the left sleeve of her henley was gone, but she looked all right. She looked okay. Thank Christ.

How the hell had she gotten away from Rosalie and Emmett? How the hell did she get away from two male vampires? How did she rip off Edward's arm? Her clothes were torn to hell, not much of them left, but there wasn't a mark on her.

I gripped her upper arms. "Are. You. All. Right?"

"I'm fine."

Oh, there she was, all Miss Calm, Cool, and Collected, and my brain was about to explode. I was a little angry at her nonchalance, and had to roll my eyes at her. "Isabella! You scared the ever lovin' shit out of me! Edward was practically insane. You … you came out of fuckin' nowhere … Carlisle was …"
Her right hand was on my cheek, and she was staring into my eyes. "I am fine," she whispered.

The reeling thoughts and emotions in my brain stilled at her tender touch, and I was trapped in her gaze. Her crimson eyes drew me in, and I stepped closer to her. Oh God, I wanted her. I wanted her desperately.

"Bella," I whispered. I brought my hands to her face and bent closer. "Bella, I want you."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

I drew my right hand down her neck, over her shoulder, and down her arm to feel her silky skin. "Get rid of his arm. I don't want to smell him on you."

She tossed Edward's arm away, and brought her hand to my hip. Her touch sent a ripple of pleasure through me.

"I want you, Bella. I want you to be mine." I slid my left hand around her neck and buried my fingers in her wet hair, pulling her closer.

The pupils in her eyes grew larger. I knew mine were solid black.

"I need you." I longed to be closer to her, touching her. My right hand went to her waist, and I urged her toward me. My breaths were coming faster. We didn't need to breathe, but I needed to draw in her enticing, comforting scent — the scent that called to me, the scent that said home. I needed to feel her body against mine. I bent closer to her. "You are my mate. I want you. You're mine."

I glanced down at her parted lips and watched, mesmerized, as she bit the corner of her bottom lip. "Bella, you are mine."

I closed the distance to press my lips to hers, and she spoke. "But you're married."

Chapter End Notes

"… once commanded armies" – from Twilight Rambles, Chapters 18 through 22 (specifically chapter 22) by LJ Summers on FFn, A Different Forest, and Twilighted.
I Decide

Chapter Notes

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A/N: *squee* Jackson Rathbone released his second solo single, “Indian Drums,” on 12/07/2012. It ROCKS! And it’s free. Go to his website to have a listen and download it.

http://jacksonrathbone.com/index.html

"I Live" is posted on TwiWrite, FanFiction, A Different Forest, and Archive of Our Own (AO3).

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Tiger Stripes by juliangelus on FFn, The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and TwiWrite (LOVE this Jasper)

A Chance Worth Taking by BigBro'sAlwaysWatchin on FFn

Tell 'em who sent ya.

Chapter 18, I Decide

Jasper's POV

Stopped short by Bella's words, my lips a mere hair's breadth from hers, I stared into her eyes as she began to pull away from me.

Well, she had me there.

My breath huffed out in dismay. I had almost kissed her again. I had been this fucking close to feeling her sweet lips against mine and …

This, uh, topic had been broached before, and it hadn't been settled in any way, shape, or form. I didn't see how it could have been at the moment. All I knew then was that she was mine. I wanted her. She was mine!

Her hands slid away from my body and then grasped both of mine as she took a step back. She sighed resignedly as she looked up at me.
I felt her emotions leaking through — concern and trepidation.

"Jasper, when he called you a 'scarred fiend,' I lost my mind. When I saw him attacking you, I was so … I was scared to death he was going to hurt you. Then Emmett and Rosalie had me and wouldn't let me go!" Her hands tightened on mine. "When I saw Edward punch you, I thought I was going to explode. I wanted to kill him for touching you." She frowned, and pulled her hands away. "I wanted to rip parts off him. I wanted to …" Her hands tightened into fists, and she squeezed her eyes shut, her anger ratcheting up again.

"Bella, it's okay. It was only a punch. Rosalie hits harder than he does."

She looked up at me with a small smile. Then her eyes dropped, and she turned her head away. "When he punched you, something in me …"

She was feeling bashful? Since she woke up, just a mere eight hours before, she had been anything but a shrinking violet, and now she was going to be shy?

I placed a finger under her chin and tilted her head up. "Look at me. You can tell me anything. You know that, right?"

Her dark lashes fluttered, and she looked into my eyes. "Yes, somehow I do know that." She sighed again. "When he punched you, something inside me just snapped, and I knew I couldn't stand to ever see you hurt. I wanted to protect you. I needed to. I wanted to rip him off you, and tear him apart for even touching you. I knew then if anything ever happened to you …"

Bella squeezed her eyes shut and turned away from me, wrapping her arms around herself, and hanging her head. I just wanted to take her in my arms, inhale her scent, and hold her against me, but I held back, waiting for her to speak.

"Jasper, all these feelings I've been having are confusing me. It's really hard for me to concentrate on any one thought — they all keep spinning around. They blast through my head, and I don't seem to have any control over them. And I'm trying!" Her hands flashed out away from her body. "And now you tell me I'm your mate, but …"

"You are." I couldn't restrain myself any longer and stepped toward her, placing a hand on her right shoulder. "There's no reason to be confused about that. You are my mate." I moved closer to her, placing my other hand on her left shoulder, and leaned forward to breathe in her irresistible scent. I inched forward, my chest nearly touching her back, and pressed my lips to her hair. I slid my hands down her arms. "You are my mate," I whispered into her ear. "There should be no confusion, no doubt, about that." I gently kissed her temple. "All those other thoughts and the confusion you're feeling — it's like that for all of us at first. I can help you."

She pulled away from me. "I think you can," she said and nodded. "But … but, you're married. I have to remember that, and I have to remember Alice." Her hand went to her forehead. "It's so hard, but it's not right," she mumbled, taking her hand from her face. She lifted her eyes to look at me again. "Anyway, I … I feel so angry at her, and I want to just punch her, and I've never been like that before. I don't think I was anyway." Her hands started to curl into fists. "But I have to think of Alice and how she must feel, despite my wanting to tear her to pieces. I don't even know why I want to tear her to pieces! So she made me wear stupid clothes and never listened when … but that's not a good enough reason to want to hurt her, and I know I hurt her." She shook her head again and turned to face me. "I know you're married to her … and the feelings … I shouldn't have these feelings for you. It's not right. I shouldn't be sitting on your lap, and holding your hands and …"

*She has feelings for me?*
And just that fast she was raging and growling. She twisted away from me and laid into another tree, tearing at it and punching it.

Her emotions were flipping back and forth – anger, want, guilt, need, jealousy, longing, and back to anger. Frustration joined into the mix. They shifted so quickly, it nearly made me dizzy.

I felt helpless. I wasn't used to feeling that way. I wanted to go to her and comfort her, but I didn't think she would accept my help. Not at that moment. Besides, it looked like she needed to let off a little steam, and I didn't think I wanted to get too close to her in that mood.

It had started to get dark, I noticed, but that had never mattered to us. I didn't even think Bella was aware of it.

I could empathize with her anger and frustration. I was married to Alice. I had never cheated on her, but from the moment Bella had awakened, I had been, and I could not find one iota of guilt within me. I had been with Alice over fifty years, and in just the blink of a bright crimson eye, everything changed. I had wanted Alice, but not like I wanted Bella. I'd never had that level of need, that craving — that hunger — for Alice, or anyone else. I ached with wanting Bella. It was frustrating as hell.

Welp. There went the tree.

Bella danced away from it as it fell through the surrounding trees, sheering off limbs and causing deep green needles to rain down. The moment it dropped and settled to the ground she attacked it, growling and grumbling. She was raking off limbs, snapping them into pieces, and zipping them into the surrounding forest.

It was a joy to watch her. There was a savage beauty in that destruction. Though Bella was intensely angry and frustrated, every movement flowed as elegantly as if it had been choreographed.

Even just four days ago, would I, or anyone, have ever used the word "dance" in association with Bella? She had been so clumsy — a danger to herself and most everyone around her. But since she woke up, every movement was a study in grace.

I blinked and shook my head. I was as easily distracted as a newborn. I was worse. But I could watch her tear shit up all day. While Bella was otherwise occupied and not racing off to East Bumfuck or some shit, I had to think.

In all the years we had been together, I'd felt nothing as intensely for Alice like I had for Bella. In a way, it puzzled me, but I was more puzzled by the fact that I had so readily, and completely, accepted it all. Not just accepted, but welcomed it. If I pushed aside my own bewilderment at the suddenness and strength of my feelings for Bella, I had welcomed it. I reveled in it. It was like …

And then it struck me. Being with Alice was akin to feeding on animal blood.

Animal blood had always been merely adequate. It had filled a basic need. It had been tolerable. There had been times, when chasing down and capturing a large carnivore, it had been a bit more than tolerable – it had been acceptable and not unpleasant — even enjoyable and exciting in its own way. It had fed my body, but it had never really nourished me.

It had only been sustaining, not fulfilling or truly satisfying — a pale, faded imitation of what I really wanted — what I craved. Human blood hadn't just filled me, it fulfilled me, satisfied me, quenched that never-ending thirst — at least for a time. It was a moment of near-Nirvana. It was the difference between existing and truly living.
And I craved Bella, wanted her — yearned for her — even more than I desired human blood.

Except for Bella’s blood. Having had that taste of Bella's blood and experiencing the utter bliss that had flowed through me — that was as close to Nirvana as I thought a vampire could get. Closing my eyes, I shuddered in pleasure once again at the memory of it. But even as perfect as it had been, I didn't find that I missed it, because there was Bella. If I never had any human blood again, I could be satisfied, fulfilled — complete — if I had Bella.

I smiled as I watched her take pine cones in her hands and crush them into brown dust before flinging them away, creating a small powdery cloud around her hands.

Alice had been a good companion. She had found and helped me at a time when I hadn't thought I could go on. I was truly grateful for that, but I would have to talk to her and ask her for a divorce. Scratch that — I had to tell her I wanted a divorce. If my marriage to Alice was what kept Bella from me coming to me freely and completely, I would make sure to remove that obstacle.

Or at least get papers drawn up since, technically, we're not real people and don't exist.

I had married Alice when I had been using the name Cullen, and she had always liked that. She had always wanted to be a Cullen. She had never even mentioned using my last name when we had the wedding. She just wanted to be a Cullen. I never questioned it. Why? It really hadn't mattered to me. Carlisle had been hinting around that marriage would be a good idea, though it wasn't a notion that vampires normally indulged in. It had been a bit perplexing to me that they would bother with it. It wasn't as if the marriages were real. The mate bond was so much more binding, I have learned. Though in this world of getting everything down on paper, signing contracts, and dotting I's and crossing T's, they were as real as any marriage out there. After all, there was that signed license. In the human world, that's all you needed.

Well, Alice had wanted to get married, and it made her happy. She had certainly enjoyed the planning and shopping.

It had made me wonder if she had wanted to marry me or if she had been more interested in the ceremony — the human experience — since she couldn't remember anything of her own human life. But, at the time, I saw that she was pleased, and I was happy because she was happy. Something inside me told me I would be happier with Bella.

I realized then that I was glad that Alice had never been a Whitlock.

I would have called that useful bastard Jenks and had him print me up some divorce papers, if I hadn't drowned my goddamned phone in that goddamned river. The other phone was back at the house. I took my dead phone out of my pocket, opened it and frowned at the blank screen. I had completely forgotten it was in my pocket. I crushed the useless device, and let the dust trickle through my fingers.

I wanted Bella, but what if she didn't want me? Well, I knew she wanted me — I felt it. I knew she liked me. She trusted me. She felt quite a bit of lust for me. Oh God, did she! And that lust …

I squeezed my eyes shut again for a moment, and blew out a breath.

*Settle down, boy.*

I knew I could control my dick. I was a big boy now.

*What if* she didn't want me? *What if* I got divorce papers from Alice and Bella didn't want me anyway? *It didn't* matter. *I couldn't* stay married and tied to Alice when I felt that way about Bella. I
wanted her — wanted to be with her. I could not fathom being without her. I even wanted her to keep kicking my ass. She could keep on kicking my ass to the ends of the earth — to the end of time. She was my mate, and I would follow her anywhere. I would do anything for her, even if she didn't want me. I hoped she wanted me, but even if she didn't … Well, it was already too late to worry about that, because I belonged to her.

I thought maybe I should find that son of a bitch that bit her first, and shake that motherfucker's hand. Right before I fucking killed him.

I heard rapid footsteps approaching through the forest.

"Bella, someone is coming."

Bella immediately ceased her grumbling and mumbling, dropped the limb she was shredding, and ran right to me. I'd rather have her in my arms, but I pushed her behind me, holding her with my right hand. Like before, she ran her left hand across my lower back and gripped my hip. She wrapped her little fingers around my right arm above my elbow. Just her touch steadied me, soothed me like no one before.

Then I was puzzled again. She had come right to me without arguing or giving me any flak.

*Go figure.*

She was wary and curious, but not afraid.

I heard my name. It was Rosalie calling. She had Esme with her.

"It's okay, Bella. It's Rose and Esme." She hid behind me, and I could hear her taking in deep breaths.

As they neared us, they slowed and walked toward us at a human pace. Both of them wore small smiles and a look of curiosity on their faces. Esme was a little nervous.

"Hey, Jazz, Bella." Rosalie smiled. "We came to collect Edward's arm, unless you don't want to give it back to him?"

Guilt, thy name was Bella.

"Uh, no! I wasn't going to keep it! Ew!" She ran over to where she'd tossed it beyond a few low shrubs. She jumped over them and shrieked in fear.

I was there, gathering her into my arms. "What is it? What's wrong?" Her hands were covering her eyes, and she buried her face in my chest.

"It's moving! Oh my God, it's moving!" She was bouncing on her toes. "The fingers … GAH! Why is it moving?"

I stifled the laugh that wanted to burst from me. I took in a deep breath. "They do that, Darlin'. Any parts ripped off a vampire will try to find their 'host'."

"Oh, that's gross!" She looked up at me, her eyes wide with curiosity and a touch of self-consciousness. "Any parts? *All* the parts?"

She was embarrassed again. Of course, that gave me a pretty good idea what *parts* she was thinking about. Had she considered ripping off the asshole's dick? It had been a thought that had passed
through my mind more than once.

I heard Esme take in a breath, and Rosalie started to snicker. Apparently, everyone had had the same idea.

The grin just would not stay off my face, so I turned to Rose with a pleading look.

Some help here?

By that time, Rosalie had dissolved into the giggle zone, her hand over her mouth. She shook her head and waved her other hand at me. "I think that one's yours, Jasper."

She was no damn help.

I took in a deep breath. "Yes, Bella, all the parts will move — somewhat. All of them. Even very small pieces of skin will twitch — pretty much anything but hair and bone. Though hair attached to a scalp, or other body parts with hair, will appear to be moving. It's not the hair, it's the skin it's attached to."

She slapped her hands over her ears. "That's enough! We can go over vamp biology some other time! That's just gross! Really, really gross. That's like horror movie shit." She clamped her hands over her eyes again. "I don't have to touch it, do I?" she asked in a meek voice.

I had to laugh. "No, Darlin'. I'll get it." I released her from my arms, and went to grab Edward's scrawny arm off the ground. I resisted biting it. It was difficult. "Just remember that next time you want to tear somebody apart." I couldn't help chuckling at her.

She stood still and kept her eyes covered as I retrieved the arm and tossed it to Rose.

Esme delicately cleared her throat, and rearranged her look of dismay into a pleasant smile. "Hello, Bella."

Bella peeked through her fingers. "Esme?" With her nose going up into the air, she inhaled deeply as she studied Esme. "Oh, Esme!" Relieved, she shoved me out of the way, leapt over the little bushes, and rushed to Esme, grabbing her in a hug.

"I'm glad to see you too, dear, but your hug is a little tight."

Bella's arms whipped from around Esme. "Oh! I'm sorry!"

"It's okay. I'm so very glad to see you, too. Come, let's try that hug again." Esme opened her arms to Bella, and Bella fell into them.

"Oh, Esme! I remember your smell. You smell just like freshly baked herbed bread. Maybe like rosemary. You were with me, too, when I was changing. I remember that!" She started to sob against Esme's shoulder.

"Yes, I was, Bella. I was with you, too." Esme stroked her hair and patted her back lightly. "It'll be okay. I know it's been a … stressful day for you, but it will get better. Rose and I came to check on you, and, well, to get Edward's arm, of course."

Bella sobbed again. "I'd say I'm sorry I ripped his arm off, but I'm really not. He deserved it."

Was she going to say anything that came into her head?

Bella ducked her head and glanced up at Esme. "I've been so … so mad at him. He jumped at Jasper
to attack him, then he kneed him in the side, and he punched him … and … and …" Bella pulled away from her, her fists shaking. "I just had to get him off Jasper because he was going to hurt him."

There was no way that pencil-neck was going to hurt me, but I was getting a little concerned thinking Bella might go off again, although Esme showed no fear. I was a little surprised that Bella hadn't tried to attack Esme as a new female. She had attacked Alice, and had tried to attack Rosalie, but not Esme. She had said she remembered Esme's scent. I wondered again how much she had been aware of while she was changing into a vampire. More and more it seemed as though she had been aware of quite a lot.

Esme raised her arms to Bella again and smiled at her.

Bella blinked at her, and fell into her arms once again. She began sobbing even harder.

"Oh, Bella. Shhhhhh, it'll be okay." Esme stroked her hair again. "It'll be all right. It has been a distressing day for all of us, but we'll be just fine." Esme gently squeezed Bella's shoulders. "You know, it's getting dark. Would you like to go back to the house? Maybe take a shower and put on some fresh clothes?"

"I am a mess. I have pine sap all over me." She sniffed. "I've gotten it all over you, too. I'm sorry!"

"It's all right, Bella. I can wash the clothes. I think it will come out. If not, I have more. We'll have to throw yours out, I believe, but we have more clothes for you at the house. Rosalie picked up a few more things for you."

"She did?" She turned to Rose and looked a bit apprehensive. "Uh, where did you get them? Um, I know beggars shouldn't be choosers …"

"Don't worry, Bella. No haute couture. I stopped by Target." Rosalie laughed. "I know what you like to wear."

"Oh, thanks, Rose." Bella gave Rosalie a beaming smile then she turned back to Esme. "I think I'd like a shower since I haven't had one as a vampire yet. I wonder what the water will feel like? The river was fun. It didn't feel cold at all! I mean, I felt that it was cold, but it just didn't make any difference."

Bella was driving me nuts again. She went from relieved at recognizing Esme, to pleased, to pissed off at Edward, to remorse at messing up Esme's clothes, then to near giddiness thinking about playing in the river. It almost made my head hurt.

"I know," Esme replied. "I've enjoyed swimming in rivers, lakes, and ponds — even the oceans. We can even go swimming in January."

"Like those Polar Bear clubs?"

"Yes. Only we don't have to worry about hypothermia." She smiled down at Bella. "So would you like to go back to the house?"

Bella nodded and snuggled into Esme's arms. "It's so good to see you, Esme."

Esme patted her back then turned her, placing a guiding arm around Bella's shoulders. "I am so glad to see you, too. The house is in this direction, dear, but let me speak with Rosalie first." She turned a bit and looked over her shoulder at Rosalie. "Rose, are you going to take Edward's arm back and encourage him to hunt?"
"Yes, Esme. We'll reattach it and help him hunt."

"Thank you. That will give Bella and me time to get cleaned up and have a little chat." She turned toward me, a question in her eyes. "Jasper, would you mind joining us?"

Had to hand it to her, the woman was smooth. She had just given us our orders and said it in such a way that we would think we were doing her a favor. It had to be a gift. She had let Rosalie know that she wanted a bit of time with Bella. She had also let me know that she wouldn't be keeping Bella from me. Not that she, or anyone, would be able to.

"I'd be happy to, Esme." I walked over toward them, and Bella reached for my hand. I felt warmth and affection coming from her when my skin came into contact with hers. How I wanted to just grab her into my arms and feel all of her against me.

Esme turned to Rose again. "Rose, I expect it will take three, maybe four hours, right?" At Rosalie's nod, Esme smiled again. "Okay then, we'll see you back at the house about midnight."

The woman was a pro.

Rosalie was onto her and grinned. "We'll see you about midnight." She gave us a jaunty wave with Edward's arm, turned, and disappeared into the trees.

Esme turned her attention to Bella. "Bella, I thought we could walk for a bit — it's so lovely this evening. I think we might be able to see a few stars since the clouds have thinned." Esme gave her a squeeze, and Bella leaned into her shoulder.

"It is nice. I had hardly noticed that it was starting to get dark. And this is good practice for human-like walking, right?"

"You caught me." Esme laughed. "You're doing very well." Esme squeezed Bella's shoulders again. "I have a room set up for you, next to Jasper's study. It was our guest room, but it's yours now."

"Thank you, Esme."

"It's not a problem at all. I've rewashed the clothes you've left at the house and the ones that Rosalie bought. I'll help you put them away. You'll be able to do it all yourself soon." Esme touched her cheek to Bella's hair. "I'll also help you get a shower, unless you'd like to take a bath? This room has an attached bath, and I've put some toiletries in there for you."

"Why would you rewash my clothes?" Bella looked up at her, curious. I was curious myself.

"Your human scent. Carlisle and I discussed it and thought it would be a good idea to wash all your clothes. We don't know how you might react when you smell it again, even though it's your own scent. Now our scents will be on your clothes from handling them." Esme brushed her fingers lightly across Bella's chin. "We've not quite been in this particular situation before. Your human scent will be in most of the rooms in the house." Esme smiled at Bella again. "As you can imagine, Carlisle is quite curious about it, and so am I."

The peace and contentment that arose from the two women was a balm to my soul and to Bella's. She was feeling happy and pleased, too. I was hopeful, but I knew it wouldn't last. I had not thought about Bella's human scent being all over the house — concentrated in Edward's room, Alice's room, and the living room. I should have remembered that. Being exposed to her own scent could end up being too interesting.

I suspected that Esme wanted to find out what Bella remembered, and I was sure Bella wouldn't
want to wait any longer to find out what had been going on for the last few days. I didn't want to keep it from her, but I knew it would upset her. Having an upset newborn in the house could be disastrous. But at that moment, I chose to simply bask in the serenity and enjoy the evening walk with Bella and Esme.

"Look, Bella!" Esme pointed up to a patch of darkening sky through the trees. "It's a falling star. Do you want to make a wish?"

Bella stopped and looked up. "Wow, I can see it so much better now! It's so beautiful. But I don't know what to wish for."

"Perhaps you can think of something to wish for when you see another one."

I looked up at the shooting star, watching as it faded away and winked out. I had already made my wish.
Chapter 19, I Whine

Emmett's POV

There we all were, hanging out in the middle of the woods after reattaching Edward's arm—me, Rose, Alice, Carlisle, and (sigh) Edward. When Rose had brought back Edward's arm, she let us know that Esme, Bella, and Jasper were going to head back to the house. Esme had let her know she wouldn't be expecting us back until midnight-ish. At the time I hadn't really cared much. Later, however, I changed my tune.

Edward and Carlisle looked pretty ragged with their clothes torn up, though Carlisle didn't look nearly as bad as Edward. He kind of looked like he'd been through a wood chipper.

That's what he gets for messin' with Bella and pissin' her off.

Bella sure had been hell on our clothes. Well, the guys' clothes. It was a wonder we had anything left to wear and weren't all naked. She was a vicious little thing. Like I said—hellcat. I sure was lovin' that! She had managed to rip into Edward and Alice pretty good, though. Alice had tied a pink scarf around her neck to cover the scars Bella had left on her, but Edward wasn't going to be able to hide the scars on his face.

Some chicks dig scars. Maybe it'll work for him.

I was going to have to ask Bella what made her lick her fingers when she woke up.
Who even thinks like that?

It was a nice night. It wasn't raining, and I even saw a few stars here and there in the occasional breaks in the clouds. It was good to be out in the woods with Rose, sitting on that nice, comfy log. I would have been enjoying it a whole lot more if Edward would shut the hell up—the whiny-ass cry baby.

Oh, my fucking God, Edward was the biggest pain in my ass. Ever. I mean EVER.

The pissin', and moanin', and whinin', and cryin', and belly achin', and ... Jesus Christ! He'd bitch if they hung him with a brand new rope.

Damn, I wanted him to just shut the fuck up, go drink a damn raccoon or something already, and just get over himself.

Maybe, back when he was human, his parents should have let him go off and fight in the war. Would have manned him up a little.

City boys!

And I didn't even care if he could hear me. He'd always been a moody bitch—even worse than that damn emo bastard Jasper on a bad day. (Or a good day, depending on how you looked at it.) But at least Jasper wasn't always whining about it. He was more the "suffer in silence" type. If Edward didn't quit his goddamn bleating, I was going to rip an arm off him.

Oh, and ripping off arms? That was cool as shit when Bella popped up out of the water holding Edward's arm up like a damn trophy and hooting like a fool! Hell! I didn't even feel bad that she got away from me. My little Belly-boo was stronger than hell, and she was pretty damn pissed off, too. I was a little surprised she hadn't broken anything off me or bitten the shit out of me. But, then again, she likes me.

I didn't know how the hell she ripped Edward's arm off, but that shit was cool. I had always thought she'd make a pretty good vampire, but she was turning out to be a fuck-awesome vampire! I just never understood why the hell Edward kept refusing to turn her. Stupid ass.

I didn't think I'd ever had so much fun. Not even when she was kicking my ass. Literally.

I glanced up at Edward in his classic pose—fingers clamped on the bridge of his nose. At least she didn't bite me or try to rip my arm off.

As expected, Mr. Pissypants decided to shoot me a dirty look.

"Look, Edward, you've only had one deer," I said.

After observing our little exchange and giving both of us a stern look, Carlisle raised his eyebrows. "Edward, you should hunt for something else—perhaps a carnivore. Unless you feel you need further assistance?"

Edward huffed like the little bitch he always was. "No, I don't need further assistance. I've already had a deer." His eyes dropped to the ground, and he peered up at me. "Emmett, I should thank you for capturing it for me. I ... I appreciate your help." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I had a deer yesterday. Over-feeding isn't going to make me heal any faster."

Rose had been sitting quietly next to me on the log, but then she jumped up and stomped over toward Edward. "You'll heal faster if you stop pissing Bella off." She crossed her arms. "Don't give
me that pouty look, Edward. She hasn't bitten Carlisle or Emmett. How many times did she bite you before she ripped your arm off?"

That made me snort. "You're lucky she didn't rip your head off."

Especially since Jazz had a hunk of Edward's neck in his hand after Bella tackled him. Shit. Edward was pretty damn lucky we found that piece. Jasper could have thrown it in the river. We'd still be looking for it.

He had to go and try and fuck with Jasper. It wasn't like Edward had the advantage anymore. He had whined about not being able to read Jasper's mind ever since Jasper had passed out and had been lying there with Bella. So maybe he was lucky, again, because Bella had clobbered him and gotten him away from Jasper.

Maybe he'll learn you just don't mess with somebody's mate. I sure hoped he didn't try anything with Bella. God only knew what Jasper might do to him. It was so freakin' obvious they were mates, what with her purring, and being all cuddly and shit with him. And him being all cuddly and shit with her.


"All right, everyone." Carlisle held up his hands and glanced around at everyone. "We need to remain calm here."

There went Carlisle being the peacekeeper again. It wasn't that we needed a "daddy," but sometimes we sure needed a referee.

Carlisle walked over toward Alice who was huddled up in a tight little ball at the base of a fir tree. He leaned over and patted her shoulder.

She looked awful—really sad. I couldn't say I blamed her though. We had all thought she and Jazz were mates, even though they were never as affectionate as me and Rose. And they sure as hell didn't have sex as much as Rose and I did, or as much as Esme and Carlisle either, but I just figured they didn't have the same, uh, drive that Rose and I did.

Well, whatever.

I knew all this had been a shock to Alice. But it wasn't like she was ga-ga head-over-heels in love with him. She was the one who had thrown Jasper out of her room, and she always had been more excited about clothes and all that crap.

She was always telling him what to do and what to wear, and he just did it. So I assumed ...Well, we all did. But the way Jazz was acting while Bella was burning, and then when Bella woke up and bit the be-Jesus out of him ... that was pretty much a dead give-away.

I cracked myself up sometimes.

The way they had been acting ever since pretty much clinched it—especially Jasper. As my ol' Granny used to say, he'd been as nervous as a whore in church, and that just wasn't Jasper. I mean, he could be a real shithead sometimes, but nervous, worried, jumpy, and panicky? That just wasn't normal.

Alice looked up at Carlisle and gave him a tiny little, sad smile. She stood and brushed pine needles from her slacks and adjusted the pink scarf she had tied around her neck. "Yes, we do need to try and stay as calm as we can. It will help Bella, I think. It would be better for her. If Bella doesn't get so upset then maybe Jazz ..."

Her voice fading out, she sniffed and covered her face with her hands.
Carlisle hugged her to his chest and patted and rubbed her back, trying to comfort her. "Alice, I just
don't know what to say. There have been quite a few changes and shocks over the last few days, and
it's all been rather overwhelming. For all of us, I think, but most especially for you and Edward. I am
unsure how to proceed except to try to meet each situation that arises as thoughtfully and patiently as
we can." He rubbed her back again. "And we have to keep in mind that Bella is a newborn vampire.
They are ruled by their instincts and impulses. It's very difficult for them to control themselves."

Rose came over and sat down next to me again, taking hold of my hand. She sighed. "All of us need
to accept the fact that Bella and Jasper are mates." She looked pointedly at Edward. "I'm sorry Alice,
but that's just how it is. It's pretty obvious."

It couldn't have been any more obvious, as far as I was concerned. Bella had been all over him. He
had been all over her, and he had been a complete and total fucktard. If Rose and I hadn't shown up
when we did ...

There may be a couple of " visuals" that I should try and keep out of my head.

Edward stiffened, raised his face up toward the sky, and closed his eyes. His hands were trembling. I
was hoping he didn't lose control. Well, if he was going to, he could beat the hell out of as many
trees as he wanted to.

Edward inhaled deeply and slowly opened his eyes. "I am having quite a bit of difficulty
understanding how she can be his mate when ..." There he went with the hand in the hair again.
"Alice and ... Jasper ... have been together for decades. They've been mates. They ..."

Carlisle, releasing Alice, turned to face Edward. "Not all vampires find a true mate, Edward. Many
have companions that they are quite attached to and are quite happy with." He smiled down at Alice
and patted her shoulder. "It's Bella's scent. You know it has changed. You know we recognize our
mates through scent. It is generally understood and accepted that vampires cannot truly form a mate
bond with humans, though there might be some attraction. Rosalie bringing Emmett to us would be
an example of that. But I wouldn't have called that a mate bond. They weren't truly mated until after
Emmett became a vampire." He gave me and Rose a small smile and turned back to Edward. "I
understand that this is difficult for you-"

"How can you understand this, Carlisle? How can you know anything about it?" Edward started
pacing between a huge fir tree on my left, then back to Carlisle and Alice on my right. "How can
you say it's 'scent' and humans can't form a mate bond with vampires? Bella's scent was so
provocative, so enticing to me ... so desirable that I could think of nothing else, and I very nearly lost
my control." He paced back toward the fir, slammed his right palm against it and leaned forward.
"She has been the most important thing to me-the most important thing in my existence. I love her,
and I have only ever thought of her. I have only ever wanted to take care of her, keep her from harm,
and protect her. Everything I've done over these last months has been for her."

"For God's sake, Edward!" Rose slapped her knees with her hands. "I should have seen it before! I
don't know why I didn't. But if she was your mate, you wouldn't have been able to just dump her
and leave her. Especially since you hadn't ... er ..." She trailed off, and she even looked a little
embarrassed as her eyes flicked from Edward to Carlisle and back.

Well, damn! Rose almost never got embarrassed, and there wasn't much that kept her from speaking
her mind-no matter how awkward or embarrassing it might be.

I thought I should help her out.

"Boffed her?" I asked innocently, smiling at Edward and batting my eyelashes at him.
There was what I would have called a "strained, uncomfortable silence" for several seconds. Carlisle's eyes widened a bit as he looked anywhere but at Edward, and he cleared his throat. Alice fidgeted with her scarf again, and her eyes dropped to the ground.

Then there was Edward. The only way to describe the look on his face was "aghast." Maybe even "horror-struck." He was standing there flapping his gums, not saying a damn thing, and his eyes were bugging out.

Rose blinked a couple times, patted my thigh, and smiled at me. "Crudely put, honey, but, uh, yes."

Edward finally found his voice. "I ... I would never ..."

"Yeah, I know."

"Emmett! I am appalled! How could you ..." Edward was still choking and sputtering over that one. "That is none of your concern. I never wanted to hurt her. I only ever wanted to protect—"

"Her virtue?" I asked, shaking my head. Then I snorted. "If that's the case, you weren't protecting her, you were only ever teasing the absolute piss out of her. How mean is that shit?"

Carlisle clapped his hand over his eyes and dragged his fingers down his face. Alice sort of stared off into the tree tops.

Rose took hold of my hand and gave it a little squeeze. "That was actually well put." She glared at Edward. "Teasing her like that, over and over again, was cruel."

I sighed at Edward. "But, besides that crap, you were overdoing the so-called protection thing."

"To the point of suffocating her," Rose added. She was a little exasperated. "Everyone saw it but you and Alice. If you had tried to protect me like that, I would have beat your ass. Oh wait ..." Rose brought up her index finger, her pinky stuck out, and tapped her lips. "... she did."

Carlisle seemed to have regained his composure and, with an amused look on his face, he raised one of his eyebrows at Rose, and she rolled her eyes.

"Edward, Emmett and Rosalie have a valid point."

Edward spun away from the tree. "I do understand it! But I could never hurt her! I'm too strong ... I ... I love her."

"Give me a break, Edward," I said. "You've been to college and high school how many times? Taking medical classes and biology and shit? Did you ever destroy a microscope or screw up dissecting frogs, or worms, or baby pigs? How 'bout when you've gotten into museums and read
those manuscripts written on that papyrus paper, or whatever, that's thousands of years old? You never messed up any of that stuff. Hell! Carlisle has books older than any of us, and you've read those without turning them to dust. How was Bella any more delicate than any of that stuff?"

"Exactly." Rose agreed. "The urge to 'bond physically,' as Carlisle put it, is very, very strong-irresistible. If she was really your mate, you would have ... followed through."

The look of mortification on Edward's face was priceless. "But I did want ... I mean, I do want ... The scent of her blood drew me like no other."

"And that's your answer right there, Edward." Rose jumped to her feet. "You keep saying 'her blood'. How many times have you said Bella's blood was what drew you to her? Past tense. Of course it would. She was your Singer!" She flung out her arms. "But since she's become a vampire, you haven't said anything about her scent at all."

Leave it to my Rose to not only hit the nail on the head, but grab a ten pound sledge hammer and smash it right through the board.

Edward glared at her, his face now showing anger, and his hands tightened into fists. With the nautsy way he had been acting, I didn't trust him not to take a leap at Rose, so I stood up next to her and crossed my arms.

"I have noticed the change in her scent, but that doesn't make any difference to me. I still love her. Jasper changing her and not allowing me near her, and ..."

"It doesn't make any difference to you?" Rose threw her hands up in the air. "It should make all the difference! If she was your mate, she would smell better to you than anyone else, except your Singer. Which she just so happened to be when she was human. Now that she's not human ..."

Carlisle raised both of his eyebrows at Rose before he turned back to Edward. "You may love her Edward, but I don't believe she is your mate." Carlisle looked at him sadly. "I am sorry." He glanced at Alice and then back to Edward. "If her scent drew you as an actual mate, you wouldn't be able to just disregard it. If your scent drew her, she wouldn't have attacked you so viciously. Twice. She wouldn't have tried to harm you." His hand went to his forehead. "Like with so much of what we are, it's instinctive, and Jasper and Bella appear to be acting very instinctively. Jasper's evident interest in her scent, and his show of protectiveness and possessiveness, along with his unusual agitation, is perfectly natural. It could become even more pronounced as time goes on. Bella has shown a similar protectiveness over him. Granted, it was a bit exaggerated for a female, but I think that would be due, in part, to her being a newborn just hours old." He placed both hands back on his hips and turned to face Edward completely.

"And you were hitting him at the time," I added.

"I was hitting him because I believe he's manipulating Bella's emotions." Edward extended his hands in a pleading gesture. "How do we know there actually was another vampire at the crash scene before he got there? How do we know he didn't find her and decide to take her for himself? How do we know he didn't cause the wreck?"

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe Edward had just said that shit. Even Alice's mouth fell open in shock.

Rose growled and started to head for him, but I grabbed her arm to hold her back. Edward might be talking shit, but he really didn't need to lose his arms again. Or a bunch of other parts, if I knew my Rose.
But if he didn't shut his mouth, I was seriously thinking about having a go at him myself. Then it would be Rose's turn.

Rose flashed her teeth at him. "Are you delusional? I cannot believe that utter blasphemy came out of your mouth!" Her hands clenched into fists.

Carlisle stepped a little closer to Edward and gave Rose a warning look. "Rosalie . . ."

I still couldn't believe he said that shit, and I had to say something. If he believed that, he was delusional, just like Rose said. "Hold on, Carlisle. That's crazy talk coming out of his mouth." I pointed a finger at Edward. "Yeah, Edward, are you out of your goddamn mind? Jasper had gone to hunt. He had been at the house with Alice. Bella was at her own house before she went to work. She made a snap decision to go to La Push. Jasper couldn't have known anything about it. And don't you think, if he wanted to turn her, he could have figured out a less traumatic and dangerous way to do it? That wreck should have killed her."

Rose gave me a quick nod and turned back to them. "Carlisle, Edward can't speak such . . . such slander and bullshit and get away with it." She focused her murderous glare on Edward. "I'll tell you how we know, Edward." She sneered at him and jabbed a finger toward his chest. "We know there was another vampire there first because Jasper said there was, and he doesn't lie. He may not say much, but when he does speak, He. Does. Not. Lie." She jerked her arm away from me. "Emmett, I'm fine. And Edward, if you ever say anything like that about Jasper again I will rip parts off you, and you won't get them back. I will burn them!"

Those two always did fight like they were brother and sister.

She took another step closer to Edward and Carlisle. Edward flinched back away from her. "I know he's not manipulating her emotions because she said she can feel him when he tries to, and she has blocked him from feeling her emotions. It's been intermittent, but she's done it. He was shocked that she could. And he wouldn't do that." Rose closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

I knew she was this close to knocking him into next week.

She crossed her arms. "It's her scent, Edward. Plain and simple. It's blatantly obvious it doesn't attract you like it did before. You as much as said so yourself, and though Jasper liked her well enough before, he never paid all that much attention to her. He barely even spoke to her."

I rolled my eyes. "And now he won't shut up."

Rose put her hands on her hips and snapped around toward me. That one eyebrow drew up, and though I was taller than her, she looked down her nose at me. I didn't know how the hell she did that.

She turned slowly back toward Edward. "Besides that, no matter what he might have tried on her, there is no way he could have done anything to force her to purr for him."

Edward squeezed his eyes shut and turned back to the tree, putting his forearm against it. He rested his head against his arm. He was breathing kind of heavy, too.

Alice stepped forward and looked up at his back, her eyes shining with venom. "I think they're right, Edward. I've known Jasper a long time, and I've never seen him behave this way before. I had thought he was who I was meant to be with. His was the first face I saw in a vision after I woke up as a vampire. But maybe I only saw him because he was supposed to help bring me to all of you." She swung her hand in a gesture to include all of us.

"It wouldn't be the first time I misinterpreted a vision because I only got a glimpse." She sighed. "It
makes me very sad, because I do love him, but there has always been a part of me that has been afraid of him. And seeing how he ... acted ... toward you when Bella was still burning, well, I was terrified of him and couldn't stand the thought of him being near me again. I guess I don't love him enough. That's not how mates are supposed to be."

Alice walked toward him, placed her hand on the middle of his back, and gave him a little rub. "And I have to admit, as much as I love Bella, she just petrifies me. I've seen her as a vampire practically since I first laid eyes on her, but I never saw her as so ... so aggressive. I never saw that she would attack us. I had no idea she would turn out this way." She patted his back again. "I had always just thought she was your mate, but I never saw you two, specifically, together. When you two became enamored with each other and I saw her in a vision as a vampire, I just thought ..." She sighed again. "Well, I haven't been able to see anything of their futures. You haven't been able to hear their thoughts either, have you?"

"No, I haven't. Not since he ... not since Esme said he went unconscious."

"I think whatever her shield is, she's blocking us, and she has somehow included him in it. I can still see everyone else. Sort of. It's all been kind of blurry and out of focus."

"I can hear everyone else," he said very quietly. "I just can't hear either of them."

I thought I ought to put in another two cents while we were at it. "Edward, if Bella was your mate, she would have gone to you after she woke up, like Rose said. At the very least, she wouldn't have attacked you like that. And she did bite him, uh, twice."

He stepped back from the tree and his fingers went right to the bridge of his nose. I swear I didn't know if he picked that up from Carlisle, or if Carlisle got that from him.

"I saw those two fresh bites. Two. She bit me five times." His hands went to his hips.

Rose heaved a huge sigh, and looked toward the heavens. Maybe she was praying for strength not to kill him. "Edward, she bit him twice with undeniable claiming bites, even if she didn't understand exactly what she was doing. You saw the first one," Rose reached back for my hand. "She bit you five times on your arm before she ripped it off. It's not so much how many times; it's where it is and what you're ... ah ... doing at the time."

I think Rose had him by the short hairs there. He looked pretty uncomfortable and a little embarrassed, too. The prude.

Bella was a great girl—a great vampire. I sure wouldn't mind hanging with her for a few centuries or eons or so. She cracked me up! So it had to be hard on the guy. She was pretty damn awesome. I know he obsessed over her, and worried, and pined, and ... I think he did love her—in a way. But they weren't mates. I was right damn sure about that. Jasper was acting like a total ass, so he had it bad. Bella was his mate. No two ways about it. Besides, humans broke up and got new boyfriends and girlfriends all the time, so why wouldn't vampires? I thought I had even had a few girlfriends before I was turned into a vampire. I thought I did. Unless vampires were mates, they broke up or killed each other. And if Edward didn't watch it, Bella would end up killing him. Edward was just going to have to suck it up.

Carlisle put his hands together. "Everyone, it's probably about time we made our way back to the house and check on them—see how they're all doing. Maybe even clean up a bit." He gestured in the direction of the house. "Shall we?"

Alice gave Carlisle a little smile and put her arm around his waist, resting her head against his chest.
"Okay, Carlisle. We should head back. I ... I'm sure it will all eventually work out." She let go of Carlisle and reached for Edward's hand. "C'mon, Edward."

The three of them started off at a slow run, and Rose and I brought up the rear. When they were a ways ahead of us, Rose whispered to me, "I can't believe how stupid he is sometimes." She shook her head. "You know I always thought Edward was only fascinated with her just because he couldn't read her mind. He can read everyone else's."

I sighed. I had been thinking about that very thing quite a bit. "I know, Rose. I know it drove him nuts that he couldn't." I squeezed her hand. "I've always thought she smelled really good, but I've always liked her, too. She's always been fun. It seemed like she wasn't having fun with him like she did with me. They were always so serious. And I don't think he's stupid, really."

Rose raised one of her eyebrows at me again.

"No, really. I think he's coming to realize what a great girl he lost, and she was never his to begin with. If he had turned her, she would have gone right to Jasper. Edward never had a chance."

I gripped Rose's hand a little more tightly. "But then there's the blood thing. Maybe it's only been her blood this whole time. I know how that goes since I ran across those women who were my Singers. They were the only other women ... only other people, human or vampire, I have ever smelled that smelled better to me than you."

I stopped and dropped my head at the memory. Sometimes I felt a little guilty at that admission.

Rose came and put her hand on my arm. "I know, Em. You don't need to feel badly about that. It's okay. I've never come across my Singer, but I think I understand."

There was no one who smelled better than my Rose, until I ran across those women. Once I had caught a whiff, there was no stopping me. No one could have stopped me from getting to them, which was why I could never understand how Edward resisted draining Bella. I knew how that Singer shit was. But maybe he thought that fascination was love? Both kinda made ya go crazy.

I patted Rose's hand and raised it up so I could kiss her knuckles. "You know I love you, Babe. More than anything."

She smiled her special smile at me and placed her hand on the side of my face. "I know you do. And I love you."

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Chapter 20, I Fret

Jasper’s POV

What the hell was there to do in a bathroom for ninety-three minutes? There had been a lot of dirt and pine tree sap on Bella, but Christ! I was out of the shower and dressed in a grey t-shirt and jeans in fifteen. Even found my boots and put them on. I’d have been finished sooner, but the thought of a naked, wet Bella? Let’s just say it slowed me down a little.

Bella and Esme had been up there yakking about who knew what while I had been pacing in the living room like a tiger in a too-small cage — waiting for them. That was until I forced myself to sit my ass down and watch for them to come down the stairs.

Not that the image of a naked and wet Bella, with soap suds flowing fluidly down and over her curves, was an unpleasant distraction to pass the time. That image was followed closely by another very pleasurable one: Bella bent over with her foot propped up on the side of that huge tub, a well-lathered washcloth in her hands, gliding over her foot, up around her calf, circling her knee, and then slipping to the inside of her thigh.
A moan escaped me. That semi-hard-on I had been sporting most of the day was practically aching again, and I had better quit that shit before they came downstairs.

I considered pacing again, but Esme probably wouldn’t appreciate my wearing a path in her carpet.

Esme had opened nearly every window in the house, trying to dilute Bella’s human scent. Even the sliding doors behind me were open. Bella had reacted to the scent, but not like I thought she would. I had almost expected her to get a whiff and start tearing up the house looking for the human. She’d been tense and a little nervous when we first arrived at the house, but it turned out to be no big deal. All she did was shrug her shoulders and say, “Kinda sweet. But it’s not making me thirsty. I mean, there’s a little burn in my throat but … Is it because it’s my scent?”

Who the hell knew? Back when I had been dealing with all those newborns, they sure as shit didn’t wake up in their own houses. By the time they’d been clawing, scratching, and screaming for three days or so on the dirt floor of a shack or cave, there hadn’t been much of their clothes or their human scent left.

There was the slightest trace of a breeze through the house, and I could smell the soap Bella was using upstairs. The light vanilla and brown sugar complemented her warm, inviting scent of cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger. Again I was reminded of my human days and of the spice cake made only for those rare, special occasions. Bella was certainly special.

I had started to think Esme deliberately chose that scent. Bella had always used a strawberry shampoo before. It had not detracted from her floral scent, but it had always been a little on the sweet side for my liking.

Edward had always liked sweet …

*Who gives a shit what that dickhead thinks?*

Alice had always preferred floral scents. Though she had liked citrusy, berry scents, too, which weren’t bad. I liked orange and berries, but those didn’t compare to …

*Finally! Christ!*

Bella and Esme appeared on the stairs, holding hands and smiling. I was relieved. I hadn’t realized how tense I’d become until I saw her again. The warm vanilla combined with her comforting fragrance drifted across the room to me, and I inhaled deeply. The tension I had been feeling drained away, easing the tightness across my shoulders.

Esme directed Bella to sit on the coffee table in front of me, while Esme sat on the couch to my left. She sectioned off a handful of Bella’s still-damp hair and started brushing it at the ends.

“Get all the sap off?” I sat up from my slumped position.

Esme smiled. “I think so. It was quite a challenge to get it all out of Bella’s hair.” She patted Bella’s shoulder. “We both feel much better in fresh clothes.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Remind me not to wrestle any more pine trees. I thought that crap … er, stuff would never come out.” She dropped her head and peeked up at Esme. “Sorry, Esme.”

“It’s okay, dear. I remember I had a hard time controlling myself and took out my frustrations on more than a few trees when I was a newborn. I’m a little embarrassed to say my own language was a bit … coarse. I went through more than a few sets of clothes, too.” Esme chuckled. “There was that time I ran directly through a swamp. I didn’t even notice the odor or the black, slimy mud until I was
a mile past it — or the briar thicket I had run through.”

Bella looked over her shoulder at Esme. “Did you do that a lot when you were a newborn?”

“Unfortunately, yes. All the thoughts whipping through my mind, and all the scents and sounds, were quite difficult to manage at first, and I would shriek in frustration and race away, not paying any attention to my surroundings at all. Carlisle had quite a time with me.” Esme gathered another section of Bella’s hair and began brushing the ends, working her way up. “I was quite violent at times, also. Carlisle would catch me, and I would fight against him. Clothing doesn’t hold up well against newborns.”

Bella propped her elbows on her knees and dropped her head into her hands. “I am really sorry about that. Not only am I tearing up my own clothes — I’m destroying everyone else’s!”

Esme reached forward and gently rubbed Bella’s shoulder. “Don’t let that concern you, Bella. We’ve been there before. All of us have gone through it, and all of us have gotten through it. Like I told you upstairs, I’m sure it won’t take you too long to learn to control your strength. Rosalie was so determined she mastered buttons and silk hose in three months.”

“But I feel so bad. I…”

I leaned forward and brushed my fingertips across her right knee, unable to resist touching her any longer. “Bella, in that respect, you are no different than any other newborn. It takes a while to get used to the strength. We are so much stronger than humans. And you are so much stronger than Emmett!” I had to smile at that, and that brought a small smile to Bella’s face. “How did you get away from him and Rosalie?”

“Oh!” She laughed, her voice sounding out in ringing clear tones, and she dropped her hands to her thighs. “I slammed my legs down on the rock and she came loose! You should have seen her face!” Bella’s whole face lit up with laughter. “And when she let go, Emmett’s grip loosened, so I jabbed him with my elbow —” She demonstrated it by jerking her right elbow back, glee sparkling in her eyes. “— and then I threw his arms off!” Her hands flew outward in her excitement. “I jumped up, and then I…”

In a flash, her glee turned to wrath and it was as if a dark cloud passed over her face. I caught her fluttering hands in mine and held them together.

“It’s okay, Bella. I just wanted to know how you got away from them,” I spoke softly to her. “It’s okay.” I tugged gently at her hands. “Look at me.” Her darkening eyes snapped to mine. “Not many can get away from Emmett when he gets his hands on them like that.”

Esme had paused in her task of brushing Bella’s hair, but she gave me a small nod and a smile and resumed working the brush through those long, tangled locks.

“Yes, Bella, that’s very true.” Esme said. “Emmett’s always been the strongest one in our family, but now you are.”

She looked puzzled. “I am? But he’s huge!”

“I guess you don’t remember us mentioning it. You’re a newborn.” I held both her hands with my left and drew the fingers of my right down her wrists and the back of her hands. “For about the first year, newborns are very strong because they still have their own blood in their tissues.”

“Even if they drink animal blood?” Her anger was gone, replaced with curiosity.
“From what Carlisle has said, yes, even if you feed on only animal blood.” I grasped her hands more firmly and smiled at her.

She bent her head down and looked up at me through her lashes. “So when do I get the freaky yellow eyes?” Her sweet smile turned into a devious grin, and then I felt her mischievousness.

“Freaky?” My eyebrows flew up in surprise. When she started to laugh, I realized she was teasing me, and I had to laugh with her. I rolled my eyes and shook my head at her. I gripped her hands, brought them up and kissed her knuckles.

Even Esme chuckled at Bella teasing us. “Bella! It is so good to hear you laugh. And to answer your question, your eyes should change to freaky yellow in a few months — maybe four to six.” Esme chuckled again and gently shook her head as she continued brushing a beautiful shine into Bella’s hair. “Right, Jasper?”

I smiled again at Bella and squeezed her hands in mine. “Yes. It could be as early as four months, but probably around six months.”

“Jasper.” Esme raised her head toward me. “Why don’t you finish brushing out Bella’s hair for me while I go get our dirty clothes from upstairs?”

“Yeah, Jasper, finish brushing my hair, please? I broke two hairbrushes upstairs.” Bella covered her eyes with a hand, feeling embarrassed. “Only broke one back brush, though.”

“I can do that. And don’t feel embarrassed, Bella. We all go through it.” I had to smile as I moved over to the couch to sit behind her, eager to get my hands in her hair again. It was beautiful, even though some was still tangled from her shower.

Esme patted my shoulder. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She first moved to the right toward the sliding glass doors and inhaled deeply. “Beautiful night. The roses smell so lovely.” Then she made her way in front of us toward the stairs to our left.

As I reached with the hairbrush toward Bella’s right temple, she took hold of my hand. It felt almost warm to me and a feeling of peace settled over me. At just her touch, I was calmed and any remaining tension I had melted away.

She was wearing a long-sleeved, navy blue t-shirt with a graphic of Calvin and Hobbes fighting on the front. “I like that shirt. I always liked Calvin and Hobbes.”

“Thanks. Me, too. I didn’t get to wear this one much since Alice …” She sighed heavily. “Okay, Jasper, you can start telling me what’s been going on. It’s been long enough. You can start with why Edward …” I saw the muscles in her jaw clench and her eyes slowly close. “… Why Edward would tell me I’m his mate and …” She raised her head and looked upward, taking in a breath and slowly letting it out. “No more stalling and distracting the crazy newborn.”

“You’re not crazy. The confusion is normal.”

“Jasper …” she warned.

I took in a breath, breathing in her scent and attempting to center myself. I didn’t think that the currently calm atmosphere would last very long. But maybe by brushing her hair, and with Esme’s innately soothing presence, it would help to keep her from losing control and destroying the living room.

I might have a hard time, though. Just hearing his name come from her lips caused a spark of anger
within me. “I can’t tell you what Edward was thinking. It is my opinion that he was … infatuated with the scent of your blood and fascinated by the fact that he could not read your mind.”

Bella sat quietly in thought for a moment as I brushed her hair. Anger flashed from her, then resignation. She sighed again. “I’d have to agree,” she said as she looked down at her hands in her lap. “Now, what else has been going on? Start at the beginning.” Her tone of voice was sharp and her words clipped. Her anger and resignation were pushed aside for determination.

“Saturday morning, I didn’t go with Carlisle, Emmett, and Edward. I was hunting near the Quileute border. I heard a crash out on the highway. I went to look and saw your truck. I went to the truck and saw you inside, badly injured. I thought, at first, you were dead.” I would never be able to get the image of Bella, lying there helpless, broken, and bloody, out of my mind. Thank God, or whoever may be up there, that I had found her in time.

I heard Bella take in a breath, and she stared down at her clasped hands in her lap. “What day is it now?”

“It’s Monday, nearly Tuesday.”

“Is it Memorial Day?”

“Yes. It’s the twenty-ninth.”

“How bad was I?” she asked in a quiet voice. Her emotions were still steady, though she was beginning to feel apprehensive.

“I thought you were near death. Your truck had hit the guardrail and flipped over it. It rolled down the embankment and smashed into the trees. The truck was destroyed. I think your seat belt may have held at first, since you weren’t thrown from the truck, but when I found you, the seat belt was broken.”

Esme appeared then and sat down on the floor in front of Bella. She placed her hand over Bella’s, resting on her thigh.

I continued brushing through her hair. “Both of your arms and legs were broken. Your right ankle was broken. You had a huge gash on your forehead, and glass from the broken windows had cut your face, neck, and arms. Carlisle believes your pelvis and jaw were also broken. You had broken ribs, too.”

I saw her tense and she let out a breath. She continued to look down at Esme’s hand covering her own. “There was blood everywhere.”

She wasn’t asking me; she was telling me. Did she remember the crash? Did she remember what had happened to cause it?

“Yes, there was. You were … covered in it. You were unconscious at first, and I couldn’t feel that you were there. When I first saw you, I thought you were dead, but I heard your heartbeat and knew you were still alive.” I put the hairbrush at the crown of her head and slowly eased it through her hair all the way to ends.

“Do you remember what happened?” Esme asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe something ran across the road?” She sighed, and Esme squeezed her hands. “I remember the blood — it was on everything. I was thinking there couldn’t be that much blood in a human body.”
She was starting to tense up, and I could feel her cycling emotions beginning to pick up speed with a touch of anxiety and sadness. I didn’t know what made me do it, but I set the brush down on the coffee table and started combing my fingers through her hair. She shivered when my fingers brushed her back, but she felt grateful. Then remorse and fear crept in.

“Jasper, how did you stand the blood? How could you stand it? I know it was everywhere. It had to be …”

“Shhhh, Bella. It’s okay.” I leaned forward and put my left hand on her hip. I kept slowly combing through her hair with the fingers of my right hand. “Bella … it … I had just been hunting. Smelling your blood made me thirsty, but I needed to try and take care of you. The thirst just went away.”

I glanced at Esme and she was watching Bella carefully, concern in her eyes. She put her other hand on Bella’s knee.

Bella nodded and I continued. “A vampire had been there before me and had bitten you. I believe it was a male, but between the rain, the scent of your blood, and the gasoline that was leaking out of the truck, I couldn’t be sure if I had ever run across him before or not.”

Her head snapped up and she turned on the coffee table to face me. “I had been bitten? A vampire …?”

I took hold of her shoulders. “I didn’t smell him at first. I hadn’t realized you’d been bitten until I saw the bite on your neck. It wasn’t a bite to feed; it was a bite to inject venom. I was there quickly. He didn’t have time to get much venom into you before I got there.”

I slid my hands down her arms and grasped her hands. She was feeling a bit stunned and incredulous, and I was starting to feel a bit apprehensive. I had bitten her to put more venom into her. She hadn’t wanted that previously. She had wanted Edward to change her. I had no idea how she would react.

“Not much venom? I remember Alice had said not enough venom would make the change take longer. Evidently, I changed in two and a half days. Then who …?”

“I bit you to add more venom after I pulled you out of the truck.”

“You bit me?” She yanked her hands from mine and was up in a flash, pacing the room. She quickly moved to Edward’s piano at the front of the house and back again.

I stood and wove around the chairs toward her, but she stopped, pointed a finger at me, and continued with the pacing. Her emotions were gaining speed. Confusion primarily, but there was astonishment, disbelief, gratefulness, relief, and then it all swirled again.

She stood tensely next to Edward’s piano and stared at the glossy black surface. Her hands flashed up to cover her ears then went to her face. She inhaled a ragged breath. She exuded sadness and a feeling of regret for a moment. Did she remember that Edward had written a song for her? Her hands slowly left her face. She lifted her head, squared her shoulders, and an aura of determination grew around her. She turned her face away from the piano and walked quickly away from it, ending up in front of the back windows.

She crossed her arms and brought her right hand to her mouth. “You said a vampire had been there before you.”

“Yes.” I went over toward the two recliners that were in front of the flat screen on the east side of the room and leaned against the back of one closest to Bella. I just watched her, anxiously. Her emotions
were gaining speed, but I couldn’t guess at what she might be thinking. A little fear joined the mix.

“You don’t think it was Victoria?” she asked and she shuddered.

I went and stood behind her and lightly set my hands on top of her shoulders. “No, I don’t. The vampire that was there was a male.” I slid my hands down her arms. “I was there very quickly after I heard the crash. I was surprised that you would be bitten and left behind.”

“Could you have sucked the venom out?” She tugged at her chin and started tapping the heel of her right foot against the floor. “I remember after James bit me, Edward sucked the venom out.”

Anger seeped in, joining her swirl of emotions. Her eyes dropped to stare at the floor, and her brows crept down.

“It never entered my mind.” I quietly answered her. She was angry, but I didn’t know why. Angry because I didn’t try to suck out the venom? Angry that it was my venom that had changed her, or for some other reason?

Esme had relocated to stand by the chair I had been sitting in. “Bella, your injuries were devastating. We were all very lucky that Jasper found you and could help you.”

Bella’s anger was increasing. She was almost vibrating with it.

“Why are you angry?” I gently squeezed her arms. I was afraid that she would be angry at me for biting her and changing her.

She darted away from me and to the left, ending up in front of the TV, and she began her quick pacing again. She dashed from the TV diagonally across the room toward the stairs, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. “I am angry. I am pissed off. The first thing Edward did after James bit me was to suck out the venom while you killed James.” Her hands flashed up, palms open. “He never wanted me. He never wanted me to be a vampire, to be like him, so I could be with him.” She flashed back toward the TV. “He never wanted me!” She gestured at herself, her hands going to her chest. Her distress and anguish grew on her beautiful face, and her eyebrows drew together.

A moment later, she was back at the foot of the stairs, leaning on the banister, her head down, shoulders trembling. Her hands shook as she gripped the shining wood. “It was only the blood,” she whispered. “It was only ever my blood. But that’s all gone now.” Her hold tightened and she crushed the gleaming rail between her hands.

“Oh, shit.” She spun around to face us, wrapping her arms around herself. “Esme, I … I didn’t mean to do that.” Her shaking hands flashed up to her face, covering her mouth. “Jasper, tell me why you bit me, why you added more venom?” she asked pleadingly.

She was feeling desperate, angry, and hurt, and my heart ached for her. I had often wondered if Edward’s fascination with her was due mainly to the call of her blood and the fact he couldn’t read her mind, and that was why I had told Bella that. I knew Rosalie had thought the same thing. Bella’s revelations must be nearly devastating to her.

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what she wanted, but I would not tell her something just because I thought she wanted to hear it. I would only ever tell Bella the truth. I didn’t know if she would accept it or reject it, accept or reject me, but I would only tell her the truth.

She looked up at me, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “Jasper, tell me. Tell me why you bit me!”

Then she blocked me from feeling her emotions. It was like having a door slammed shut in my face.
Perhaps, like Alice and Edward, I relied too heavily on my gift.

I walked tentatively toward her, my hands reaching for her. “When I first saw you, I was afraid that you were dead. I couldn’t stand the thought of you being gone. When I heard your heartbeat, I was so thankful, so grateful, that you were still alive. Before I had even realized you had been bitten, I was trying to decide if I was strong enough to bite you without draining the rest of your blood. I knew I didn’t want you to die. I knew I wanted you in my life.” I extended my hand and touched her arm. “Then I saw that you had been bitten, but I was there very soon after you crashed. I knew that the change would take even longer without enough venom, so I bit you to add more. I … I couldn’t stand the thought of you suffering any longer than you had to.”

Suddenly, I felt her emotions — relief, amazement, and gratitude rolled off her, and they just as suddenly stopped. Her hands dropped from her face and she looked up at me, her eyes still shining with those venom tears. The next instant, she was directly in front of me, her hands on either side of my face, her fingers spread, and her thumbs near my mouth. She just stared into my eyes.

The pressure increased and I could feel a tremor in her hands. I raised my hands to her arms and let mine drift up to her wrists. Something in her eyes changed. Was it sadness? Her hands tightened again, and I was caught by her — locked in place by her hands and the intensity of her gaze.

“Thank you for saving me. Thank you,” she whispered so quietly I had to strain to hear her.

The tremor in her hands increased, and the look on her face changed slightly, as if she were struggling. Her brow puckered and her lips pressed tightly together, forming a straight line across her face.

“Bella …”

Then she said … something. I thought she had said …

She snatched her hands away from my face. She was across the room in a flash, and she was out the back door, running again.

I started after her. I reached the center of the patio and inhaled, searching for her scent. She had gone to the left and around the house, heading northeast, and I raced in that direction. I didn’t know if Esme followed me.

I couldn’t understand why Bella was running again, unless …

I thought she had said, “I want you so bad.” Was she running away from me because she didn’t want to?

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Chapter End Notes

“freaky yellow eyes” from Type O Negative by quothme on FFn
I Regroup

Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by remylebeauishot and fmfg of Project Team Beta. (fmfg also writes!)

A/N: In the immortal words of the Dropkick Murphys, “They call this Christmas where I’m from.”

"I Live" is posted on FanFiction, A Different Forest, and Archive of Our Own (AO3).

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Stranger by Sookie Starchild on FFn

Chapter 21, I Regroup

Jasper’s POV

I wished I knew why she kept running. At least I had my boots on that time, and Bella was wearing her old blue Converse. Not that we needed to wear shoes, and she would probably run them right off her feet.

But, when I was a newborn, I fought the other newborns — a lot. I could only imagine that when she was close to being overwhelmed, she ran. All the sensations bombarding her mind all at one time, and add to that the hurtful and disturbing news she had been faced with … I suppose I wasn’t really that surprised that she would run instead of fight.

Was she running from those thoughts or was she running from me?

She wasn’t heading in a straight line, either. If she kept curving around toward the right and east, she might run into Edward and the rest of them heading back to the house. I definitely wanted to catch her before that could happen. Edward had not been behaving normally, and I feared what he might do. Would he try to take her? Try to convince her to stay with him? I honestly could not see her going along with that, but just the thought of him making the attempt caused my teeth to grind together as a spark of jealousy flickered to life in my chest.

Rage grew hot and red within me, my fists clenched, and a growl rumbled through my chest.

No! She’s mine!

I beat back the rage, pushed aside the jealousy, and concentrated on sending out reassurance and
comfort. Whether she wanted me or not, I hoped that it would slow her or make her want to come back to me. She knew that I wanted her. Was she running because I wanted her so much?

She was still blocking her emotions from me, and I suspected she had figured out how to do that consciously. Before, she had blocked me when her emotions had become very strong, but then they had escaped. In the living room, her actions, and the timing, convinced me she was controlling them.

I could still pick up her scent, and the fact that there weren’t any animals scurrying around, led me to believe I was on the right track and wasn’t too far behind her. I couldn’t hear her running through the pine needles and damp leaves that carpeted the ground, but I had to be getting closer.

At last, I spotted a flash of movement ahead of me through the trees.

“Bella! Stop!” Of course, calling to her would let her know that I was nearby, but what else could I have done? I saw a flicker of movement through the trees to the right, about fifty feet ahead. If that was her, and I was sure it was, I hoped I could head her off. I caught another whiff of her scent and darted for where I expected her to pass next to yet another grouping of rocks and boulders. I slowed as I neared the rocks and listened for her.

There was barely a whisper of sound, but there she was. I dove for her, catching her from the side, wrapping my arms around her. She squawked as I hit her. I twisted around so we’d end up with me on the bottom, to keep her from being shoved into the ground. We plowed into the earth, and I felt my t-shirt being torn away from my back as we slid through the rocky soil. I tried to force her legs up, but she had squirmed around so her back was to my chest, and then she kicked me in the right thigh like a fuckin’ mule.

I had to grunt at that one. She pulled her left arm loose and elbowed me in the side of my chest so hard I heard the crack.

Ribs.

That one pulled another grunt out of me.

“Jesus Christ, Isabella, why the hell are you hittin’ me?!” I was starting to get a little pissed off. I grabbed her left arm and held it perpendicular from our bodies, planning to flip us over.

“Dammit, Jasper, I want you to let me go!” She planted her feet on the ground on either side of my knees and shoved. With her newborn strength, she managed to flip both of us over my head. I yanked her left arm in, crossing it over her right that I was holding down across her body. Her hair was all over the damn place.

We landed on our knees, and I scrambled to stand before she got her feet situated again. As soon as I was standing, she curled her body, drawing up her legs, and kicked me in my left thigh. That hurt so goddamn bad my grip on her loosened, and she slithered out of my arms, falling to the bed of pine needles in front of me.

I didn’t know how the hell my left leg wasn’t broken.

My chest hit her back as I dropped to my right knee, my left leg stuck straight out behind me. She fell forward, sprawling in the leaves and pine needles. She recovered quickly and started to roll, but she turned in the wrong direction if she wanted to get away from me. She ran into my right leg, and my right arm I had braced against the ground. I grabbed both of her wrists and pinned them down on the ground, out to the sides.

Despite the pain in my left thigh, I forced it between her legs, followed quickly with my right. I
spread her legs and dropped my weight on her. The top of her head was under my chin, and I couldn’t stop myself from bending my head down and burying my nose in her hair near her ear, inhaling deeply — drawing in the scent that said home to me.

Even knowing my throat was exposed to her, and she could easily slice through it with her teeth if she wanted to, I didn’t care. I was touching her skin again, and her inviting and tempting scent was filling my nose, my lungs, invading and taking over my mind — chasing away the anger I had briefly felt. I was lost in the essence of her, and it made me disregard everything else around me.

Everything except I was exactly where I longed to be. Where I had wanted to be since she woke up and had bitten me — my body covering hers, pressing against her, breathing in her scent, my lips against her skin.

She was struggling and breathing harshly, but when she realized I was inhaling her scent while nuzzling at her ear, she became still.

“Jasper, stop,” she whispered.

When I pulled my face from her hair, I saw that her eyes were shut. I could not stop the pleading tone from creeping into my voice. “Why? Why should I stop? You know that I want you. You know that she threw me out.”

“Because … because you’re married. It’s a promise that you made to each other.” She squeezed her eyes even more tightly. “I think you both have broken that promise but you haven’t even talked to each other. You … you need to talk. If she really meant to throw you out and if you want …” She clamped her lips closed.

I still couldn’t feel her emotions, but she had a look of pain on her face. Her eyebrows were pulled together; her sensuous lips were turned down. She turned her face away from me and whispered, “You shouldn’t be cheating on Alice. You need to talk to her.”

Was I truly cheating on Alice? Yes. Technically, I was, even though Alice had removed my things from her room – in essence, throwing me out. Bella was right, of course. I knew that. But practically from the moment I had found her in her truck, I belonged to Bella, and my marriage to Alice was over. I just hadn’t realized it at the time. Since Bella woke up, it seemed I couldn’t think of anything but her. Hell, even before she woke up. When my skin came in contact with hers, when her scent overran my mind, all I wanted was to be next to her and feel her body against mine.

If she kicked me again, I might be momentarily distracted from those thoughts. Not that lying on top of her wasn’t distracting me beyond all reason.

“What did you say before you ran from the house?” I breathed across her ear.

She inhaled my scent, and the look of pain deepened across her face.

“Bella,” I whispered in her ear. I traced a path with my lips from her ear to the corner of her eye and kissed her lightly. “What did you say?”

She squeezed her eyes more tightly and tried to jerk her head away. “I … I said stop. You need to stop.”

She wasn’t going to tell me, and I did need to stop. I didn’t want to force myself on her, though I wanted her so badly; so badly every part of me ached with longing for her. It was so frustrating, but she was right. I had made a promise to Alice, and I did need to talk to her.
Would Bella even be Bella if she could so easily disregard a promise she had made? How could I do any less? How could I behave so dishonorably? Edward had said I wasn’t good enough for Bella, and I was proving him right. I was ashamed of myself and my actions.

As difficult as it was, I had to try harder. I knew she was struggling against her own instincts, and what she thought was the right thing to do, and I shouldn’t make it even more difficult for her.

I reluctantly lifted my face away from her. “Will you run again if I let you up?”

“No. No, I won’t run.”

“What are you doing to her!?!?” From the deep shadows of the trees, Edward’s voice was loud and accusing.

Oh God damn him to the eighth and ninth circles of Hell! Perfect fuckin’ timing.

I supposed it was a good thing the stupid fucker announced his presence instead of just pouncing on me from the darkness. Well, it was good for him. Had he attacked me that would have led to his immediate dismemberment.

Growling deeply, I was on my feet, pulling Bella up with me and shoving her behind me. Ignoring my sore, healing ribs, I crouched slightly, preparing for Edward’s attack, when I noticed my torn t-shirt flapping around me. I grabbed it at the neck, ripped it from my body, and threw it to the ground.

Bella was pressed up against my back, her left hand was at my left hip, and the fingers of her right hand found their way to just above my right elbow — a pose similar to earlier in the day. There was a low rumble beginning in her chest.

“Edward, stop right there,” I warned him.

He stalked closer and stopped about thirty feet in front of us. Standing rigidly, his rage and jealousy were pushing out in front of him. A flicker of lust curled around the edges of his seething emotions, and I felt my hackles rise.

“What, in God’s name, were you doing to her? Were you trying to take her on the ground like a …”

Emmett came barreling up behind him, reaching around and slapping his hand down over Edward’s mouth as his other arm wrapped around Edward’s chest. “Edward, you better shut up.”

Bella snarled, and her blazing hot fury pulsed outward. She jumped to the right and leapt toward Edward. I stepped forward to reach for her leg and, unbelievably, my left thigh cramped, and I missed her. I lurched forward, but caught myself before I hit the ground.

What the fuck!??!

Carlisle flew from between the trees, and Rosalie, a look of panic on her face, was barely a step behind him. Carlisle darted in front of Edward and Emmett, catching Bella in his arms, as Rosalie slammed into Edward and Emmett, knocking them to the ground.

Bella’s momentum sent Carlisle stumbling backwards, and they thudded onto the ground and bounced. He flung his arms around her, capturing her arms between their chests, and he flipped over, trapping her against the ground with his body. She snarled again, her teeth barely an inch from his face.

All rational thought fled as black, murderous rage filled my head. In that moment, all my mind could
comprehend was that another male had my mate pinned to the ground, and he needed to die. I roared.

Fear. Jagged fear and terror arced through the air around me. I smelled it, I felt it. It shot out from all of them, except for my mate. She didn’t fear me. Her anger sizzled and snapped through the air, and I heard her snarl again at the male who was holding her down.

The words he was shouting made no sense to me as I charged him, my hands forming claws to rip him to shreds. His eyes flew open in fear, and he flipped over onto his back, releasing my mate from his hold.

As she twirled away from him, two vampires rammed me from the left, knocking me off my feet. I hit the ground and spun away. As I gained my feet, my mate was on me, wrapping herself around me, and pushing me back. One of her arms circled my neck, her hand going to my hair. The other was under my right arm and across my back. Then her legs were around my waist, gripping me tightly. I inhaled her scent and clutched her to me, pressing her head into the right side of my neck. I stepped back and blasted the entire area with lassitude and lethargy. Every vampire in front of us ceased their movement and collapsed bonelessly to the ground.

I held my mate to me for many long minutes, my nose in her hair, breathing in her enticing and reassuring scent. I didn’t know how long it was, but her firm touch, her soothing scent, and her soft voice eventually began to break through my rage.

She pulled back to look into my eyes. “Jasper, it’s okay.” Her right hand moved to my face and her thumb brushed across my lips. “It’s okay.”

I kissed her thumb and breathed in her comforting scent. I turned my nose into her hair and inhaled deeply again. I kissed her temple and then realized I needed to taste her skin. I lightly licked her temple, drawing in her rich, spicy scent and taste. I pressed my lips to her temple again.

My mate knew when I needed her. She knew when I needed to touch her, feel her, smell her.

“Don’t hurt them. Please, don’t hurt them.”

I stroked her hair and pressed my lips to her forehead as I observed the immobilized vampires.

“Did he hurt you?” I tilted her head back to look into her brilliant red eyes. “Did. He. Hurt. You?”

“No. He didn’t hurt me.” She gently stroked my face. “He did not hurt me. Please don’t hurt them.”

I saw the anxiety in her eyes, and I felt her concern and worry for them. I would do anything for her, but I would not promise not to hurt them — not kill them — until after I had made sure she had not been harmed.

Since the barrage of emotions I was sending out would keep them disabled and helpless on the ground, I knew I wouldn’t have to worry about them while I examined my mate.

“Let me see.” As much as I wanted — needed — to feel her in my arms, keep her close to my body, I also needed to look at her. My hands slid to her waist. I pulled her from me and set her on the ground.

I bent forward to touch my lips to her forehead and breathe in her scent, and my hands moved to cup her beautiful face. They glided down over the silky skin of her neck and over her shoulders, brushing away the pine needles. As I skimmed over her arms to her hands, I leaned in to kiss her. I needed to feel her skin. I needed to taste her. I gently kissed her, my tongue brushing lightly across her lips, and
I kissed her again.

“Jasper, I’m okay. I’m right here.”

“I need …” I dropped to my knees in front of her, my hands going to her waist and following the curves over her hips and down the outside of her legs. She appeared all right to me. I crushed her to me, working my hands under the hem of her shirt so that I could feel her skin, burying my face in her stomach.

“You’re all right?” I asked again as I continued to breathe in her scent.

“Yes. I’m all right.”

I was so relieved, and it struck me that “relieved” was such an inadequate word for what I was feeling. My mate, my Bella, was unharmed. She was here, in my arms, and he had not hurt her.

Her hands were on my head, her fingers combing steadily through my hair and flowing gently down my neck and over my shoulders. “Jasper, I’m fine. I told you I was fine. Are you okay?”

I melted into her touch as her fingers stroked and caressed my head. Her hands came back to my face, and she urged me to look up at her.

“Jasper, look at me. Are you okay?”

“Yes. They didn’t hurt you.” I had no other words to better express how I felt. There were no words satisfactory enough to explain the complete relief, the immense pleasure — the utter rightness — of my mate, safe and well, and in my arms.

“No, they didn’t. What did you do to them? Why aren’t they getting up?”

It seemed the rest of my brain was finally catching up. When he had Bella on the ground, I had lost all rational thought and only wanted to protect my mate — tear him away from her and then rip him apart.

I turned her slightly to look past her at the vampires lying on the ground. As I stood, I ran my hands carefully up the sides of her body then pulled her into my chest, her face at my heart, my body molding to hers. She had no idea how her touch mollified me, and eased my frantic mind. I think it was only her coming to me, and putting her arms around me, that had brought me back from that murderous rage and stopped me from destroying all of them. Even though she had pushed me away before, she seemed to know instinctively what she needed to do to bring me back and stop me from killing them all.

“I knocked them out. They won’t get up until I let them.”

“Is it hurting them?” She burrowed into me, her arms going around my waist.

“No. They are as close to unconscious as vampires can be. They aren’t feeling any physical pain.” I kissed the top of her head and decided that I could finally tell her I wouldn’t destroy them without lying. “I won’t hurt them.”

I wouldn’t kill them, but only because she had not been harmed.

She sighed in relief and squeezed my waist. Her hands slid up to my chest. “Then let them go. Let them up. I know Edward was being an asshole, but Emmett was only trying to stop him. Then Carlisle was only trying to stop me from getting to Edward and ripping something else off him.” She
pulled away from me, her hands sliding down to my stomach. She looked up at me with small smile on her face.

My hands cupped her beautiful face, and I bent to softly kiss her lips, and she let me. But then she took a small step back and placed her fingers over my mouth.

“Your eyes are still black. You need to regroup or something. You need to let them go so they can get up.” Her hand slid back down to the center of my chest, resting over my heart. “You know Esme and Alice only attacked you to keep you from hurting Carlisle?”

“Yes, I realize that.”

“And you know that Rosalie only ran in to knock Emmett and Edward out of your way, right?”

“Yes.” I stopped the lethargy and lassitude I was holding over them. “I’ll let them go.”

Bella took another step back away from me, but she kept her hand on my left arm. She moved to stand beside me, and stood quietly as we waited for the others to start moving.

The first to recover was Emmett.

“What the fuck?” He sat up, his hands going to the sides of his head. He spotted Rosalie lying on the ground, and in a flash, he was at her side as she began to stir. He lifted her into his arms and his face was in her neck, inhaling loudly as he stood up. “Rose. Rose, are you okay?”

Her hand went to her forehead. She shook her head. “Em!” Her hand flew to his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Babe, I’m fine. Jasper didn’t kill us.”

“Jasper!” she snarled. “Emmett, let me down so I can kick his ass!”

“No, ya don’t, Babe.” He kissed her cheek with a loud smacking sound. “Well, you know she’s all right if she’s pissed off.” Emmett squeezed her to his chest.

Bella raised her hand, palm out, to stop Rose. “Not a good idea, Rose. I just got him calmed down. Don’t mess it up.”

Carlisle was on his feet and darting toward Esme to help her up from the ground. They hugged each other tightly and whispered in each other’s ears. They both extended hands to Alice as she slowly rose up from the ground.

Edward was the last to recover, and he moved deliberately and stiffly, as if he were feeling all of his one hundred years. He glanced around at everyone and then looked toward Bella and me. A sense of profound sadness, despair, and loss drifted sluggishly from him. He ran his fingers through his hair, dislodging twigs and leaves, as he took in a shuddering breath.

“Bella,” he began hesitantly. He sighed heavily. “Bella, I think we need to thank you. I believe you just saved all our lives.” His darkened eyes dropped to the ground, and some embarrassment joined his disconsolate cocktail of emotions. “My behavior has been … erroneously proprietary and inappropriate, and I promise you that I will try to … contain it.”

I wasn’t the only one that felt shock at what Edward had just confessed. Rosalie and Emmett gawked at him with wide eyes, and even Esme and Carlisle took a moment before they snapped their jaws shut. Alice, standing behind Carlisle, just blinked and cocked her head to stare at him.
Bella gaped at him wide-eyed, mouth hanging open.

I stood silently and watched them all. I noticed Edward didn’t promise me anything, but I really wouldn’t expect him to. Evidently, he realized I could have killed them all and wouldn’t have thought twice about it. And he was right; the only thing that saved them was Bella.

“Er … thank you, uh, Edward.” Bella snatched her hand from my arm and clasped her fingers together nervously. Then she crossed her arms over her chest, and she dropped her head to stare at the ground. “I … uh … I’ll try not to bite you anymore.” She glanced up at him. “Or rip off anything else. But I don’t think I can make any promises about that right now. I …”

“I know, Bella.” He looked at her with yearning in his eyes. His gaze flicked to me and there was a burst of resentment from him. His eyes dropped to study the ground again. “I remember what it was like to be a newborn. I should have … I should’ve kept that in mind.”

Fear still clouded the air, but it was beginning to dissipate. Rosalie was still angry, but I knew she would get over it in time to find another reason to kick my ass. She could just add it to the list.

Carlisle turned toward us. “Jasper, how are you feeling?”

“I’m good,” I said quietly.

“Did something happen at the house?” He looked to Esme and back to Bella and me. “I thought you would be there.”

Esme took in a small, nervous breath. “Jasper was telling Bella about the accident and how she had been bitten by another vampire before he found her.”

Bella stepped toward me and took hold of my left arm above my elbow again. Her light touch again soothed me, causing a sense of peace to spread through me. I wanted to wrap her in my arms, but I felt she wouldn’t be receptive to it. I believed she felt the need to touch me also, but wouldn’t because of her concern over Alice’s feelings.

“Then Jasper told me he bit me to add more venom and … and … I …” She glanced around at everyone. I felt her uneasiness, and as her eyes passed over Edward, disillusionment and then anger surged. She quickly suppressed it all. Edward had hurt her so many times, and he was continuing to cause her pain.

When I had told her that I was the one who had bitten her, I knew she had been surprised, relieved, and grateful but then she had blocked her emotions from me. I didn’t know what had caused her to become upset and run again. It had felt almost like she had been hiding something.

Edward’s sense of loss, then his jealousy, with a touch of regret, flowed outward and I pushed back against it. He had apologized to her, but I still didn’t trust him. He was coming to see just how much he had truly lost.

Esme stepped away from Carlisle. “I’m not sure why, but Bella became upset and ran from the house.”

“It was everything, and the thought of another vampire being there. I don’t remember anyone.” Bella’s hand shook on my arm. “And Edward …” She trailed off and squeezed her eyes shut, a jolt of pain crossing her features. She took a deep breath as she gradually reopened her eyes. “Besides that, I know there’s more.”

I put my hand over hers and tried to send her my encouragement and the peace that I felt when she
touched me.

“Stop it, Jasper.” She glanced up at me and frowned. She blocked her emotions from me. I knew she had gained some control over that. I wished she hadn’t.

She looked back toward Carlisle. “There’s more isn’t there? They all think I’m dead, right? Everyone thinks I’m dead.” She snatched her hand away from me and crossed her arms, gripping her own upper arms. “Everybody. I’m dead to them.” She began to pace.

“There was someone … I know there was someone important to me.” She stopped in front of me and searched my eyes. “Blond hair … a woman,” she whispered.

“Yes. I tried to remind you of people and things in your life, while you were burning.” I stepped toward her, reaching out to her. “I don’t know everything, but I told you what I could.”

She began to tremble. “Blond hair …” Her face crumpled with her distress. “Renee! My mother!” She began to pace again more quickly, her arms flying out away from her body. “I’ll never see her again. And … Charlie! What about Charlie?” She suddenly stopped, her whole body shaking. “My parents. I’ll never see them again. They think I’m dead!” Her hands flashed back to her arms and she tightly clenched the fabric of the sleeves, ripping holes in them.

“Oh goddammit! I liked that shirt!” She tore away the sleeves and threw them to the ground. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her arms rigidly at her sides.

She was struggling, trying to rein in her out-of-control emotions, and I longed to help her.

“She, I can help you.” I stepped toward her.

She spun away from me. “No! I can do it!” She came to an abrupt stop a couple yards from Carlisle and Esme, and she trembled as she fought to control her emotions.

Alice had been standing behind Carlisle, and she peeked around his side. She was uneasy and a bit apprehensive, but she wasn’t afraid.

Bella spun to face me again. “What else? What do they think happened to me?”

I raised my hand toward her again, reaching out to her. “They all think you are dead and a giant bear dragged you away from the crash scene.”

“Giant bear? What giant bear?” She began to pace again, flashing from right to left. She stopped in front of me again, closer that time, studying my eyes. “The werewolves are the giant bears. That’s what everyone thinks they are.”

“Yes.” I knew she needed the comfort and security I could give to her, and I needed to go to her, but she kept fighting it.

She turned away from me again. “Carlisle. What else? Is there something else?”

“Yes, there is. A memorial has been scheduled for you on Thursday at ten o’clock. That’s two days from now.” Carlisle looked at her with such sadness in his eyes.

All of them were feeling sadness and a bit of pity for her. We had all been through some form of this, except for Alice. We all had had to face the thought that our human families would go on, following custom and tradition, and would have had some sort of memorial. They would have tried to find closure at funerals where there would be no one to say good bye to and no body to lay to rest.
It was good to have that information, despite the sadness in the air and the obvious pain it was causing Bella. That would be the day that I would take her away from Forks. The entire town would probably turn out to pay their respects to the Police Chief’s daughter. The whole town and the surrounding areas would be distracted that day. It would be the best time to slip away.

Bella stood staring at Carlisle. Her shoulders began to shake, and she darted to me, placing a hand on my chest. “Did you know about this?”

“No, I didn’t. I’ve been with you.” I put my right hand over hers. “I see you struggling. Let me help you.”

“No!” She pulled her hand away and stepped back. “What else? I see it in your eyes, Jasper. What else?”

I inhaled a deep breath, to take in her scent and to steady myself, wishing she would allow me to comfort her. “I will be taking you away from here. Emmett and Rose will be going with us. I’ve decided we will leave on Thursday.”

I heard various gasps and all eyes turned to me. I felt their surprise and then I felt a flare of possessiveness from Edward. At a sharp glance and a snarl from me, he quickly buried it. Emmett and Rosalie turned to look at each other and nodded. I knew they understood why we would be leaving that day. Alice was sending out some sadness, and Esme and Carlisle were resigned. They all knew that Bella couldn’t stay here.

“Leave? Why do we have to leave?” she wailed. She spun away from me, her hands jerking to the sides of her head. She gripped two handfuls of her hair and bent over at the waist. “Leave? Leave Forks? This is my home!”

She dropped to her hands and knees, threw her head back, and screamed, drawing her fists up. Her entire body was shaking. Her anguish and despair burst from her, and struck me with such a heavy blow I stumbled back away from her, my right hand moving to clutch at my chest. Such pain! It poured from her. Too much had happened, and it was all crashing down on her.

I saw the others move to step toward her, and I waved them off. Bella needed me, but I knew she would try to run again.

“I live here. This is my home!” she howled. In a blur, she was on her feet and running.

I leapt and tackled her, once again wrapping my arms and legs around her and forcing her head down. We rolled across the forest floor, coming to a stop not far from the rest of them. She struggled and fought against me, trying to get away.

I forced us upright and held her securely against me. “Bella, don’t run. It’ll be okay. I’m right here.”

“No! No!” she cried out. “No!”

“I can help you. Let me help you.” I turned her so her arms were against my chest. “I’m right here. I won’t leave you.”

“Is that it, or is there something else?” Her voice cracked as she forced her head up to look at me, venom tears making her black eyes shine.

“That’s it, Bella,” I said quietly to her.

Her face crumpled again with her heartache. “Forks is my home! I can’t leave.” She tried to elbow
me again, but I held her too tightly. “I … I live here! Charlie is here!”

I saw Edward take a step toward us, and Emmett grabbed his arm to stop him. “We’ve been doing this all day, Edward. He’ll calm her down.”

I tried to send reassurance and peace to Bella, but it wasn’t getting through. She was blocking me again.

“Let me help you, Bella.” I spoke quietly into her ear. “I can help you.”

“No!” She shoved against my chest. “I can’t leave! Charlie’s here. He needs me!”

“That’s why we can’t stay here. You can’t see Charlie. You could kill him.”

“No!” she cried and then she screamed again. She managed to get one leg free and kicked against the ground.

As we started to roll over, I straightened out her arms when she was face down to the ground. I forced my legs between hers and dropped my weight on her. “Bella, listen to me. We can’t stay. We need to get you away from here so no one sees you — so you don’t hurt anyone.”

She started growling at me and tried to head butt me. I pushed her head down with mine. “Shhhhhh, Bella. I’m right here. I will help you.” I repeated words I had spoken to her while she had been burning with my venom. Her emotions crashed into me again, and I reached out to capture that dark wave. Her despair, anguish, and deep, deep grief funneled into me, and I caught it all and contained it. I replaced it with my reassurance, my comfort, and my understanding. I filled her with my respect and admiration, and the serenity I felt when her skin touched mine.

After several long minutes, her breaths slowly calmed and her struggles ceased. I whispered into her ear. “Bella, we can’t stay here. We’re too close to Forks and all the humans. I know you don’t want to hurt any of them.”

Her body shook with her tearless sobs. “I don’t want to hurt them. Some of them are my friends. I wouldn’t want anyone’s family to …” She sobbed again.

“I know. I know you don’t want to hurt them. So we can’t stay here. You need to be away from them.” I kissed her temple. “I can take care of you, but it’s good to have help. That’s why Rose and Emmett are coming with us. You won’t be alone. You won’t be by yourself. I will not leave you.”

She sniffled and relaxed further, shifting her head. I lifted mine from hers, but kept my lips near her ear, breathing in her scent. “I know this is a lot for you to take in, but it will be all right. I’ll take care of you. I will help you. I’m right here. I won’t leave you.”

“Yes,” she whispered quietly, “as bad as it was, you stayed with me.” She inhaled deeply and slowly let the breath back out. “But Charlie, Angela, and Ben, and … and Jacob … I won’t ever see them again.”

“No, you won’t. You can’t. Seeing you would bring danger to them and to us.”

Her brow furrowed. “There’s some kind of treaty with Jake? With the wolves?”

I was amazed again at how much she seemed to remember. “Yes, we have a treaty with Jacob Black and the wolves. If they see you, they will assume one of us bit you. My biting you broke the treaty. They’d come after us.”
She whimpered. “I don’t want Jacob to be hurt. Please don’t hurt him, Jasper,” she pleaded.

More jealousy, bitterness, and a flash of resentment flared from Edward. I glanced over at him and saw that, fortunately, Emmett still had a tight grip on his arm.

I lightly kissed Bella’s smooth cheek. “I don’t want to hurt Jacob Black,” I said as I narrowed my eyes in warning at Edward.

“Thank you, Jasper,” she whispered. “I don’t want any of the wolves to be hurt.”

“I know you don’t. That’s why we need to leave.”

“You have a plan? You all always have a plan, right?”

I smiled at her. “Yes,” I whispered back to her. “Emmett, Rosalie, and I are supposed to be away at school anyway. We will not be missed. Edward and Alice should stay here and finish the school year.” I glared at Edward. “Any other details will have to be worked out when I can talk with the others, but there really isn’t much more than that.”

Her eyes had lost their wild look, and she was breathing evenly. “Where are we going?”

“I have a place that is rather isolated. It’s not really that far from here. It’ll be our new home for a while.”

“Where is it? Do you have a house?” Her voice was a breathy whisper.

“At this time, I don’t want to say where it is. I’m not sure that the other vampire that bit you left the area.” As her emotions began to register fear, I reinforced the tranquility and peace that I felt being in contact with her.

“Don’t be afraid. I will protect you. If he should happen to be around, I don’t want him to hear where we are going. No one here knows where it is. Once we are on the road and away from Forks, I’ll tell you. And yes, I have a house.”

“Is it a house like this one here?”

“No. It’s not nearly as big as this one.”

She nodded slightly. “Can you let me up now? I won’t run. I think I probably need another bath.”

I had to chuckle at her. “I’ll let you up. Do you want me to keep influencing you?”

“Yes. For now.” She smiled at me.

I released her wrists and slid my hands up her arms to feel her silky skin. I just could not resist, even though we had an audience.

I rose slowly, and when I was on my feet, I extended my hand to her. She took it and allowed me to help her up. She gave me a small smile.

“Thank you for helping me, Jasper, but you can stop now. I should feel all that so I can work it out. Deal with it. You calming me is like somebody taking drugs or drinking to numb their pain. It doesn’t really make it go away.”

“I know. You’re right. It will all hurt, but …” I smiled encouragingly back at her. “If you need me, just say so.” I stopped sending her those peaceful emotions and waited.
It took a moment, but her face crumpled again in grief, and she brought her hands to her face and sobbed. It tore at me to see her in pain, and I touched her arm.

“Don’t, Jasper. I need … I need to do this.” She inhaled a shuddering breath. “I won’t ever be able to see any of them again.” She took a step back and wiped her eyes. Then she stared at her hands. “All this, and I can’t even fuckin’ cry!”

Esme stepped forward, opening her arms to Bella.

“Oh, Esme!” Bella ran to her and threw her arms around her.

“I know how it is, Bella. Sometimes I think it would be a great release to be able to shed tears.” Esme stroked Bella’s head and wrapped her arm around her shoulders. Bella sobbed into her chest, her shoulders heaving.

Letting Bella cry, Esme stood quietly, slowly running her hand over Bella’s head and down her back while murmuring, “I know, Bella. I know.”


“We all have had to leave someone behind.” Esme’s arms tightened around Bella, and her eyes closed for a moment. “Our family here has been a blessing. They have all been a great comfort to me, but what has helped me the most is knowing I have Carlisle. He has been beside me through some very difficult times.”

Bella’s head turned a bit in Esme’s arms, and her shining eyes shifted to look back at me. Not for the first time, I wished I could know what she was feeling. Unconsciously, my hand reached for her, and I ached to have her in my arms — be the one to comfort her.

Her eyes closed and she pressed her face into Esme’s shoulder and sobbed again.

Esme stroked Bella’s hair. “You know we will help you.”

After several minutes, Bella pulled back from her and sniffed.

Esme lightly cupped Bella’s cheek with her hand. “Did you want to go back to the house and get another shower?”

Bella sniffed again, even though there was no need, and nodded her head. “Can Rose come with us?”

“Of course she can, dear. We’ll both help you.”

Rosalie came forward, and Esme, keeping an arm around Bella’s shoulders, turned and started walking in the direction of the house.

She looked over her shoulder at us. “We’ll see all of you a little later, okay?”

We all nodded at her and watched them walk slowly away. I didn’t want to be away from Bella while she was feeling such heartache and loss, but Esme and Rosalie would be with her. They certainly understood grief and loss.

I did need to talk to Alice, and I needed to try and firm up my plans with Emmett and Carlisle.

When Bella, Esme, and Rose were far enough away, I turned toward Alice.
“Jasper, we need to talk.”

She had beaten me to it.

“Yeah, we do.”
Jasper's POV

Carlisle, Emmett, and Edward trailed slowly after Bella, Esme, and Rosalie, letting the women move ahead of them through the trees. I could feel her emotions again, and Bella's grief and sadness at the loss of her human friends, family, and home coiled over and around me. Her sorrowful sobs, and Esme's and Rosalie's soft murmurs of condolence and sympathy, made me long to go to her, hold her in my arms, and reassure her that things would get better. I couldn't, though. I thought she needed time with Esme and Rosalie. Not that the rest of us couldn't sympathize. We had all felt the pain of loss, but Esme and Rosalie would certainly have a different perspective. Esme bore the grief of losing a child that was — a child whose life was cut tragically short. Rosalie still mourned the loss of future children and a life that would never be.

An errant thought ran through my mind — maybe losing most of your memories during the fiery agony of the transformation from human to vampire wasn't such a bad thing.

I sighed. Bella was like a child whose life was cut short. She was only eighteen years old and hadn't experienced much of life yet. Now that particular life would never be. What sorts of things, large or small, would she have accomplished if she had never met us?

Bella would never know what sort of life or relationship she could have had with her father. They loved each other but still hadn't known each other well. What could that relationship have been? What could it have grown into?

Would there, someday, have been grandchildren for Chief Swan to take fishing or play ball with in the backyard?

The thought of Bella being with someone else, anyone else — even if she were human and had a
human husband and children — sent a stabbing ache of yearning through me, and my hand flashed to my chest. I was selfish enough that I was glad she had been turned into a vampire. I was glad she had come into my life — that I had found her. I couldn't imagine a life without her. I knew I would have no life if it didn't have Bella in it.

If it took a thousand years, I would be there for her and help her to live her life. Not just exist — live the life she could have, even though she was thrust into it. Help her accomplish whatever she thought she wanted to. No matter what it might turn out to be.

I knew I could not live without her. To try and begin some kind of life with her, if she would have me, I needed to speak with Alice and get things settled between us.

I was feeling even more anxious as Bella moved farther away from me, with Edward following not too far behind, but I was sure Emmett and Rosalie would guard her for me. I had felt acceptance from Esme and Carlisle also and thought they would help to make sure Edward didn't try anything untoward.

If he did, it would be a suicide mission on his part.

Then there was Bella herself. I knew the anger she felt toward Edward. I knew the pain he had inflicted on her, and I honestly didn't think he would be able to get too close to her even if he wanted to. If he stupidly tried, he wasn't able to read her mind so didn't have the advantage of knowing where she would strike. Because of her, he had gained quite a few new scars in less than twenty-four hours. More than he had in his whole life. Physical and, I was sure, emotional ones, though I hadn't paid any attention to what he had been feeling until he directed it at me.

On the one hand, I didn't care what he felt and didn't give a shit how he would be suffering at losing her. And he had lost her. He had done more than enough to screw that up. Maybe he was finally coming to realize that. However, there was a very small part of me that felt a bit of sympathy for him, but only because I hadn't actually won her. I belonged to her, but she wasn't quite mine. She hadn't accepted me yet, and I wasn't one hundred percent sure that she would.

I supposed I was just insecure enough that I didn't want him anywhere near her. He had managed to capture her attention before, and I couldn't stand the thought of his making an attempt at it again. She had always been so forgiving. Could she get past all the pain he had caused her and forgive him? I didn't think I wanted her to. She was my mate. I was hers.

Would she come to me?

Edward was the only other unmated male around, and Bella was perfect, besides the fact she kicked the shit out of me and kept trying to beat my ass. Honestly, who would want a mate who would let you walk all over them?

Who wouldn't want her?

That's what scared the hell out of me. Any male would be ecstatic to claim her.

*Bella was mine! She was mine! Nobody could have her but me!*

I scrubbed at my face with my free hand. Didn't *that* make me sound like a fuckin' possessive, knuckle-dragging, caveman. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

I was confident Rosalie would run interference. In fact, I was counting on her to keep Edward away from Bella. How she did that was up to her. Maybe she would punch him again.
Bella had been hit with a lot of devastating information and needed to come to terms with it. She wouldn't be able to see her parents or her human friends again, or her not-so-human friends. We would be leaving her home. Primarily, to help ensure she didn't attack any of the humans in the area — most especially her father or friends.

If she were to attack any of the humans in the area, that might be difficult to hide from the Quileute wolves, and they would know there was another vampire in the area. They would begin hunting her. Would they recognize her scent? We didn't need that added complication.

Staging a death and moving out of town wasn't anything new for the rest of us, but it was all world-shattering for her.

If the vampire that bit her first was still in the area, I definitely wanted to get her away from him. It still boggled my mind that she would be bitten and abandoned.

Who the hell would do that? But thank God he didn't take her.

My most important reason for taking her away was purely selfish and completely self-serving. I wanted my mate to myself. I didn't want to share her with anyone. I hadn't even initially thought to take anyone with us because I wanted her all to myself. I just wanted to take her away from all of them, and I sure hadn't been thinking at the time that she was my mate.

Even if she refused to accept me as her mate, I still wanted to be near her. I had to be near her. The ever-present ache twinged again, and I pressed my hand to the center of my chest.

I didn't even want to split my time with her with Rosalie and Emmett, though it would be foolish to try and move her by myself, unless I was carrying her and could keep my hands on her. But we wouldn't be running to my place. I thought it was too far to run with a newborn. There would be too many opportunities for things to go badly, too many chances for her to get away from me. With three of us to keep an eye on her, and confine her within an enclosed vehicle, I was hopeful the trip would be uneventful. Driving was the quickest way to get there.

Man plans, God laughs.

Once we got to the house, I thought it would be isolated enough, and at a high enough elevation, that no stray humans would stumble upon it, but you never knew. It was better to have Rosalie and Emmett with us. I thought I should give Peter and Charlotte a call and see if they felt up to handling another newborn. I hadn't spoken to them in a long time and didn't know what they had been doing lately, but there was room at the house for both of them, and it wasn't that far from town. They'd be able to stick to their natural diet and find enough scumbags and dirtballs to eat. Every town was plagued with them. Maybe they weren't busy and wouldn't mind coming out. Besides, I wanted Bella to meet them. They were my family, my first step away from Maria and that hell.

I continued watching long after I couldn't see Bella anymore. My eyes stayed focused on where they had disappeared into the darkness and the trees until I couldn't even hear them anymore. Surprisingly, Alice stood patiently and waited.

Again, I hadn't been thinking of her at all — only Bella and myself.

I turned to face Alice, taking my hand from my chest. She exuded sadness, and her golden eyes shined with unshed venom tears. Belatedly, my heart went out to her. Just in the last three days, so many things had changed. In the fifteen hours since Bella had awakened, all our lives had been altered — forever. Even if Bella rejected me, I knew I could never go back to Alice. It wouldn't be fair to Alice because my mind would always be on Bella, and I was sure Alice knew it.
I would not be happy without Bella. I belonged to her, whether she wanted me or not. I had found my mate, now Alice would be free to find hers. Free to find her true mate, someone who would appreciate her more than I ever had, and she wouldn't be chained down to someone she was afraid of. Someone whose scars she couldn't bear to look at.

Even then, her eyes would drift away from me before she forced them back. I would have to get another shirt to put on as soon as possible.

"Alice, I am sorry you have been hurt. When I pulled Bella out of that truck, my only intent was to try and save her, not end up causing pain to you, or anyone else. I had no idea Bella was my mate."

She blinked back her tears and glanced up at me before returning her eyes to the ground.

"I know you didn't, Jasper. I had always assumed that Bella was Edward's mate, just like everyone else. He was always so … preoccupied with her. I had only ever gotten tiny flashes of her future, and the main one was that she would be one of us one day." She picked at the scarf she had tied around her neck and took a deep breath. "I hadn't ever seen who would change her." She quickly glanced up at me and trained her eyes on the ground again. "I'm so glad you found her and saved her. She's been my first friend and I …"

She nervously shifted from foot to foot and tugged at her silk blouse. Then she clasped her hands together and sighed. Her eyes were still focused on the ground. "Um, I've been doing a lot of thinking and … I've called Mr. Jenks and told him to draw up divorce papers for us — for Jasper and Alice Cullen. No contest, no-fault divorce. No splitting of property or any of that. What's mine is mine, what's yours is yours. But if you'd rather have an annulment?" Her questioning golden eyes glanced up at me again.

I was astounded. I hadn't really given it much thought at all, but I hadn't thought it would be that easy. It hadn't entered my mind that Alice might call Jenks. I guess I would have thought she might fight it. But why? Why would she want to stay married to me after the way I'd been treating her? Knowing I wanted somebody else?

"Uh, no. That's fine. I wanted to tell you that I wanted a divorce. Staying married wouldn't be right with the way …"

I cut myself off before I finished that sentence with "… the way I feel about Bella." I felt Alice's sadness increase and realized I shouldn't have said even that much. She drew in a shuddering breath and sighed again. I took a step toward her, extending my hand. I hoped she would take it in hers.

She glanced up at me, then at my hand, and reached forward tentatively. At last her fingers touched mine.

"Jasper, I want to tell you that I'm glad I found you and we had fifty-eight years together. I hope …"

Her voice trailed off in a whisper.

I drew her hand into mine. What did you say to someone you had spent a third of your life with? What words did you use to say goodbye? If Peter and Charlotte had been my first step away from that hell I had lived in for so long, then Alice was the second step on that journey.

"Alice, finding you was one of the best things that ever happened to me. You saved my life." I gave her tiny hand a gentle squeeze. "I didn't know how much longer I could have gone on with that depression, and then I saw you in that diner." I sent her my feelings of gratefulness. "Alice, you helped me so much."
Besides, if I hadn't found Alice, and she hadn't brought us to the Cullens, I wouldn't have ever found Bella.

A small smile appeared on her face as she looked up at me and blinked away those tears that would never fall. "I'm glad we found each other. Because of you, we found a family with the Cullens. I think finding them did help you. It helped us both. It's been good for both of us."

I gripped her hand with both of mine. "Perhaps now you'll be able to find your real mate. Decide to find him and I'm sure you will."

She softly sighed. "Let's head back to the house, okay?" She took a step forward and pulled on my hands. "My visions haven't been coming in so well. Carlisle thinks it may be Bella's shield blocking them."

I held her hand in mine and walked slowly beside her. I just nodded at what she had said. I didn't know what I could have said to that.

"You know, Edward hasn't been able to hear your thoughts," she continued as she stepped lightly through the bed of pine needles. "Before, he couldn't hear you when you were touching Bella. Now he can't hear you at all."

Again, I wasn't sure what to say to that, but I appreciated the information. I had to admit, it was a goddamned relief, too. I hadn't known if he could hear me when I wasn't touching Bella. It made me wonder how he had heard me when I was carrying Bella back to the house from the crash. Most likely because I was desperate to help her at the time and mentally shouting.

We walked in silence together, her hand in mine, listening to the night creatures chirp and buzz, until we neared the patio at the back of the house. Emmett was outside, waiting for us.

Alice turned to me before we reached the patio and reached for my other hand. "The paperwork will be delivered here in a few days. When you get to where you're going, give me an address, and I'll send it along to you."

I raised her hands and bent to gently kiss the back of each one. "Thank you, Alice."

She was still sad, but she looked directly into my eyes, and I thought I saw a spark of hope there. "I just want you to be happy. I want everyone to be happy." She squeezed my hands before releasing them and turned to walk quickly into the house. I watched her make her way through the living room, past Edward, Esme, and Carlisle, and then to the stairs.

When I had met her, I had felt hope for the first time in decades. She had given me that gift — the gift of a better life. She helped me fight off the depression that had plagued me for so many years. It had been its own form of hell even after I'd left the hell that was Maria's army.

My old friends, Peter and Charlotte, had taken a great risk when they had returned to try and talk me into leaving that shit. They had saved me first. They had shown me a life that wasn't full of hate, destruction, and fear. I had stayed with them for a few years and then took off on my own. In search of what, I hadn't known, though the depression I felt after feeding from humans still hounded me. Then I met Alice. I hadn't imagined at the time that I would ever leave her. It hadn't ever occurred to me that I would want to. But she was giving me an even greater gift. She was letting me go so I could follow my next path, find my next life, whatever it might be. I hoped it included Bella, and she would share that new life with me. I knew part of it would include her, but would she choose to stay with me?
I sighed and walked toward Emmett.

"Brought you a shirt," he said as he tossed it toward me. Then he gestured toward the Adirondack chairs. "Take a load off."

"Thanks." He had brought me a plain, black v-neck shirt. "It's not a long-sleeved one."

Emmett waved a hand at me. "Jazz, I never gave a shit about your scars, and you know Bella doesn't mind them. I knew you wore long sleeves all the time because of Alice. I don't think you need to worry about that anymore."

I just nodded at him. After I slipped the shirt over my head, I asked him, "Where's Bella?"

He dropped into one of the chairs and pointed up toward the right side of the house. "She's in her room. She's doing a Patrick Swayze movie marathon."

I sat heavily on the white Adirondack chair next to him and propped my arms on my knees. "What?"

"Uh, yeah. She had another shower, then, while Rosie was helping her get dressed, she said she remembered her mother had had a thing for Patrick Swayze and asked if we had any of his movies." He propped his legs on the wooden footstool, crossed his legs at his ankles, and clasped his hands behind his head. "Edward even dug them all out."

At hearing his name, I stiffened and glared into the living room at Edward. A touch of jealousy swirled around my head.


"What about North and South?"

"Sorry, dude. She sent those discs back downstairs. We'll take 'em with us when we leave. Maybe you can talk her into watching all ninety-seven hours of it when we get to your place."

"I already have a copy of North and South there." I looked up at the windows to her room on the second floor. I could see the light from the TV flickering through the curtains, but I couldn't hear the sound. "She's watching Roadhouse?"

Emmett shrugged his shoulders. "She said she liked the bar singer and Swayze was a badass. Apparently her dad liked that one, too." He brought his hands from behind his head and settled them on his stomach, his elbows resting on the arms of the chair. "You know she used to like watching the Jackie Chan movies with me. She likes action movies." He shrugged his shoulders again. "I think she's mourning her folks. Can't you feel her?"

"No. She's blocking me again. I think she can do it on purpose." I adjusted the chair to lean back farther, mimicking Emmett's pose. "How has she been?"

"Cryin', but Rose and Esme already had her upstairs when Carlisle, Edward, and I got back here, so I haven't seen her. I think she may have broken a towel bar in her bathroom. She might have crushed the door knob, too." He shook his head and smiled. "It's so funny to hear her cussing, especially in front of Esme."

"It is funny because she's another one that wouldn't have said 'shit' if she had a mouthful. Except, I don't want to laugh at her just yet; she might start kicking me again. She kicks like a goddamn mule." I rubbed my thigh where she had kicked me earlier. I sighed again. "How has everyone been?"
From Bella's room, we heard a loud "Goddammit!"

I started to get up and Emmett wrapped his huge hand around my arm. "It's fine. She probably just broke something else. No big deal."

Rosalie flashed down the stairs and went to the cabinet beneath the flat screen. She rummaged around in a drawer for a few seconds, lifted out two remotes, studied them, and darted back up the stairs.

"See? Just a remote. We've got a million of 'em. Now sit back down." He pushed against my arm. "And everyone's okay. Edward's been really, really quiet. He hasn't even been up to his room, I don't think. He asked Esme if she would bring him some clothes. I think the smell of Bella's blood is still there. Might take a few days to air it out. Or maybe he just doesn't want to go in there. I don't know." He looked over toward me. I could feel his concern. "How's things with you?"

I leaned back on the chair, my left hand going to my chest. I felt a tugging, a pull, and I thought it was because of Bella. We hadn't actually been away from each other for more than a few minutes since I had found her on Saturday. Had it only been three days? Not even three whole days. So much had happened.

"I'm all right. Alice said she'd give me a divorce. She should have the papers in a few days. She said she'd mail them to me."

Emmett looked over at me, his concern and surprise flowing out from him. "That's good, right? That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but it's still ... sad. We've been together a long time." I rubbed at my chest. "I never meant to hurt her."

"I know you didn't." Emmett thumped my right arm with his fist. "But you and Bella are mates. I should have realized it sooner. Everyone should have, considering the way you were acting. I think Rose figured it out right away, but she's the brains of our operation." He dropped his hands on his stomach again. "I guess we just didn't want to see it. We all thought she was Edward's mate. Look, don't start growling at me. Quit being an asshole."

I cut off the growl. I hadn't even noticed I was growling. "Look, Emmett, I have to go see her."

"No, you don't. Just stay right there. She needs some time to do whatever it is she's doing up there. You can see the windows just fine. You know where she is."

Rosalie came down the stairs, and she stopped by Esme to speak to her, then she made her way out to the patio.

"Alice is up in her room, and Bella is watching movies in her room." Rosalie cocked her head at me, a look of curiosity on her face. "I told Bella to call me or Esme when the movie was finished so one of us could put in the next one. She's broken a couple of the remotes." She sat on the Adirondack on Emmett's other side. "Jasper, did Emmett tell you what she was doing?"

"Yeah, mourning her parents by watching Patrick Swayze movies." I shut my eyes and rubbed the ache in my chest again. "Seems a little odd, but what else can she do? It's not like she can go see her folks. I'm surprised she remembered something like that."

"She seems to remember a lot of things. I think you really helped her with that, Jazz," Rosalie said softly. "Does your chest hurt?"
I stopped rubbing my chest and looked over at Rosalie, feeling almost like I had been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. "Yes. Sort of. It just started a little while ago."

"That's the mating pull. Bella feels it, too. I saw her pushing against her chest." A small smile raised the edges of Rosalie's lips as she looked at me. "Well, she had a t-shirt of yours wadded up in a ball, and she was pushing that against her chest. That was after she had been sniffing it. She was trying to be sneaky."

"She … she what?" I sat up and stared at Rosalie in amazement.

"When we first got back to the house, she ran right upstairs. When Esme and I went into her room, she wasn't there. We found her in your study just looking around. I think she was trying to get your scent."

"Then I have to go see her." I started to get up and Emmett grabbed my arm again.

"I said no. Just sit here and wait for her." Emmett yanked on my arm. "She'll let you know if she wants to see you."

I flopped back onto the wooden chair and squeezed my eyes shut. I was starting to get frustrated. I wanted to see Bella. I'd been away from her long enough.

"Somebody needs to be with her. That other fuckin' vampire could still be around here somewhere and …"

"Jasper, you're starting to be an asshole again." Emmett sat up and leaned toward me. "Now pay attention to what I'm saying. Esme, Carlisle, and Edward are right there in the house. And quit fuckin' growlin' every time somebody says Edward's name." He pointed one of his huge fingers at my face before he eased himself back to lounge again.

"We can see the windows just fine. There isn't any other way into that room, unless somebody busts through one of the windows on the front of the house, and we would hear that, right?" Emmett stared at me, eyes wide, like I was a complete idiot.

I sat up again. "But I want to tell her Alice is giving me a divorce."

"She is?" Rose sat up and turned to face me, a baffled look on her face. "You know, I think that's the most mature and selfless thing Alice has ever done."

She looked toward the house, and I could feel the beginnings of respect blossom around her. "Wow. Will wonders never cease." She blinked a few times, shook her head, and looked back toward me. "Bella has enough to deal with at the moment. Let her handle it her way. She doesn't need you adding to it right now."

I huffed and crossed my arms over my chest. "So, what about my shirt?"

"Yeah," Emmett said, turning toward Rosalie. "What about the t-shirt?"

Rosalie smiled and flipped a strand of hair over her shoulder. "That was actually sort of cute. She wouldn't leave your study. Esme and I could see she was struggling. It was like she wanted to be in there, but didn't want to be in there. One of your t-shirts was lying on your armchair, so Esme took it and handed it to her. She grabbed it and brought it right to her face. She took a deep sniff, too."

Rosalie chuckled lightly. "Then she looked embarrassed and tried to hand it back to Esme, but Esme told her to hang onto it if it made her feel better. She could give it back to you later. I hope you don't mind?"
"Uh … no."

That was … that was encouraging. She wanted to smell me? That was great! Every time I turned around, she was doing something to surprise me.

"Uh, what shirt was it?"

"The long-sleeved Forks High gym shirt." Rosalie smiled at me, batting her eyelashes.

I had been wearing that one about a week ago and hadn't bothered to throw it in the wash.

"Uh, then what did she do?" I was curious as hell. Did she miss me? Did she want to see me, too?

Both Rosalie and Emmett smirked at me. I rolled my eyes at them.

"She showered. She crushed the door knob and broke the towel bar, but that's really no big deal." Rosalie fluttered her fingers in dismissal. "Then she told us about her mother having this crush on Patrick Swayze, and she used to watch his movies all the time. She asked if we had any of his movies, and Esme went downstairs to get them. After she brought them up, she went back downstairs. I set up the DVD player so Bella could watch them. She broke a couple of the remotes. Well, she actually crushed them into black dust."

"No. What did she do with my shirt?" I was getting frustrated again.

Rosalie laughed at me. "Jazz, aren't you cute?" She was feeling very mischievous.

Oh, goddammit.

I knew she was just teasing me, but Emmett was practically giggling at me. Both of them were having too much fun at my expense. Again.

"Rose …" I growled at her. I couldn't help myself. I had to know what Bella did with my shirt.

"Well …" She drew out the word and glanced down at a golden lock of hair draped over her shoulder. She began combing her fingers through it and finally looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "Once I convinced her to let me put the disc in, she took your shirt, tucked it into her chest, and curled up on the bed to watch the movie."

I jumped up off the chair. "Then I should go see her."

Emmett lunged at me, clamping his huge ape arms around me, and we fell over the damn Adirondack footstool, landing on the patio with a loud crack. At least we didn't break the patio or the footstool.

"Emmett! What the fuck?"

"Jazz, you're starting to be a real pain in my ass." Emmett started to untangle his legs from mine, which wasn't easy because we were kind of caught in the footstool.

He pushed up from the patio then planted his hand in the middle of my chest. "I already told you. Leave her be for now. She'll let you know if she wants to see you."

"Well, boys, I see you're having a nice talk out here." Carlisle smiled down at us, bringing his hands together. "Yes, Jasper, I know you want to see her, but let her have a bit of … quiet time, I guess you could say." He looked over his left shoulder up toward the windows of Bella's room. "She needs to process it all. She seems to have found a way to deal with not being able to see her parents again. It's
a little unusual, but if it helps her …"

From Bella's room we all heard her yell, "Yeah! Bar fight! Get the fucker!"

We all had to laugh at that, including Esme, who was still inside. Believe it or not, even Edward cracked a smile at hearing Bella yell at the TV.

Carlisle turned back toward us, a bemused look on his face. "She's become rather … ah … expressive."

Emmett laughed again. "Yeah. You should have heard her out in the woods. Woulda curled your hair."

"Quite. Well then." Carlisle turned back toward us, smiling. "I thought I'd better go do my morning rounds at the hospital — they start at six. But I'll be back around noon, barring any emergencies. Everyone here will be fine, right?" He nodded hopefully at each of us and his eyes settled on me.

"Yes, Carlisle, I'll be fine, as soon as Emmett lets me up off the ground." I glared at Emmett.

"Oh, yeah." He offered me a hand to help me up, and I brushed myself off as I stood up.

"As I said, I'll be back around noon. If I hear anything, I'll be sure and let you know. If anyone needs anything, just give me a call." Carlisle gave us a little wave and turned to go back into the house. Esme stood from the couch to give him a hug, and he kissed her on the cheek before he headed for the front door.

I huffed at Emmett again, and reached to take hold of the chair I'd been sitting in. I carried it over to the side of the patio directly opposite Bella's windows and plunked it down. Then I dropped into it, propping my elbow on the arm and planting my chin on my fist.

Emmett gave me a look that clearly said "Behave yourself." I rolled my eyes at him again.

Rosalie stood from her chair and went to Emmett, taking his hand.

"You'll stay there?" she asked me.

"Yes."

"Good. Emmett and I need a bit of quiet time ourselves, and we should probably pack a few things. When Bella wants a new movie, I'll get it for her, okay?"

"Yes."

Rosalie turned to face me. "Jasper, quit sulking. You'll see her soon enough."

"I am not sulking." My hand went back to the ache in my chest. I thought it was getting worse.

Rosalie raised that eyebrow at me. "Oh, really? What would you call it?"

"I am … guarding her. That other …"

Emmett snorted and shook his head at me. "You're being such a little bitch. I think I know what your problem is, but I'll tell you about it later." He winked at me. "Besides, if you need something to do, you could go look at the truck I got for you. It's in the garage. The keys are in it. C'mon, Rose." He tugged her hand and they went into the house. Leaving me alone to wallow in my misery and wonder what the hell he was talking about.
Alice found Jasper in 1948. I'm assuming Alice and Jasper were married in 1951 (in June, wouldn't you think?) as it says in The Twilight Saga: The Official Illustrated Guide that they joined the Cullens in 1950 and were married soon after, at Carlisle's insistence. He wouldn't have liked that living-in-sin thing.
Chapter 23, I Learn

Jasper's POV

I had been sitting out on the patio for hours, waiting to see Bella. Waiting for her to call for me. Willing her to call me, but she hadn't. I hadn't moved. I hadn't even gone to look at the truck Emmett had picked up for me. I was sure it was fine.

The sky had lightened with the dawn soon after Carlisle left for the hospital. The clouds had thinned a bit, and I watched the few visible stars fade as the sky became brighter. Some of the clouds were touched with a bit of pink and others had a pale orange glow. As the sun rose higher, more clouds moved in and they all took on that familiar, soft pearly grey. At least it hadn't rained.

Periodically, Bella had called Rosalie to change out the DVDs, and after a while, Esme had come outside and sat silently with me for a few minutes before she softly patted my arm and went to go putter around in one of her flower beds. She had cut a few flowers, put them in a basket, and carried them back into the house.

I had mostly ignored Esme's quiet presence, and had been so wrapped up in my own sullen misery that it never occurred to me that maybe she had come outside to make herself available to talk if I wanted to.

I started in surprise at my own self-centered, self-absorbed, insensitive, inconsiderate, thoughtless, and just god-fuckin'-damned stupid and ignorant behavior.

I was a dick. A complete dick. How could I have ignored her like that? The woman had been nothing but kind to me, quietly offering her assistance, helping to keep Bella calm out in the woods, washing Bella's clothes, getting a room ready for her, helping her take a bath and getting her dressed, and …
And on top of that, had I felt anything but acceptance from her? In fact, hadn't she been pleased? Hadn't she been proud of me? Hadn't she even been supportive? Not once had I felt any resentment or bitterness concerning Edward from her. Some fear, yes, but never resentment.

What sort of word would Edward use? Cad. I was an utter cad. Esme did not deserve that sort of shitty treatment from me.

I was a dick. I would have to do something to make it up to her.

That twinge of remorseful shame twisted into a throbbing ache, and I realized the ache was coming from my chest. That brought my mind back around to Bella and how badly I wanted to see her. Why hadn't she called for me yet?

I fretted. Outwardly, it would have looked like I was dozing, but inside? My nerves were jangling, my teeth were on edge, and the pain in my chest certainly had not gone away. Periodically, it would spasm and I would have described it as feeling like a toothache, except I didn't remember if I'd ever had a toothache when I was human. Probably not, since I still had all my teeth.

Over and over in my mind I wondered if Bella would turn me away. I wanted her so badly. I wanted to go see her. I needed to be near her, but stayed away, primarily because I didn't want Emmett tackling me again — I'd gone through enough shirts. And, truth be told, I didn't want her to reject me again; at least not yet. She did need time to mourn the loss of her parents. I kept glancing up at the windows to her room, hoping she would open the curtains, but she never did.

I sighed and thought about everything that had happened since she had awakened. The memory of when she had attacked Alice and Edward, and then had my arms pinned down while she bit me, wove its way through my head. It caused my cock to harden, and I silently groaned.

Admitting defeat, I finally adjusted my position by crossing my legs, but only to try and camouflage my growing dick.

Closing my eyes, I recalled when she had pulled her teeth from my shoulder and had roared, "Mine!"

A bright, hot burst of sensuous pleasure shot through me, and I groaned again.

She had taken off, crashing through the windows. Of course, I had chased after and caught her. The way she had looked at me! Not with fear, but with admiration when she had seen the scars on my arms. Her eyes had continued over my body and paused when she reached my groin.

The ache in my chest sharpened, feeling like a slice from a knife, and my right hand went to press against it. I would have sworn the pain was coming from my still heart. Rosalie had called it "the mating pull." I had never experienced it before. I had heard others speak of it, but no one had ever claimed that it hurt. At the most, all anyone had ever said was that it was uncomfortable.

Maybe I was being a little bitch like Emmett said.

Glancing to the left through the sliding glass doors leading into the living room, I could see Edward slumped on the couch. I was immensely relieved that he wasn't able to read my mind.

Perhaps I merely needed to replace thoughts of the pain with more pleasant ones. Like when Bella ripped my shirt off. Her lips were on my neck, her hands on my body, and I pushed her up against that tree.

I blew out a breath.
Or after she had hunted for the first time and there was blood smeared across her face and her full lips.

I didn't think my dick could get any harder, but it was straining against my jeans — practically throbbing — and it was becoming rather uncomfortable. I knew if I continued with my current train of thought, I'd probably cum in my pants again.

Oh goddamn, it had felt so good when she …

If I shot my load, there would be no way I'd be able to sit still. I'd probably crush the fuckin' chair. I needed to think about something else.

Edward was still in the living room, watching TV or something. Why the hell hadn't he gone to school? School had been closed the day before because of Memorial Day, but it would have been open again today.

Okay. That was stupid. Of course, he wouldn't have gone to school. His "girlfriend" had been killed in a tragic crash, and he was in mourning. Of course Alice wouldn't have gone either since Bella had been her "best friend."

I would imagine half the students hadn't shown up. There was probably a shit-ton of flowers and teddy bears marking the spot on the highway where Bella had crashed.

I should have gotten my laptop, but it was up in my study. If I went up there, I wouldn't be able to resist going to Bella's room. The door to her room was only a few feet away from mine.

She hadn't asked for me yet.

Would she ever? What would I do if she didn't?

That disturbing thought had the same effect as being doused with a bucket of cold water. The little soldier was at ease again, and the timing couldn't have been better because Emmett was on his way outside.

He grabbed one of the Adirondack chairs and dragged it over. Then he went back, picked up a couple of the footstools, and placed one in front of me and the other in front of his chair. He dropped down on the seat, lifted his legs to the stool, and clasped his hands over his belly.

"How ya doin'?"

My simmering frustration and loneliness boiled over. "I'm doing sucky, that's how I'm doing. I'm goddamn pissed off, is how I'm doing. How the fuck do you think I'm doing?"

Emmett squeezed his eyes shut, grimaced, and jerked his head away from me as if he were in pain. "Jesus Christ! Cap that shit or you're gonna make me fuckin' cry. Keep your voice down so Edward doesn't hear you."

I reined it all in, and heaved a big sigh. "What the hell is she doing up there?" I hissed at him.

"I guess she watched the movies and she wants to watch Dirty Dancing again. Rose and Esme are going to watch it with her. Hell, she even invited Alice to come watch it."

"She did?" To say I was surprised would have been a slight understatement. "Is Alice going to do it? What if Bella gets pissed off at her again? I should go …"
Emmett's huge hand dropped down on my left arm. "Lookie here, bro, if Bella wants her to come watch the movie then that means she's trying to make nice with her or some shit. Since you aren't in the room, she'll most likely be okay. Both of them should be okay. Besides, Rose and Esme are in there. And, no. Nobody's told Bella Alice is divorcing you. Rose and Esme thought that was something you should tell her."

Oh. Worrying about that hadn't even occurred to me yet.

"Hell, chicks really dig that movie, so let 'em have their fun. They'll be dancing with Swayze in no time. Bella even asked Rose if she had any 80's music." Emmett rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You know she's got a ton of it on her Ipod. It'll be Dance Party USA up there."

"Dancing with Swayze? Bella never wanted to dance before."

Faint giggles and laughter wafted down from Bella's room and hearing them made me smile. I was glad they were all getting along, though I could feel Alice was still a bit apprehensive. I couldn't feel Bella's emotions, but Rosalie and Esme were fairly happy. Emmett smiled up at Bella's windows. "She was a klutzy human then, which was always funny as hell. But ya gotta admit, she's become pretty damn graceful. It's weird. Besides, you know how Rose loves to dance."

An image of Bella dancing twirled into my head. Me, dancing with Bella, perhaps in a smoky, dimly lit bar: her arms around me, my arms pulling her body against mine, our hips pressed together …

Emmett shifted uncomfortably in his chair and blew out a gusty sigh. "And on that note … quit it."

I squeezed my eyes shut, thumped my head against the back of the chair, and clamped down on the lustful thoughts. I just couldn't help it. I couldn't control it; I wanted her so fucking bad.

Emmett took hold of my arm and whispered, "Hey, watch Edward."

Edward was still sitting on the couch.

*He couldn't find something to do?*

"What? And why are you holding my arm?"

"Ahhhh. See? Did you see him cock his head?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"He can't hear you, and I think if I'm touching you, he can't hear me either." His head snapped around toward me. "He's looking out here now, right?"

I looked directly at Emmett but could still see Edward beyond him. "Yes. He is puzzled now. Maybe you're right."

"I'm pretty damn sure I'm right. I've been watching him and this just confirms it." Emmett's smile grew across his face, and he squeezed my arm. "I don't get it, but when the girls are touching Bella, it seems like he can still hear them. But, I'm touching you, and it looks like he can't hear me." A wide grin spread across his face. "Watch him."

Emmett squeezed his eyes shut, his eyebrows drew together and he even started gritting his teeth.

"Don't strain so hard," I told him. "You're gonna bust a vessel."
After a moment, he reopened them and grinned at me. "Did the look on Edward's face change?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I was screaming at him that he's Mr. Eddie Pissy-pants, panty-waist, pansy ass, pubescent, poo-poo head."

I had to laugh. "What?"

"And he's a fucktard." Emmett started to laugh. "You know he hates it when I call him names like that. That just proves he can't hear me."

We heard windows being opened and looked up toward Bella's room. They'd pulled back the curtains and Esme was pushing open the windows. We could hear music coming from the room. It was "Maniac" of all things. I had to roll my eyes at that. It wasn't *that* bad, but …

Emmett saw the look on my face and just grinned at me. "Told ya. Dance Party USA."

Esme leaned out of the window. "Jasper, would you mind if I opened the window in your room? Since it's not raining, I thought I'd open the windows again and get some fresh air in the house."

I smiled up at her. "Please do, Esme. Go right ahead."

As she darted around upstairs opening windows, Edward finally got his ass off the couch. Maybe he was helping her. As long as he stayed away from Bella, I didn't give a shit what he did.

I could hear Rosalie and Bella laughing, and I smiled again. Alice's tentative laugh joined in. It felt good to hear them.

Emmett shook my arm. "Okay, now I'm going to tell you what I think your problem is, since everyone seems to be distracted at the moment and Edward can't hear me. Well, what your *other* problem is."

I frowned at him. "What the hell are you talking about? My only problem is I want to see Bella and you all keep giving me shit about it."

He grinned at me again, mischief twinkling in his golden eyes. "You need some sexual healing."

I just stared at him, speechless.

"Huh?"

"Ya know, in keeping with the 80's music theme. Marvin Gaye? *Sexual Healing*? 'Darlin', you're so great, I can't wait for you to operate."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the song. What are you talkin' about?" I was getting frustrated again.

He shook his head and sighed. "You need to get laid."

I was taken aback momentarily. But, goddamn right I needed to get laid. I needed to get laid so goddamn bad my balls were probably fuckin' purple, but the only woman I wanted wasn't currently available. She may not ever *be* available, and the thought of *that* sent another dull ache through my groin, and the pain in my chest was no longer just a paring knife sticking me, it was a cleaver trying to hack its way out.

I grimaced and my right hand went back to my chest. "What the fuck, Emmett?"
"Okay, it's like this. You're feeling the mating pull and it keeps getting worse, right?"

"Yeah, it does, but I expect it'd be better if I could just fuckin' see her." I glared at him.

"Calm down. I'm mated, so I know how it feels. Rosie wasn't real receptive right at first, because of … well, because of … uh, you know how Carlisle found her." Emmett looked a little uncomfortable. We all knew how Rosalie's fiancé and his friends had abused and assaulted her, then left her for dead in the street. We tried not to bring it up. It distressed her to remember it.

"Yes, and I'm glad she killed all those fuckin' pieces of shit that hurt her."

"Me, too, because if she hadn't, I'd have gone lookin' for 'em. But anyway, she wasn't real receptive to me right at first, but I could tell she wanted to be near me, just like I wanted to be near her. When she finally, you know, cozied up to me, that mating pull eased up. Though I feel it mostly when I'm away from her, it doesn't hurt."

"So what are you saying, asshole?" My frustration was growing. I wanted him to get to the point.

"Once you claim her, your ass will calm down, and that pain in your chest won't be such a pain."

"As simple as that?"

"Yeah, as simple as that. You know how Rose and I like to travel. We've met quite a few vamps all over the world, and sometimes the talk turns to sex, and mates, and stuff like that. Apparently, with a 'normal' mating, the two interested parties spot each other, make the googly eyes, and spend the next few days or so gettin' it on, as Marvin Gaye also said." Then he looked off to the side, a puzzled expression on his face. "Though we've never run across anybody that had turned someone who ended up being their mate."

I stared at him again, incredulous. "But I already told her I wanted her. She knows that. She's already bitten me. Twice, for Christ's sake. And then we … then we, uh …"

"Yeah, I know what you did. I was there, remember? Don't start fuckin' growlin' at me." He gave my arm a squeeze that almost hurt. "Just telling her isn't 'claiming' her. A bite is only part of it. Some vamps don't bite each other at all. You need to have sex with her. Or she needs to let you, but you can't rush these things. Not that I'm all that thrilled about telling some jerk-off to have sex with my little sister …"

I couldn't believe he was talking about this shit, and he called me a jerk-off. I was going to punch him right in the face.

He snorted at me. "Put your fist down. I'm not telling you this for you. My motivations are purely selfish. If you calm your ass down, and quit projecting that lust and shit all over the place, it'll be a whole lot easier on the rest of us." He tipped his head toward me and his eyebrows crept up his forehead. "Capiche?"

I nodded at him.

"Look, how else are you going to learn this shit? Nobody's written a damn book on it. You were with Alice for years, and we all thought you were mated. I wouldn't think in the Vampire Wars you guys talked much about it, right?"

"No. If any of the newborns looked like they were mated to each other, Maria had them both killed. After I was there for a while, I killed them — except for Peter and Charlotte. Mates were a liability," I told him quietly.
"Dude, that's harsh, and it had to suck. But I guess I can see why Maria would do that. A vampire would protect his or her mate before anybody else." Emmett leaned back against the chair with a thoughtful look on his face, but he kept his hand on my arm. "That had to really suck." He shook his head and blinked a few times. "Well, what I'm saying is — and let me use my Professor McCarty voice — since you two haven't claimed each other fully and completely by consuming, your instincts are urging you to do so. Though, why vamps would have such a strong urge to mate is beyond me, especially since we can't actually breed." He sighed. "Just another one of those enhanced and exaggerated human traits, I guess." He stared off into space for a moment and turned back to me.

"Your possessiveness has been a little over the top." He raised his eyebrows at me again. "I thought you were going to kill Carlisle back there before you knocked all our asses out, and you know how he feels about her. Now, if another male were to come around here, and he looked at Bella like she was a hot little number, I'd bet you'd kill him. If you were up in Bella's room with them, Bella would probably go after Alice again, since she's the unmated female and would be seen as a threat."

"I'm having a hard time not killing Edward, and I kinda like him. Well, I used to," I said, bringing my free hand up to brush my hair away from my face.

"Uh, yes, she does."

"Did she smell that good as a human?"

"No. I mean, she smelled pretty good but …"

"Is she the prettiest woman you've ever seen?" Emmett smiled.

I smiled back at him. "Yeah, she is. She's better than pretty, she's beautiful and …"

"Was she ever that pretty to you when she was human?"

"Well, no, actually. It wasn't that she wasn't attractive as a human, it's just that …"

"That's the mating thing," Emmett explained. "Like Carlisle said, it's probably the pheromones, but all that shit together makes her irresistible to you." He grinned at me. "But there is one catch — if you ever run across your singer, then he, or she, will smell even better than Bella. That would be the only thing that would ever smell better than her." He squeezed my arm again. "Ya know the best part? You smell and look better to her than anyone else does. I'm kinda surprised she's been able to resist you, you've been such a fucking charming asshole, smashing her face down in the dirt an' all."

I just gaped at him. I couldn't even get pissed off at him for calling me an asshole. Emmett, for all intents and purposes, just gave me the vamp version of "the birds and the bees" talk. I was twice his age and he gave me "the talk." Stupefied, I blinked at him again.

"Informative as all hell, ain't I?" He smirked at me. "Did you get this real strong urge to bite her?" At my nod, he continued. "Then that's what ya gotta do. You gotta jump her bones."

"It's not like I don't fuckin' want to," I mumbled into my chest.

"Gee, I couldn't tell."
"You fuckin' assholes keep interruptin' every time we …"

"Here probably isn't a good idea — too many Cullens around. And you're being a total jerk."

I was a little pissed off by then. "Shut the fuck up. It's not as simple as you're makin' it out to be. She won't come near me because I'm married. She doesn't know yet that Alice and I are gettin' divorced. Then she was just … I mean, there's Ed-tard … uh, she kinda has to get over him."

"I think she's over him, dude."

I sighed in exasperation at him. "Then she's … she's, uh …"

"Yeah, yeah." He waved his other hand at me. "It's not like we all don't know about her being a virgin." He rolled his eyes again.

"And she's a newborn, and I don't want to take advantage of her." Emmett raised his eyebrows at me. "Well, not really. Besides that, she keeps pushin' me away."

"Are you trying to talk yourself out of it?" He sighed. "Jazz, she's your mate. She wants you. You want her. It is so fucking obvious. Besides, she's the only one you haven't scared the absolute shit out of over the last few days. As a matter of fact …" He cocked his head toward me, raising an eyebrow. "She's probably the only vamp you've ever run across that isn't afraid of you, right?"

I thought about that for a moment. Every vampire I had ever met had been initially afraid of me after seeing my scars. Bella certainly hadn't felt fear at the sight of my scars. "That's true. Even Carlisle was afraid of me when I first met him."

"I thought so. Bella wasn't afraid of any of us when she was human, but she was kind of a strange human. Well, she had been afraid of James and those other ones." He stared off into space for a moment then looked back to me. "But, being a vamp, with the instincts and all, she should have been afraid of you. But it sure doesn't look like your scars bother her in the least. In fact, she's anything but afraid of them." He waggled his eyebrows at me. "You'll just have to wear her down. Use some of that southern boy charm on her. When you get upset, your accent is stronger and she likes that. Lights her right up."

"It does?" Why hadn't I noticed that?

"Yeah, it does. Are you stupid? I told you to quit fuckin' growlin' at me."

I stopped growling at him.

"To be serious for a moment, I don't really think you have to worry about her being a virgin either. She's your mate. You won't do anything to hurt her. You guys will figure it out."

I began to feel just a little uncomfortable. I'd been around a long time, and there had been a lot of women; vampires and human. I nervously brushed my hair back from my face again. "Well, uh, I've had …"

"Ya don't say?" Emmett smirked at me. "I forget how friggin' old you are sometimes. In that case, you don't have anything to worry about. Besides, the lust you keep projecting is pretty damn hard to take. I'm surprised Edward hasn't imploded."

It had been pretty damn difficult for me to deal with, too.

"But," Emmett said in a cautious voice. "She might not be ready yet. Like I said, it took Rosie a
While to really warm up to me, and you know what a great guy I am." He grinned at me, showing most of his teeth. "Bella hasn't been a vamp very long, and there's been a lot of shit goin' on. She remembers a lot of her human life, too, it seems like." He paused and glanced up toward Bella's windows. "Some of that crap was right damn traumatic." He gave himself a little shake. "Working your charms on her while we're here probably isn't a good idea. I don't know about Alice, but Edward might get a little weird, and I don't think you want him going all drama queen and shit and interrupting you. There's that and the divorce, since that's really important to her."

"Are we through with this little heart-to-heart?" I dropped my head down toward my chest, sighed, and looked up at him. "Uh, thanks. Are you going to let go of my arm now?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess so." He winked at me.

He cocked his head like he was listening to something. "Do you hear a car coming down the driveway?"

I listened then sat up straight when I heard the unmistakable sounds of gravel crunching under tires. A feeling of cold unease spread through me. "Yes. It's too early for Carlisle to be back yet."


Oh shit.
Chapter 24, I Need

Jasper's POV

An unanticipated vehicle coming into our driveway, driven by a human, was very rare. We did place orders online, so there were the occasional deliveries, but no one was expecting a delivery, and it was certainly not a good thing with a newborn vampire in the house.

If the human got out of the vehicle, Bella would catch his scent, especially since all the windows in the house were open. Emmett and I jumped out of the Adirondack chairs.

"Emmett — upstairs. Guard Bella's room for now," I directed him. "I'll jump up to the window and get her." I turned to Edward. "Edward — the door …"

"Yes, I'll get the door. It's a floral delivery." His eyes squeezed shut in anguish for a moment, and he dashed back into the house. Emmett was right behind him.

I jumped up to Bella's window, startling the ladies.

Bella and Esme were to the left, near the audio and video equipment, and I stopped and just stared at Bella. Her light ivory skin, and the rich, reddish-brown color of her hair were striking against the deep charcoal grey of the long-sleeved shirt she was wearing.

It had only been a few hours since I had seen her, but my heart clenched at the sight of her, and the pain of the mating pull just ceased — like it had never even been there. I breathed a small sigh of relief.

I shook my head to try and clear it and blinked. I needed to stay focused. Bella would not want to hurt the human so I needed to get her away as quickly as possible.
Alice and Rosalie were to the right, on the far side of the bed. Alice's eyes snapped to Bella and grew wide with fear. Her hands flew to her mouth, and she started to back away.

Bella's eyes widened as she looked at me. A small breathy "oh" escaped her soft pink lips. She was holding my Forks High t-shirt and brought it to her chest with both hands, her fingers curling into the fabric. She took a hesitant step toward me then her eyes narrowed. In a blur, she spun toward Alice and growled. Alice squeaked and scurried to hide behind Rosalie.

Esme turned off the CD player. "What is it?"

"Car coming in the driveway. Edward says it's a floral delivery. Bella …" I raised my hands, opening my arms to her.

Bella took another step toward Alice and growled again, but she tossed my t-shirt onto the bed and jumped toward me. I caught her in my arms and held her firmly to my chest. "It's a human. We should leave."

"A human?" Bella gasped. Fear and dread flashed out from her and she buried her face in my chest. Startled that I could feel her emotions again, I stroked her hair. "It'll be okay. Esme, come with us." I stooped down a bit and picked Bella up, urging her to wrap her legs around my waist. "Emmett's right outside this door. Rose, Alice — stay and guard the human."

I turned, holding Bella tightly, trapping her arms against my chest, and jumped back out the floor-to-ceiling window. I tucked her head into the crook of my neck, but it was already too late. The scent of the human male had drifted through the open windows of the house, and I could smell him as I dropped toward the patio.

I landed with a heavy thud, and Bella began to snarl. She twisted in my arms and tried to push away from my chest. Esme dropped lightly beside me and we shared a tense look. I saw fright in her eyes. We took off for the forest. I needed to get as much distance between Bella and the human as possible.

Bella's emotions were chaotic, shooting out from her like a volley of arrows. Thirst, hunger, craving, extreme need, desire, and back to intense thirst. I deflected them all the best I could so I wouldn't be overcome and join her in attacking the human.

She tried to pull away from me again, and when she couldn't, she growled and her rage battered against me. Her hands clenched in my shirt, her fingers tearing holes through the material. She jerked her right arm free, wrapped it around my back, and clawed the back of my t-shirt from me.

Her eyes were coal black, and as she snarled, venom ran from her mouth. She was twisting more frantically and started kicking the backs of my legs, causing me to stumble.

Esme was to my right. "Jasper! Can you hold her down on the ground?"

"I can try." I saw a bit of a depression in the ground ahead, surrounded by firs, and I jerked my head toward it. Esme nodded.

Skidding to a stop at the center of the depression, I shouted over Bella's growls and snarls, "Grab her feet. I'm gonna fall on her."

Esme managed to capture Bella's left foot. I grabbed her left arm that was still caught against my chest, and I dropped us to the ground, seizing her flailing right wrist and shoving my knees between her legs, forcing them apart. I pushed her head down into the pine needles with my jaw and tried to
hold her, but she was fighting against me more desperately than she ever had before. I began to worry that I wouldn't be able to hold her down.

Her rage and thirst were reeling around us, and then frustration joined the storm. She bucked and fought against me and managed to draw up her right knee, kicking against the ground. Though she was actually stronger than me, because we were spreadeagled, and Esme was bearing down on her left leg, she couldn't flip us.

Her growls and snarls grew more desperate, and I was astonished she hadn't bitten me yet.

I tried to send her serenity and peace, and though it didn't appear as though she was blocking me, it wasn't getting through to her. I concentrated on lethargy and exhaustion and sent those, as I blew a breath across her face. After a moment, her snarls quieted but she kept up her struggles.

"Bella, I'm right here. I'll help you."

I knew she needed me, and I did everything I could to send her my encouragement along with the lethargy I was already sending. I reinforced the encouragement with the admiration I felt for her. As her struggles slowed, I added the pride I had in her, knowing she was fighting so hard against her thirst.

"I'm right here," I whispered to her. "I know you're fighting it, and I will help you."

Abruptly, her twisting and bucking stopped and she was still, except for the heaving of her chest with her rapid breaths. I lifted my head from hers, and she turned her head to her right. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

She should have been immobilized, but I would take what I could get.

"It's okay, Darlin'. It'll be all right." I breathed across her face and she inhaled deeply. Having my scent helped to calm her before, so I was hoping it would work again. "We'll just lay here like this for a little while. It'll be okay."

She was still panting as her rage and extreme thirst began to dissipate. Then her eyes flew open. They were still a dull black.

"I'll keep talking to you, Bella, if you think it helps."

Her eyes flashed to mine, and I felt a tiny spark of gratitude through her anger, and then her emotions twisted back to hunger and thirst. Fear and panic swiftly followed. Her eyes took on a wild look and she began to struggle again.

"Can you speak?" She bared her teeth as a snarl ripped through her throat. "Maybe not. I'll keep talking. Don't be afraid, Bella. I'm right here. I will help you. Esme is here, too, and she will help you."

She jerked her face away from me, searching frantically for Esme.

"Esme." I looked back over my shoulder at her and gestured with my head for her to come to me.

Esme rose quickly from Bella's leg and squatted down about five feet to my right and spoke calmly to Bella. "It'll be all right, Bella. We got you away from the man. He'll be okay."

"Bella." I whispered her name again to keep her attention. "Don't be afraid, Bella." I kissed her tense jaw. "It'll be okay. It's all right."
Her breathing began to slow and her eyes closed. "That … that was a human? That's what they smell like?"

"Yes. That was a human male," I whispered in her ear.

Her emotions quickly fluctuated back and forth from fear and remorse to thirst and anger. Her head began to thrash back and forth. She finally settled on her remorse and guilt, and her brow furrowed as her chest heaved with her breaths.

"That was a man. I could have killed him. I would have killed him," she cried. "He might have a wife, kids and …"

"That's why we brought you out here, Bella." Esme moved a bit closer. "We know you don't really want to hurt any humans."

"I … I don't. But I want him so bad! I need him!" she wailed. Her thirst and hunger spiked again and she struggled to fight it as she tried to jerk her arms away from me. "He smelled so good. I just wanted … I wanted to … I never smelled anything so good before, except …" Her eyes snapped to mine and then she squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head away again. Pain and longing burst from her, then her guilt flared brightly. "He smelled so … I could have just … ARRRRGH!"

"I can help you." I moved my lips closer to her ear. "I can help calm you. Let me help you."

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "No! No, I can do this! I … I can fight it!" She clenched her teeth and her eyes snapped shut again. "Do they all smell that good? How do you stand it?" A growl vibrated through her chest. "How could you stand to have me around when I was human? Oh my God, it must have been so hard for you all! How could you stand me?"

Esme crept closer and placed her hand on Bella's forehead and smoothed her hair away from her face. "Yes, most of them smell that good, but we've had a lot of practice, Bella. When we met you, knowing you was more important to us than your blood. You've brought such joy to our lives — such happiness."

"Esme, I'm so sorry. I never knew how it was. It must have been so hard," Bella cried. "Jasper, now I know, I really know. At my birthday it had to be … torture! Absolute torture! You smelled my blood and then felt the thirst from the rest of them — especially Edward." Anger flamed up again but was quickly doused by the heavy, dark fog of her guilt and shame. They closed in around us, weighing us down.

I shoved it all away and lifted her from the ground, wrapping her in my arms, nuzzling her neck, and whispering into her ear. "That was not your fault. It was never your fault." I kissed her neck and sent my admiration and reassurance to her. "Bella, that was not your fault." I felt comforted just touching her, and knowing she had responded to my touch, I shared that comfort with her.

Bella's arms tightened around my shoulders and she sobbed into my neck. "I'm so sorry, Jasper. I never knew."

Turning her in my arms, I sat on the ground, cradling her on my lap. I gathered her hair with my left hand and combed through it with my fingers as I laid it along her back. I tucked her head in against my neck and hugged her to me. I found myself trying to curl completely around her.

"How can you stand it now?" She burrowed into my chest, inhaling deeply, her wildly spinning emotions calming, becoming less frantic. "How can you stand feeling my … my thirst for that man?"

"Because I have you," I whispered to her. "Because I knew you needed me." I stroked her hair. "At
"You couldn't have known. How could you?" I kissed the top of her head. "But it's done. It's over with. It happened and we can't change it." I drew back from her and lifted her face so that I could look at her, my fingers tracing over her cheek. The matte black of her eyes was slowly lightening back to red, but bright red or deep black, they were beautiful to me, and I felt myself being drawn into their liquid depths.

"I wouldn't change it if I could," I whispered to her, staring even more deeply into her eyes.

Her left hand slid up my forearm and she gently squeezed my wrist, then she placed her hand over mine.

"Thank you for helping me. I never want to cause you pain, Jasper," she said softly.

"It's okay, Bella. We're past it now." Once again, I was ensnared by her eyes, her touch, her scent, and I felt myself being pulled into her; closer to her lips.

Her hand tightened on mine, as she shifted slightly in my lap, and I felt her thirst dissipate, to be replaced by want, but this time it wasn't the human she wanted.

"You helped me again. You stopped me from killing that man." She blinked slowly and licked her lips.

"I will always try to help you, in any way that I can." I couldn't tear my eyes away from her mouth.

"I ripped your shirt again," she whispered.

Her embarrassment trickled through, but it didn't replace her wanting me. Her want was quickly becoming need, and her desire began to grow. She bit her bottom lip, and I was mesmerized by her teeth sliding across her soft, full lip.

"I can get another t-shirt." I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed her fingers then my right hand slid slowly over her shoulder, down her back, over her side, and to her hip. I pulled her in even closer to me. I wanted to kiss her and feel her lips against mine. If I moved just one more inch would she let me kiss her?

Esme very lightly cleared her throat. "Jasper, did you happen to bring your phone?"

I had done it again. I had forgotten everything around me, completely consumed by Bella's touch and scent.

Bella and I looked over at her out of the corners of our eyes.

"Uh, no."

She was feeling a bit uncomfortable but also delighted and pleased. "I don't have mine either. I suppose if we wait out here for a while, someone will come and tell us when the man is gone." She smiled reassuringly at both of us. "Or, perhaps in a while I can go back to the house and see what's going on. Are you feeling better, Bella?"

Bella nodded and shoved her face back into my neck. "We really do have to leave here. I can't be here. I'm too dangerous." She was starting to get upset again. Her right hand clenched at my t-shirt against my chest, and her left hand moved up to my face and into my hair. Gripping a handful, she pulled and tugged at it. "If I can take down a 500 pound elk, a human would be nothing! Jasper! We have to leave as soon as possible!"
"Bella, shhhhhh." I stroked her hair. "It'll be okay. We'll leave on Thursday. I think that will be the best day."

"Why?"

I didn't want to upset her any further but she had to know. "I think the entire town will be preoccupied with your memorial service. It will be easier for us to leave then. We'll just slip away while everyone is looking the other way."

She pulled my head down and sobbed against my throat. "That's right — the memorial. I forgot about that." She sobbed again. "I don't want to leave, but I know I have to. I can't stay here."

I couldn't help noticing her lips were pressed against my throat, and I swallowed the venom that began to well up in my mouth. "It'll be okay, Bella. Remember, you won't be alone. I'll be with you. Rose and Emmett are coming, too. We'll all help you." As much as I enjoyed Bella's fingers tangled in my hair, I gently pulled them away and kissed them again. I pressed my lips to the top of her head and wished there was some way I could make it all easier for her. At least getting her out of Forks would remove some of the temptations she would be faced with, but who knew what we might run across along the road?

At the same time, we all heard the sound of feet treading rapidly over the forest floor. Someone was running toward us. All three of us were on our feet in an instant, Bella right behind me, pressed up against my back, her left hand on my left hip, her right hand clutching my right arm. Esme was back a bit and to my left, her stance and emotions alert but cautious.

"I think it's Rosalie," I said quietly to them.

The runner stopped before we could make out any sort of figure through the trees.

"It's just me," Rosalie called. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Rose. We're fine." She had made her steps loud enough so that we could hear her approach. I pulled on Bella's hand to bring her to my side. Esme stepped forward and stood next to me on my left.

Rosalie walked toward us slowly, watching all three of us. "Everyone looks fine. Are you okay, Bella?"

"Yes." She nodded and dropped her eyes to the ground. "I … I wanted that man so bad. I could have killed him."

Her guilt reared up again, and I hugged her to my side. "We stopped you, Bella. We all know how it is."

Rosalie came up to us and took Bella's hand. "We all do know how it is. We'll help you, you know?"

"Yes, I know. Thank you. I never knew before how hard it could be." She sobbed again and leaned into my chest.

I pulled her into a hug and rubbed her back. "Believe it or not, you'll get used to it. It's especially hard now while you're a newborn. In about six months to a year, it won't be quite so bad any more. The pull won't seem so strong. It never goes away, but it won't be as bad."

"But what if I slip, Jasper? What if I eat a human and decide I like it?" She looked up at me, her eyes
bright with tears of venom.

I sighed as Rosalie placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Esme placed her hand on the back of Bella's head and combed through her hair. "I won't lie to you, Bella. If you ever taste a human, you will like it. You will love it." I brought my hand to her face and lightly ran my fingertips down her cheek. "It is our natural food source, but it will always be your decision to make."

"But, Jasper …" She sobbed, trying to push further into my chest, her guilt and thirst warring with each other again.

With my finger under her chin, I tilted her face up. "Look at me."

"During your newborn year, while you aren't able to control yourself, I will help you avoid them. As long as you want me to, I will do what I can to stop you from hurting any humans."

She blinked and nodded at me. Then I felt her embarrassment.

"What is it, Bella? Why are you embarrassed?"

"I … uh." She glanced toward Esme, up at me, and then down again.

"You can ask me anything. You know that."

She nodded and glanced up at me again. "Do you miss it?" she whispered. "Do you miss human blood?"

"Yes, I do. Some days more so than others," I answered her in all earnestness.

She studied my eyes for a moment and nodded her head slightly. I thought she might ask more questions, but she seemed satisfied for now. I imagined that would be a topic we would return to in the future.

I looked to Rosalie. "Is the man gone?"

She eased back a step, releasing Bella's hand, and the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile. "Yes. But right after he showed up, two more vans came with more flowers. I didn't know there were that many florists in Forks."

Bella sobbed and heartache and sadness welled up and around her. She turned back to me and leaned into my chest again, grasping at my torn t-shirt with both of her hands. "They're sympathy flowers, aren't they?"

"People are sending flowers to Edward, aren't they?"

"Yes," Rose answered sadly. "There are flowers for Edward and Alice."

"I wonder how many Charlie is getting?" She sobbed loudly, burying her face in my shirt.

Wrapping my arms tightly around her, I bent to kiss her head. I didn't say anything because there wasn't anything to be said.

Anger suddenly burned through her sorrow, taking me completely by surprise, and she jerked away from me, ripping my shirt right off me.

"That's bullshit!" she shouted as her hands clenched into fists. She seemed to finally notice she was holding my torn black t-shirt in her hand and blinked at it. "Oh shit, I ripped another one off you, and
I liked the black. Goddammit!" She stomped away from us, leaving six-inch furrows in the ground, and kicked a tree before whirling around and stomping back toward me. "I didn't mean to rip your shirt off. Even though I already tore it, I didn't mean to rip it off you."

I picked off the few remaining pieces of the shirt and dropped them to the ground. "I know you didn't. I'll get some more." I reached for her, and she batted my hand away. "What's the matter, Bella?"

She held the pieces of my shirt to her chest with her right hand and waved her left through the air. "People wasting all that money on flowers because they think I'm dead!" She spun around again, startled Esme and Rosalie, and stomped toward another tree. She slapped her palm against it. "I know everybody thinks I'm dead, but they should stop wasting their money on flowers! They could make donations to the health center on the reservation or to the rez school. Or even to whatever benevolent fund there is at the Forks police department!" She kicked the tree. "I don't know what it is, but there must be one."

Esme stepped hesitantly toward her. "That's a wonderful idea, Bella. We should …"

Bella spun around, clutching my shirt to her chest. "Edward should call the paper and tell them." She broke into a run so fast she was just a blur.

Rosalie, Esme, and I sprinted after her.

"She probably shouldn't get too close to Edward just yet," Rosalie said from my right. "He was pretty upset after he read a few of the cards that came with the flowers."

A low growl started in my chest at the mention of Edward. I didn't want Bella anywhere near him by herself.

With alarm, I realized she was going to reach the house before I could catch her. I pushed myself harder, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to stop her.

As I neared the house, I saw that one of the sliding glass doors had been torn from its track. Shattered glass and pieces of the splintered frame were strewn across the patio and into the yard.

I heard Bella's angry growls inside and my still-heart clenched. I leaped the last fifty feet and landed just inside the doorway, skidding to a stop in front of Bella. She was to the right, standing rigidly in front of the TV, growling loudly, her fists at her sides. She had dropped the shredded pieces of my t-shirt to the floor.

Before I could ask her what was wrong, a hand seized my left wrist, and I was thrown across the living room, slamming into Edward's bouquet-covered piano at the front of the room. The discordant sound it made as I crashed through it grated through my ears and rang through my head.

Snarling, I burst out of the shattered remains of the broken vases and twanging piano wires. Pieces of glazed ceramic, glittering shards of crystal, flower petals, and greenery exploded outward in every direction.

Carlisle appeared in front of me, his hands outstretched. "Jasper! Stop!"

He was between me and Bella!

I grabbed his upper arms and shoved him away from me, sending him careening up toward Emmett, who was running down the stairs. Carlisle broke through the curved banister, crashing into Emmett, and they both plowed through the gleaming wooden treads just below the second floor landing like a
wrecking ball, destroying the upper third of the curved staircase.

My eyes snapped back toward Bella. She had Edward embedded a few inches in the west wall directly opposite the TV. She had plowed through the furniture, tossing the overstuffed chairs aside, to get to him. Her left hand was around his throat just under his jaw, and she held him so his eyes were level with hers. Because he was nearly a head taller than her his legs were spread and bent at the knees. Bella's right hand held his left to the wall, even with his head. She was snarling in his face.

I roared and leapt at them, aiming for Edward.

Esme and Rosalie darted across the patio and in through the gaping doorway. "No, Jasper!" Esme cried.

I was so close I could almost feel my hands finally ripping Edward's head from his shoulders, when I hit … something. I was deflected to the left, toward the center of the room. My hip caught the corner of one of the overturned chairs, and I flipped over it, landing on my feet in front of the doorway to the kitchen. As I spun around, I first saw Rosalie, then Esme reaching toward Bella and Edward. It was as if their hands struck an invisible wall about two feet away from Bella. Their bodies immediately followed, crumpling against that … something … and they rebounded — Esme flying back and landing on the coffee table, smashing it to the floor. Rosalie bounced back onto the couch, causing it to slide into the floor-to-ceiling windows next to the missing sliding glass door.

What. The. Fuck?

I leapt toward Bella again, landing just behind her, and reached forward. There was something there. I couldn't see it or smell it, but it was hard and unyielding — smooth like glass. Whatever it was, it prevented me from getting to her, and my rage fanned out and around me.

Bella was still growling, and Edward looked absolutely terrified. I suddenly realized I couldn't feel emotions from either of them. I went to fling my arms around Bella and was stopped by that hard, invisible bubble. Then I realized I could just make out a slight distortion in the air around them both.

"It's a shield," Carlisle said in awe from my right. I hadn't even noticed that he and Emmett had worked their way out of the debris of the upper part of the stairs. They were covered in drywall dust and splinters. They were about ten feet away from me, Bella, and Edward. "She has a physical shield."

"No fuckin' way," Emmett said incredulously.

"Yes," Carlisle continued. "I can see a minute ripple in the air around them. If I hadn't been looking for it, I wouldn't have seen it."

Edward's eyes flicked toward Carlisle, then to me. I bared my teeth at him and lunged. He cringed, squeezing his eyes shut, but Bella held his throat so tightly he couldn't move.

I thudded against the shield and snarled. I slapped my hands against it. "Isabella!" I couldn't reach her, couldn't touch her, and I roared out my rage and frustration. I shifted to the right so I was beside both of them. I needed to be able to reach her.

Though she remained facing toward Edward, her glittering black eyes turned to me.

"Isabella! Are you doing this?" I growled, becoming angry with her for blocking me.

Just the very corner of the right side of her mouth twitched upward, and she whispered, "Shields up, go to red alert."
I gaped at her in shock, my mouth dropping open. I wouldn't have thought it was possible for Edward's eyes to grow any wider in fright, but, impossibly, they did.

The alarm, dread and fear pulsing from everyone in the room was nearly overtaking me, and I fought against it.

"Isabella! Put it down!"

"No." She looked back toward Edward. "Edward and I need to have a little talk." Her hand squeezed his throat more tightly and cracks appeared in his skin.

I slammed my fists down against her shield in utter dismay. "Bella!"

"Don't hurt him!" Alice wailed from behind me.

_Oh shit._

I spun to face her and saw her jumping from the landing above.

Carlisle reached desperately for her, catching her in his arms, and shouting, "No, Alice!"

I snapped back to Bella. Her eyes narrowed, her lips curled back away from her teeth, and she snarled. She shoved Edward a little deeper into the wall, let go of his left arm, and started to turn.

"That female," she hissed.

"Alice, run outside! Get out of Bella's sight!" Carlisle dropped her, and Alice, eyes ringed in white with her sudden terror, bolted to the front door behind them. She threw it open, tearing it from its hinges, and disappeared through it.

As soon as Alice was gone, Bella inhaled deeply and turned back to Edward.

I knew I needed to calm down. I couldn't feel her emotions, but I didn't know if she could feel mine. I also took a deep breath and blew it out. I could see that she was unhurt, but I felt the overwhelming need to touch her. I hoped I could convince her to put the shield down. "Bella, please put down the shield," I pleaded.

Her eyes, still black, glanced to me and back to Edward. "I said no. Like I also said, Edward and I need to have a little talk."

Then, what she did next stunned everyone, shocking us all into total stillness. She held up the index finger and thumb of her right hand and curled her remaining three fingers against her palm. She slowly brought her hand up and touched the tip of her index finger against Edward's left temple like a pistol. She jerked her head up, raising her eyebrows, and glanced to the left toward Esme and Rosalie. Then she turned slightly to look out the corner of her eye at me, Carlisle and Emmett.

"Now," she began. "All of you need to calm down or I shoot the hostage."

Chapter End Notes

"shoot the hostage" - Officer Jack Traven (Keanu Reeves) in the movie "Speed"
**Chapter 25, I See**

**Jasper's POV**

I, like everyone else, was stunned into complete and total motionlessness. We were all frozen in place. No one breathed, except Bella. Esme and Rosalie were beyond her and Edward, standing in front of the hole where the sliding glass door used to be, their eyes wide and filled with fear. Carlisle and Emmett stood behind me. I didn't hear a sound from either of them.

I did not even feel any emotions from anyone, and that had never happened before.

We all stood that way for several long moments. Outside, the light breeze whispered through the trees. There were chirps and whistling calls from birds and a chattering bark from a nearby squirrel. Insects clicked and buzzed softly. In the distance, I heard the hum of cars driving by on the highway, and I could even pick up the gurgling and lapping of the river. But inside, the only sounds were the ticking of a clock and Bella's harsh breaths.
Agonizingly slowly, my mind began to recover from the shock. Skittish, incomplete thoughts made their tentative way back through my mind, and I reached hesitantly toward Bella, placing my hands on her physical shield — my left near her and my right over Edward.

Bella's eyes were still a glittering black as she stared fixedly at Edward. Her heaving breaths began to slow, and she blinked several times.

I was befuddled, to put it mildly, and didn't have any fucking idea what to do. Perhaps Bella would give me a clue. "Bella," I began softly. "What are you doing?"

She blinked again. "I am trying not to rip Edward's head off while I gather my thoughts."

"Oh." I nodded. Well, we couldn't fault her for her blunt honesty. "Is that what you meant by 'shoot the hostage'?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to put your shield down?"

"No."

"I see." Instantly, my desires were torn. I wanted to destroy Edward, and I didn't even care what he had done. I required the opportunity to feel my hands on him and crush him out of existence.

My other requirement was to touch Bella, gather her into my arms and soothe and comfort her — calm her raging emotions. Needless to say — get her the hell away from him.

It didn't appear as though I would have the chance at either of those options at the moment. I also needed to calm myself down and think as clearly as I could, despite Bella's somewhat out-of-character behavior. I needed to find out what he had done.

Evidently, Edward had done something to piss her off in the few seconds she had been in the living room before I arrived. Even without knowing what it was, I was absolutely certain he deserved to have his head removed. Experiencing that sort of pain and mental chaos would, hopefully, help him remember to stay away from Bella. We could always reattach it later — if Bella didn't damage it too badly or burn it.

Regretting the loss of my Zippo lighter in the river, I sorely missed it and would have to get another as soon as possible. In the meantime, I quickly cataloged where matches and lighters were kept in the living room and kitchen. I believed I would be able to stop Bella if she went in search of them. Though, maybe once I found out what he had done, I'd go grab some for her.

If she moved to tear his head from his shoulders, he might try to defend himself, and she could be hurt. As I studied them both, it didn't appear as if he had tried to fight her off yet, and in their current position, it would be easy for her to behead him. But I wanted to be the one to rip his head from his shoulders. It didn't look like I'd get my chance since Bella had Edward encased within her shield.

I sighed inwardly. Because I couldn't get at him myself, I did need to find out what he had done. I appeased myself with the promise that I could always shred him later — unless Bella did it first. Cooler, thinking heads needed to prevail, so I closed my eyes, inhaled a deep breath, and slowly let it back out.

Bella appeared to be marginally less angry. Perhaps she would listen to me. "Darlin', if you rip his head off, he won't be able to fully comprehend anything you have to say. It is very painful, and thoughts tend to be very … disjointed and chaotic."
"I kinda thought that might be how it is." She blinked again and glanced over at me, a puzzled look on her face. "How do you know?"

"Though there are scars on top of scars, and they've blended together, some of the scars around my neck are from when my head was torn off." I reached up and pointed at my neck to show her before putting my hands back on her shield.

"Oh!" she whimpered and started to turn toward me, taking her gun hand from Edward's temple.

I held my hands up, silently urging her to not move too much. I didn't know if Edward might see that as an opportunity to try to break her hold or subdue her. I would have.

"It's okay, Bella. It was a long time ago, and it only ever happened once."

Suddenly, I felt everyone's emotions again. Varying degrees of shock, fear, concern, dread, and even anticipation circled around me, and I couldn't tell where they originated from. Not that it really mattered. Pushing back against them, I concentrated on Bella.

"But who would do that to you? How could somebody do that to you?" Her face reflected her dismay and concern.

Keeping my hands up, I pointed at Edward. "If you're not going to put your shield down so I can help you, you need to watch him." I honestly didn't think she had to worry about him, but she needed to learn. You didn't ever take your eyes off the enemy. The look of terror on his face informed me he wasn't thinking about defending himself or retaliating against her. He'd had several opportunities to strike if he wanted to, and he had let them all pass.

"Oh, yeah." She looked back at Edward, her eyes still black, and moved her gun hand back to his temple. "But who did that to you?"

"Maria. I was still a newborn and didn't do what I was told quickly enough. I learned — after that." I looked pointedly at Edward. His black, fear-filled eyes glanced in my direction and back to Bella.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Jasper."

"So am I." I continued to stare at Edward. "Are you going to put down your shield?"

"No." She scowled at Edward.

That was the answer I expected, but I was becoming a little frustrated. Sighing heavily, I spoke gently and evenly. "Then tell me what happened, please. Start after the part where you pulverized the sliding glass door."

She ducked her head and looked up at me. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to do it." She glanced over at Esme to her left. "I'm sorry, Esme. I'll clean it up."

Esme, standing next to the statue-like Rosalie, blinked away the look of shock on her face and gave Bella a slight nod.

"Bella, what happened?" I put my hands back on her shield, ready for the instant it came down.

She turned back to Edward, and her eyes narrowed. "Well, after I pulverized the door … I was over by the TV. Edward was at the piano, looking at the flowers or whatever. I guess he decided to change his tactics. Instead of trying to tell me what to do, I suppose he thought he'd try the ol' guilt and sympathy routine." She snorted and frowned at him again. "He ran over to me and said he still
loved me, he missed me, and couldn't live without me." She rolled her eyes and gestured with her gun hand, drawing a wide arc in the air, before she pointed it at his head again. "Plans A and B didn't work. Got your Plan C ready, Edward? Another trip to Italy?" She raised an eyebrow andcocked her head.

The sharp intakes of breath came from all around me. I believe I even heard Alice's shocked gasp from outside.

"Then he said that he'd been planning to ask me to marry him." The muscles in Bella's jaw tightened, and she spoke through clenched teeth. "He was going to propose to me Saturday night, while I was conveniently being held hostage here, of course." She pushed him a little further into the wall. "Or do you mean 'dazzle and manipulate' me some more?"

I couldn't stop the growl from forming and vibrating through my chest, but I contained my anger. I slid my right hand over the barely perceptible shimmer of Bella's shield, moving it closer to Edward, itching to get my hands on him and crush his throat. Remove a few limbs. Snap him in half. The thought passed through my mind that maybe I should go dig out a pack of matches — have them handy in case they were needed.

Bella quickly glanced at me and back to Edward. "If he had ever listened to anything I ever said, he would have known how I felt about that." Her hands began to tremble. "But I'm sure he was only going to do it for my own good and protect me." She sneered, her lips curling away from her teeth. "Now we need to talk." She pushed him another quarter inch into the wall.

I could see that she was becoming angrier by the moment. "Bella, he won't be able to speak …"

"He's done enough talking," she said, snarling and interrupting me. "I don't need to hear anything else he has to say. He's like a broken record — 'I love you,' 'I could kill you,' 'I only want to keep you safe,' 'I could kill you.'" Her hand tightened on his throat, causing more cracks to appear and spread jaggedly around his neck. "It was all for my own good. Or was it for the protection of my precious blood, Edward? You never wanted to change me, and I finally figured out why. Sorry it took me so damn long. You know, that poor, slow human brain and all." She poked at her own temple with her gun hand and placed it back against Edward's head.

"If I became a vampire, there'd be no more of my blood. Pretty fuckin' simple. I should have figured that out sooner. God, I'm an asshole. No more blood and you wouldn't be able to tease and test yourself any longer. Test your strength — test your resolve and willpower. You just wanted to see if you could challenge yourself — win over your baser, evil, carnal instincts. And if you couldn't, who was the real loser? Me! I'd be dead!" Then she broke into a sing-song voice and said, "And you could go about your merry way. After another century or so, when you got bored again, you could find yourself another stupid little human to challenge yourself with." She sneered at him. "You are a monster."

Bella shuddered, and her voice became a guttural growl. "Yup, I sure do remember your little suicide trip to Italy. How stupid, how selfish, how completely self-centered and ego-centric that was. You never thought how that would affect the rest of your coven, did you? No, because the fucking universe revolves around fucking Edward, and how he feels, and what he thinks, and what he wants. Screw everybody else."

She snapped her mouth closed, shut her eyes, and bowed her head to the floor. "And I was stupid enough to fall for the biggest manipulation of all," she whispered.

Her breaths came faster, her nostrils flared, and her whole body shook. She slowly raised her head. "You never wanted me for who I was. I was just another puzzle for you — like a code to crack. You
were only fascinated by a mind you couldn't read and the smell of my blood. No matter how many questions you asked me, Edward, you never knew me!

I could not believe Bella's control over herself. I — everyone — could clearly see how she was struggling, battling to control her rage and heartache. I would not have had the strength or the will. The admiration and awe I felt for her — the total veneration — flowed through every part of me and filled me with a warmth I had never experienced before. From it grew adoration. I utterly and completely adored her. I had no words to express how that beautiful little newborn affected me. I would worship that woman for the rest of my days.

She fucking owns me.

Loathing for Edward began to boil and bubble up like lava from my very center. As soon as I could get to him, I would end him for causing such torment to my Bella.

I shoved that desire aside for the time being, wishing I could send Bella some part of the miserably inadequate strength I had, send to her the adoration I felt for her.

She snapped her eyes closed and took in a deep breath. She let it out with a long, breathy "Ahhhhhhh." She moved her head in a circle, flexing her neck in a very human-like gesture, and her eyes gradually opened. "I was stupid for listening to you. I was stupid for falling for you. I was a goddamn immature moron. I was a fucking idiot for letting you dazzle me whenever you wanted to have your way. But that's just another advantage vampires have over humans, isn't it? Dazzling them. There wasn't anything I could have done to fight it, was there?" Her right hand flashed to his throat, and she started pushing him down through the drywall, crushing and turning it to dust.

"Or did you know?" Bella glanced at me before returning her fiery gaze back to Edward. Her voice became just a wisp of air from her lips. I didn't think anyone but Edward and I could hear her. "Somehow, did you know? Did you use your fucking vampy voodoo so that I wouldn't see him?"

Her eyes narrowed to mere slits, and she bared her teeth at him.

I was floored. Was that even possible? Could he have done that? My eyes shot to Edward's, and, once again, all I could read from his glassy, black stare was terror. Unfortunately, that did not answer my question.

Then the rest of what she had said struck me like a bolt of lightning. Had he dazzled her so she wouldn't see me? No. No, he couldn't have. I would have felt his deceit. I would have felt the treachery from him. He wouldn't have been able to mask it all the time. As much as I would have relished blaming him for keeping me from my mate, I knew that Edward was too immature, too much an adolescent, and too besotted with Bella in order to be able to do that. With everything that had gone on over the last fourteen months, he wouldn't have been able to guard his thoughts and emotions at all times. I would have caught it. I was sure I would have.

I felt my eyes close to mere slits and my own lips peel away from my teeth in a snarl. My right hand skittered over Bella's shield to stop right above Edward's head. I would be asking him about that later, right before I killed him — if he survived Bella.

She hissed then pulled in a rasping breath. "You said you missed me, but I'm still fucking here!" she shrieked, shaking him. She snapped her teeth together, stared up at the ceiling for a moment, and then brought her face down to glare at him again. "The blood is gone," she whispered. "That's what you miss. You never wanted me to be your partner, your mate. I was just another intellectual challenge for you. Something interesting for the poor, bored little vampire to pass the time during his long, long life. At the same time, I just so happened to smell really good, too." She shook him again, causing more drywall dust to puff out and float to the floor. "Probably would have tasted really good,
too. But I guess you'd have to ask Jasper about that."

At the scathing reminder that I had bitten her, Edward's eyes squeezed shut as if he had been slapped. Hearing Emmett's snort behind me, I expected a jeering "Oooo, burn" out of him, but he remained silent. Even I was amazed and impressed by Bella's cutting taunt. There was a delicious wicked streak a mile wide running through my Darlin', and I loved that shit. I smirked at Edward.

She stopped pushing him down the wall to adjust her grip on his neck. "Or maybe you were the stupid one, thinking your fascination with my blood was love. You never learned how to really love someone. You were a child when you were changed, and you're still a child. Maybe you think the way to protect and love someone is to control everything they do — lock them in a cage up on an unreachable pedestal? Make them into the perfect little being you think they should be? And you were so much stronger than me. How could I ever hope to fight back? That's not how you love someone." She continued forcing him down until he was seated on the floor, staring up at her, pleading with his eyes. She dropped to one knee in front of him. "I was a fucking fool. But my eyes have been opened."

Then she bowed her head and squeezed her eyes shut. "I think I can do it. I think I can show you …" she murmured. She opened her eyes, and looked up at him, the corners of her eyes tightening and a slight smile forming on her lips. "You wanna meet the real me now?"

She snatched her hands from his neck and clamped them on either side of his face, her fingertips digging into his skin. He sucked in a ragged breath, finally able to breathe again. His eyes widened further in shock as they snapped to me. A look of anguish and sorrow flashed across his features.

"Look at me, Edward." Bella shook his head again, forcing his eyes back to her.

Some unknown measure of time passed as they stared into each other's eyes. It could have been thirty seconds or thirty minutes — I didn't know. It was as if everything in the room was caught in some sort of suspended animation. No one breathed. No one moved. We all stood transfixed, watching Bella and Edward in that eerie, silent exchange.

Whatever it was she was doing to him, I sincerely hoped it was agonizing.

After what seemed an eternity, Bella inhaled a small breath.

"Do you see?" She began to rise, drawing Edward up with her and adjusting her grip on his neck again. "Do. You. See?" she asked him again in a low, menacing voice.

He nodded and squeezed his eyes shut. "Yes," he croaked. "I … I see."

She stood and flung him to the floor. Powdery white drywall dust puffed up around him as she stood over him, her chest heaving with her breaths, her fists trembling at her sides.

She unclenched her hands and looked down at Edward quivering and shaking at her feet. He was breathing in short, quick gasps. "Grow the fuck up, but do it away from me," she hissed at him.

Her shield disappeared from beneath my hands, and a solid wall of overwhelming heartache, sorrow, grief, remorse, shock, and terror from Edward slammed into me. I staggered back under the assault and dropped to the floor, groaning, my hands flashing to my head.

Bella was instantly on her knees next to me, trembling hands grasping either side of my face. Edward's explosion of emotion abruptly stopped, and I gasped in shock at the release from the crushing weight of it.
"Jasper! What happened? Oh God, did I hurt you?"

I was off the floor, my arms clutching Bella to my chest, my face buried in her neck. I was still bewildered by everything that had just happened, but I had Bella back in my arms, and feelings of relief, gratefulness, and peace flooded me with her touch. Closing my eyes, I inhaled her comforting scent, drawing my nose up to her ear. "You didn't hurt me."

Her arms tightened around me, her right hand in my hair at the back of my head. "Oh, Jasper!" she cried and started kissing the side of my face. "I'm so glad you're okay!" Her arms gripped me even more forcefully.

"Uh, that's a little tight, Bella." I wheezed as she squeezed the air out of me.

"I'm sorry!" She started to pull away.

"No, no. You're perfect right where you are." I drew her back to me and tucked her head into my neck. "You are not stupid, Bella. You are not a fool or an idiot. You were taken advantage of. You were used. You couldn't have fought against him." She whimpered against my neck. "Bella, that was not your fault. In many ways, we are superior to humans. They aren't able to fight against us. I should have seen it. If I had thought about it, I would have." I bent my head and pressed my lips to her ear, whispering, "I felt your love for him, and he seemed to reciprocate. I can't blame him for thinking he loved you." I stroked her hair and held her more tightly to me, my body curving over her. I sent her my respect and adoration. I wove it around both of us, encircling us with a warm, soft, reassuring cocoon.

Bella gasped and breathed out in a rush. "Oh, Jasper, I feel that." She pressed her face into my neck. "It feels so good!" Her hands spread over my back. "I was holding so much of that in for so long. But I should have known …"

"Shhhhh, Bella. I think you were getting there. I had been feeling your frustration and desperation for weeks. I was expecting you to blow up. I just never expected this." I nuzzled against her ear and whispered, "I need to kill him."

"No." Her eyelashes fluttered against my cheek. "No, don't kill him. Death is too easy, too quick. I want him to remember." She pulled her head back a bit and looked up at me, her eyes cold and hard. "He needs to remember for a very long time."

Confounded by her again, I felt my left eyebrow creep up, and I slowly grinned at her. She was right. If, as Edward believed, death was the absolute end of his existence, it would end his suffering too quickly. I didn't know what she had done to him, but whatever it was it looked like it had been horrendous. I had thought my admiration of her had already reached its pinnacle. I had thought wrong. "You are a wicked, wicked demon. I won't kill him."

She smiled up at me, and I stroked her hair again and placed a kiss on her forehead. I glanced around the room. No one else had moved, and Edward still lay trembling on the floor. I could not feel their emotions, but everyone else still looked shell-shocked to me. Then I realized that everything had a slight blurred look. I ran my left hand down Bella's back and pulled her into me more firmly. I bent my head down to kiss her temple, and ran the fingers of my right hand through her hair. "Bella, I can't feel anyone's emotions. Is your shield up?"

"Yes. They're around me, you, and Edward," she whispered into my neck.

"They? There's more than one?" I heard Carlisle gasp and turned to look at him. He looked astonished and was studying Bella.
"Yes. I can see and feel them. It's like the layers of an onion, I think? There's the little one that's around my mind. I can't really see that one, but I can feel it. I think that one has always been there. I guess that's why Edward and Aro couldn't hear me and why Jane couldn't attack me." She looked up at me. "I finally realized I've had a layer around you. I can feel that one. It's around you and me, and there's another layer around us that's stretched out over Edward."

That was unquestionably incredible, but I had enough information about it for now. I was immensely curious about what she had done to Edward. I pressed my lips to her forehead, noticing that her eyes had returned to red. I kissed her between her brows and lightly traced the fingers of my left hand down her cheek. "What did you do to him?" It's not that I cared that she hurt him somehow. In fact, I hoped it hurt like fucking hell. But I did wonder if she could use it as some sort of defensive or offensive weapon, like the Volturi's Jane.

"Vulcan Mind Meld."

As I gaped in stunned surprise at Bella again, Emmett snorted. A grin spread across his face, and his booming laugh rang out around the room.

"Oh my God, Bella!" he wheezed out. Hand rising to cover his face, he shook his head. "You are one scary little demon from Hell. Remind me never to piss you off!" He gasped in a breath. "You. Are. Killin' me over here!" He actually slapped his knee. "You destroyed the living room. You made a gun out of your hand. You're quoting movies and TV shows. You even made Edward shut his fuckin' mouth, and now you're cracking more jokes!" Emmett wiped away imaginary tears and kept on guffawing. "You are just killin' me!"

Bella grinned up at him. "Well, nobody puts Baby in a corner."

Emmett practically squealed with delight at that. "Yeah! Edward threw Jazz on the piano in the corner and …"

"Right! I didn't break the piano, trash the flowers, wreck the stairs, or pull the front door off the hinges!"

Abruptly, the far-reaching implications concerning the evident strength of Bella's shield sent a frigid spasm of fear through my heart. She was just the type of gifted vampire the Volturi were always seeking and encouraging to join their guard. Simultaneously, icy dread and fiery possessiveness overtook me.

No! No one would take her from me!

"Enough!" I roared loud enough to rattle the remaining windows. "Isabella!" I grabbed her upper arms and forced her to look at me. "Do neither of you understand the ramifications of this?" I glared at both of them. "You …" I said, capturing Bella's eyes with mine. "You reduced Edward to a groveling, sniveling heap. You could have a potentially dangerous and powerful weapon in your head, and you and the dumbass over there are making jokes!"

Bella's eyes widened before she dropped her head to her chest. She looked up at me contritely and blinked. "I'm sorry, Jasper. Emmett started laughing and …"

"Stop, please," I said softly, feeling like a complete ass for losing control of myself and yelling at her. "You don't need to apologize for that. I do. I'm sorry I yelled at you." Touching my forehead to hers, I released my anger and fear with a sigh. "Darlin', I didn't explain myself, but you are still drivin' me clean outta my mind."
Looking heavenward, I called up my gratefulness for her presence in my life. I hugged her to me relishing the feel of her body against mine, despite the fact she was driving me insane with her wildly swinging moods. Like Emmett said, she was about the scariest little demon I'd ever met, and she certainly had gotten in touch with her inner hellcat.

"Settle down for a minute." Dropping my nose to her hair, I breathed in her beguiling scent to settle myself down. I needed to feel her against me. I needed the reassurance it gave me, and when her hands slid down my back and her arms tightened around my waist, I knew she had forgiven me for yelling and needed to feel me, too.

"Okay," I began. "Let's start over. What did you do to Edward?"

She glanced over at Edward, and her eyes narrowed again. "I let him read my mind. I gave him a sort of 'highlight reel' from when I first met him. Little parts of memories keep coming back to me, and he always asked me what I was thinking. Now he knows."

That was fucking brilliant. He had always wanted to be able to read her mind and what better punishment could there be than to let him? What better justice could be served than for him to wallow endlessly in the wretchedness and hell of his own mind? I had known how Bella had felt. Now he knew what she had been thinking as she experienced all the pain and desolation, the worry, heartache, and the rejection he had inflicted on her, time and time again.

Carlisle stepped closer to us. "Bella," he said quietly, "so you're not causing him physical pain?"

Her eyes snapped to Carlisle. "No! The only physical pain I caused him was when I had hold of his throat. Any pain he feels now is from his own doing — unless he pisses me off again."

I glared at Carlisle, and a low growl rattled in my chest. He knew better than to try and interfere with someone's mate. Of course, Carlisle would be concerned about Edward and any discomfort he might be feeling, but what about the misery and heartbreak his first son had caused Bella? The anguish and worry he had put Esme and Alice through? I set those thoughts aside for the moment and looked to Bella. "How did you do that? How did you let him read your mind?"

"Um, I pushed the shield around my brain out toward him. That one seems to be very tough and it was really hard. The others are easier to push out." A puzzled look grew over her face. "Well, now they are. I can't figure out how to explain it. They're like bubbles around me. Or, they're part of the first shield, but I can push out a layer of it. Maybe? When I ran into the living room, all of a sudden I could see and feel it around me."

That was incredible, mind-blowing, and unbelievable. I ran out of fucking words again. I stared at her for a moment in awe and wonder. I had to force myself to get my shit together and think coherently. "Why isn't he getting up?"

"I'm holding him down."

Carlisle gasped behind me. "Bella, that is astonishing. Even Aro's personal shield Renata isn't able to do that. She can only deflect people from attacking him, and she has to be touching him in order to do it!"

Hearing that, my earlier dread and terror wrapped around my heart. Aro, the leader of the Volturi, searched out and collected vampires with gifts. The more powerful the ability — the better. He surrounded himself and his brothers with the most gifted vampires they could find. That, added to their already formidable strength, kept them in power.
If Bella was that strong and had that much control at only one-day old …

I shuddered at what that could possibly mean for her — for all of us. Fighting against the fear gripping my heart, I shoved it away. I couldn't allow it to stop me from thinking this through. At all costs, we had to protect Bella and keep knowledge of the extent of her gift from reaching the Volturi.

I looked at each person in turn, capturing their eyes. "Listen to me. Information about Bella's shield must never go beyond this family — or coven. Others already know that Edward and Aro can't read her mind. We have to keep it at that." I looked at each of them again. "Do you all understand what I am saying?" Despite their nods, I decided to expound on my warning. "You all already know Aro covets Edward and Alice for their gifts. If he learns Bella's shield is so much stronger than simply keeping him from reading her mind, he will be after her. He will go through all of us to get to her."

I suddenly felt Bella's fear as she trembled in my arms. "No, Jasper!"

My hand curved around her head, and I pressed her into my chest. "Shhhh, Bella. I will protect you. I will do anything I have to, anything that is in my power to protect you." I kissed the top of her head and looked out from the corner of my eye to Carlisle's grave face. "You realize that out of your coven of eight, half of us are gifted."

He nodded at me.

"You also know the Volturi were not especially happy at the size of your coven when there were just seven of us. Now there are eight, and the eighth appears to have a strong gift."

Carlisle closed his eyes and nodded sharply again.

"What's wrong with there being eight of us? What difference does that make?" Bella asked plaintively.

Carlisle took a small step closer to us. "As far as I am aware, Bella, our coven is the largest outside of the Volturi themselves. The next are our very close friends in Alaska. They are known as the Denalis. There are five of them and they have two gifted members. One is Eleazer who can sense the gifts of other vampires. The other is Kate who can shock others when she touches them."

"Denalis?" Bella looked up at me. "Did you talk about them before?"

I stroked her hair. "Yes, we have mentioned them. You don't remember that?"

"No, I don't."

"That's okay." I hugged her to me. "I don't think I ever want Eleazer to get a look at you. He once worked for the Volturi." I turned to look through the front doorway. "Alice?" I called to her, knowing she was just outside.

"Yes?" she answered, but didn't come inside.

"You heard everything we just said?"

"Yes. I understand completely, Jasper. I certainly don't want the Volturi to come here looking to add any of us to their collection."

My eyes dropped to Edward. He remained silent but nodded his head. If it were possible to do so without jeopardizing Bella, I would give him up to the Volturi in a New York minute.
Emmett stepped forward, brushing wood splinters and spackle dust from his clothes, an unfamiliar somber look on his face. "Even more reason for us to split up for a while. You know the Volturi have been waiting to hear about Bella's change."

"Then everyone understands what I'm saying?" I looked around at everyone again, seeing their nods. As if they had a choice. "You're right, Emmett. If they should happen to send someone over here to have a look, it would be better for us to be split up. One coven with eight members would draw too much attention. Two covens with four members wouldn't be quite so unusual." I gave Bella a small smile. "Good thing I've already planned to take you away." I looked at Carlisle. "They are aware that we have lived separately at times?"

"Yes. I have occasionally written to Aro and mentioned it so it would not be an unusual thing for us to do."

"But why is eight too many?" Bella asked again. "Jasper! How is that too many?" Her eyes were worried as she looked at me.

"Darlin', most vampires travel alone or in pairs. Sometimes three, maybe four, might band together for a while. The fact that there are so many of us here, and we have all lived together for so long, is unheard of. That alone draws attention to us. We don't need any more." My grip tightened around Bella. "Darlin', you appear to have a powerful gift, and we'll have to work on it, but we'll have to keep it to ourselves."

"I can understand that," Bella said into my chest. "I'm mad at Edward, but I don't want the Volturi to take him. We're still leaving on Thursday?"

I nodded.

"That would be the best time to go. You're right; everyone around here will be distracted. Edward and Alice need to go ahead with their graduation. I think they should attend my memorial service, too, to keep up appearances and all that crap."

"Yes, Darlin', I agree completely." I smiled at her. She was truly a wonder. "Alice? Edward? You can handle that, right?" Along with keeping up appearances, attending Bella's memorial would be further punishment for Edward.

Edward nodded from his position on the floor. Alice peeked around the frame of the door. "Yes, Jasper."

"Good," Bella said as she gave a quick nod. "Now Edward can start cleaning this up. Then he can call the paper and have them print a notice that flowers are appreciated and thoughtful, but in lieu of flowers, donations can be sent to the Quileute Reservation clinic or their school. Got that, Edward?" She looked down at him sternly.

He tensed and then collapsed, closing his eyes and nodding his head weakly.

"Bella, did you do something to him?" I placed a finger under her chin and turned her head toward me.

"I pulled my shield off him. He can get up now if he wants." She smiled slightly. "He can probably hear everyone's thoughts again. Except ours."

And that reminded me … "Darlin', before he gets up, there's a question or two, I have for him."

She looked at me curiously, as did everyone else.
My eyes slid to Edward as I asked her, "Darlin', can you let me feel his emotions while I ask him my questions?"

Edward's eyes flew open, and he was up from the floor in a flash, aiming for the hole that used to be the back sliding door.

Bella growled and started toward him. He slammed into an invisible wall, bounced back, and appeared to be caught. He stood, trembling, staring at us, his eyes a dull black.

Esme and Rosalie gasped in shock again. Rosalie took a tentative step toward Edward and slowly reached out with her hand. Just a few inches from Edward's shoulder, her hand came to a stop, and she patted at the air.

"That is just … it's just unbelievable. Bella, your shield feels like glass. Sort of." Rosalie blinked as she looked at Bella, and turned her gaze back to Edward. "I can even kind of see where it is. There's a bit of a blur — like he's out of focus."

Emmett muttered behind us, "Fuckin' scariest little demon. Ever."

Bella ignored Emmett and asked, "Can you feel him, Jasper?"

"No, Darlin'."

"Wait a sec." She backed out of my arms and faced Edward. She closed her eyes and held her hands stiffly at her sides. "How 'bout now? I think I made it thinner."

Once again, his fear slammed into me and I gasped. "Yes. Hold on …" I placed my hand on Bella's shoulder to steady myself. Clenching my teeth, I pushed back against the acrid feel and taste of his fright and dread.

Pulling in a breath, I recalled the feelings of drowsiness and lethargy, and sent them to Edward. Enough to calm him down, but not enough to drop him. He visibly relaxed, and the lids of his eyes drooped.

"I got it. Whatever you're doin', Darlin', keep doin' it. I can feel him, and he can feel me." I gave her shoulder a slight squeeze as the corner of my mouth crept up into a grin.

"What are you going to do to him, Jasper?" Esme asked in a quiet voice.

I could see and feel her worry and anxiety. I knew she loved him and didn't want him hurt anymore, but I needed to know. "I'm going to ask him if he knew Bella was my mate."

Esme's eyes flew open, and I heard Carlisle come up behind me.

"Don't, please, Jasper," Carlisle pleaded.

He couldn't touch me because of Bella's shield. I looked back at him over my shoulder. "Are you afraid he knew she was my mate and kept her from me? You know the penalty for interfering with someone's mate."

"Yes. Yes, I do know. Jasper, he's made mistakes …"

"Yeah, just a couple little faux pas. Coulda happened to anyone," Bella interjected, and I could feel her anger begin to simmer. "What's the penalty?"

"Darlin', calm down. Typically, the penalty is death by dismemberment and fire, depending on the
severity of the infraction, of course, but I think your idea is a good one."

Rolling her eyes, she huffed. "Seems the vampy answer to anything and everything is parts removal and/or flames." Frowning, she brought her finger to her chin. "There's no grey area; it's all rather black and white. But what else is there? You can't give them a time out, spank them, take their favorite toy, or put them in jail." She stared off into space with a look of deep concentration over her face. "Being nearly indestructible, what could you do to them? But removing a part would be like a time out, and it would hurt."

Taken aback momentarily by her thought processes, I just stared at her. But … she was right. Never having thought about it in quite those terms before, I realized I had never actually thought about it at all. I had always just accepted the way things were because … well, that's how it was. And it worked. Basically, fuck up and you die.

"Ya know, Bells," Emmett said, also deep in thought. "You're right. But, you could bite 'em. That shit hurts, too."

Bella nodded. "Yeah, a bite would work. Leave a scar, too. Quite a reminder to behave, and not as drastic as death."

Then my curiosity got the better of me, and I had to ask her. "Are you going to say everything that pops into your head?"

"Well, no." Her eyes flicked up to me and back to Edward. "It's not like I never had those kinds of thoughts before. I just didn't say them out loud. Usually."

Damn, she's just so fucking adorable!

Bella crossed her arms and glared at Edward. "So, did you get anything from him? I'd like to know myself."

Apparently, Bella had decided the side discussion was over. Sidling closer to her, I put my arm around her shoulders. "Not yet. Take it easy, Darlin'."

I turned my gaze back to Edward. He was still calmly standing there, his hands at his sides, eyes half-lidded.

"Edward, did you know Bella was my mate?"

I toned down the lethargy enough that he could react. His eyes opened slightly, and he met my gaze. He took in a slow quiet breath and spoke softly. "No, I didn't. I … I didn't know. I loved her and …"

Bella growled, and if I hadn't had my arm around her, she would have attacked him again. "Darlin', he's not lyin'. He feels … regret, loss, heartache, but I feel no deception from him."

Bella's growl ceased, and she huffed. "Maybe it's the question. Edward, did you keep me from seeing Jasper?"

His eyes haltingly moved to Bella and jealousy flowed sluggishly from him. "Yes, I kept you from him, but not because I thought he was your mate. He's dangerous. I just wanted you to be safe."

"That's enough!" Bella's hands sliced through the air, and her anger billowed out around us both.

I held her to my side more firmly and whispered to her, 'Please calm down, Darlin'. I feel sincerity
from him. He's telling the truth. Or he believes he is." I looked at Edward from the corner of my eye. "We already knew he thought I was a heathen."

Bella shifted against my side. "Heathen," she scoffed. "But that's how they do it on the cop shows. They ask the same questions over and over but worded differently to catch the perp telling lies." She was still angry, but then a spark of surprised awareness began to flicker. I would have called it a feeling of "ah ha."

I could practically see the wheels turning in her devious mind. "What are you thinkin', Darlin'?"

She blinked several times, cocked her head, and stared angrily at Edward. "Let's ask him about my blood."

Edward's eyes quickly dropped to stare at the floor. A cloud of guilt and then fear seeped out of him.

I drew myself up to my full height, taking in a breath and jerking my chin up. I wasn't surprised at the guilt considering he had emitted the emotion throughout the time Bella was transforming. But I was surprised at the severity of it, and how it showed so strongly at the mention of her blood. That he was suddenly afraid did not surprise me at all. I sent him another wave of lethargy to hold him still.

Bella peered at Edward suspiciously then looked up at me. "What is it?"

"Guilt."

"Guilt," Bella repeated. She slowly inhaled a deep breath and glanced at Esme and Rosalie. Leaning forward, she looked around me at Carlisle and Emmett.

All of their eyes were on Edward, and I was receiving quite a mix of emotions from them. Sadness, disappointment, surprise ... and from Rosalie there was resignation and pity. Like me, she had thought Edward was intrigued by Bella's silent mind and the scent of her blood. Did she feel that pity for Bella?

"I think I already know the answer." Bella sighed. "But I guess I'll ask anyway. Are you feeling guilty because the only real attraction you had for me was my blood? Or do you have a little memento stored away?"

At the timing of his spike of anxiety and panic, I inferred he might have tucked away something to remember Bella's blood. Before my anger ran away with me, I had to know why she thought that way. "Bella, why would you think he might have a little ... memento?"

"When we first had lunch together, he took the bottle cap from my lemonade."

As my fury caught fire and spread within me, Edward gasped. His eyes flew open in panic, and he tried to throw his hands up, but was stopped when they reached chest height.

Bella was in front of me — her right hand on my cheek, her left gripped my arm above my elbow. "Jasper, I can guess what it is. Calm down. Don't kill him." Her hand slid down my face and gently took hold of my chin. "Jasper, look at me."

I knew I had to calm down, if for no other reason than to try to keep Bella from becoming upset again, but, strangely, she was very calm.

The possibility that he had something with my mate's blood in it enflamed me and my rage came racing back. The thought that he would have the audacity, the gall, the …
"I've got him, Jasper. He can't move. Look at me." Bella tugged on my jaw and my eyes dropped to hers. "I'm fine. I'm not mad. Actually, I'm not surprised in the least. You look a little pissed off, though."

She stroked the side of my face, and the fury that was about to overtake me began to subside. I hadn't realized my hands had closed into fists and were shaking.

"Jasper," she whispered. "It's okay. We'll find it and burn it. But don't burn Edward. Esme, Carlisle, and Alice would miss him."

Her hand slid down my arm and back up. She repeated that soothing action and tilted her head, her eyes never leaving mine. "Jasper? I need you to listen to me."

I blinked. "I'm listening. I won't kill him. Yet."

She raised her eyebrows at me. "We already discussed that."

Edward gasped again, and his hands flew up to grasp at the sides of his head. I could no longer feel his emotions.

"What did you do?" I asked Bella.

"I took the shield from around us, and I am, uh, squeezing him with it. I can hold him while you go look for the little Blood o' Bella keepsake. It's probably right next to that bottle cap in his room." She twisted around to give Edward a disparaging look then turned back to me. "Or we could just ask him where it is."

How many times was this magnificent woman going to confound, amaze, and astound me? I gaped at her again, forgetting about the fury and my desire to disassemble Edward piece by piece. "Squeezing him?"

"Uh, yeah. I closed the shield down on him. I don't know if I can crush him. It's, like, against him? But I can hold him."

Emmett finally took a breath and stepped up beside us. He smiled down at Bella, pride beaming from him, and he patted her shoulder. Then he looked up at Edward. "Edward," he began, "I think you oughta tell them where it is because I think maybe Bella can kill you with her brain."

Chapter End Notes

"You wanna meet the real me now?" – Captain Malcolm Reynolds to Niska in the Firefly show "War Stories."

"vampy voodoo" – from Bodice Ripper Oh Mercy by GeezerWench. (yes, that would be me — stealing my own lines. I thought it was funny.)

Paraphrasing "I can kill you with my brain" – River Tam to Jayne Cobb in the Firefly show "Trash."
Chapter 26, I Find

Jasper's POV

Turning her head slowly to peer up at Emmett, a huge, bright smile broke across Bella's face.

"Good one, Emmy-dear!"

"Been waiting for the perfect opportunity to be able to use that one," Emmett said smugly. "And you gave it to me, Bellzy-bub."

"Bellzy-bub?"

"You know. It's another name for Satan. Satan? Demons? Get it?"

Rosalie — eyes wide and staring at Emmett in disbelief — stepped hastily around Edward's rigid form and stomped across the floor to Emmett, Bella, and me. She stopped a few feet away and looked incredulously from Emmett to Bella and back.

"Oh my God, do you two ever stop? Knock it off!" She huffed in exasperation, and her eyes flicked up to mine. "Jasper?" Her right hand flashed out, gesturing toward Emmett.

"What?" I asked. "It was a good one. And, before you get all bent out of shape …" I held both hands up defensively in front of myself. "Bella might be able to kill him with her brain." Smiling proudly at Bella, I wrapped my arms around her, drawing her into my chest. "Bella is calm, I have calmed down, and we needed a moment. It's been quite emotional."

"Jasper! I can't believe you! Not five seconds ago, you were ready to kill Edward and now …"
Rosalie threw her hands up in the air. "How can you stand the thought that Edward has something of Bella's tucked away somewhere? That is disgusting and … and …" She spun around to face Edward, pinning him with an icy glare. "I always thought it was downright creepy and stalkerish when he used to sneak into her room to watch her sleep." Rosalie shuddered and turned back to us. "And now he's got God knows what of hers hidden somewhere. It's disturbing to imagine what it might be." She shivered again and wrapped her arms around herself as if she caught a chill.

Raising an eyebrow, I looked from the corner of my eye at Bella. "It's morbid and creepifyin'."

Bella peeked up at me, snorted, clamped her hand over her mouth, and started laughing into her hand, her shoulders shaking.

Emmett elbowed me in the side as he shook his head and snickered.

Rosalie, glaring angrily at all three of us, sputtered, "What are you three laughing at?"

Emmett chuckled and said, "Quotes from Firefly." He patted Bella on her back.

"Best show ever!" Bella chuckled into my chest. "I don't know why I remember it, but I do."

I took in a deep breath and slowly let it out in satisfaction. That was just one more reason to adore my little hellcat.

Brushing my right hand down over Bella's hair, I pulled her back into my chest, and kissed the top of her head. Looking up at Rosalie, I gave her what I thought was a reassuring smile. "Whatever Edward has hidden, I'll find."

Bella pulled away from my chest and looked over her shoulder at Edward, studying him as a child might study an interesting bug. "So, where is it, Edward? We'll find out soon enough what it is."

Closing his eyes, Edward dropped his head to his chest. His shame was now vibrating through the air. At the intensity of his emotions, I was even more concerned, wondering what it was he had hidden in his room.

Bella looked up at me as she slid her right hand down my left arm, taking hold of my hand. "What's the matter, Jasper? There could be some of my books up there in his room. There might even be some clothes?" She turned to look at Esme, a question in her eyes.

"Uh, Bella." Esme finally found her voice. "I collected all of your clothes out of Edward's room to wash them." She glanced over at Edward. "At least I think so."

"With the amount of shame he is projecting, I don't think it's merely clothes or books," I said cautiously. "Darlin', are you sure you can hold him while I go look?"

"Yes, I can." She looked determined. "But maybe Emmett should stay here with us?"

"Yes, Darlin'." I patted her hand on my arm and gave it a light squeeze. Catching Emmett's eye, I said to him, "Only one of you is to leave the room at any time. Do not leave her alone with him." Emmett nodded, grinned irreverently at Edward, and cracked his knuckles. Next, I turned my regard on Rosalie. "Rosalie? Join me?" Receiving a sharp nod from her, I looked to Carlisle behind me.

He had been unusually quiet, and when I focused my attention on him, I could sense disappointment under the despondency he was feeling. His darkened, sad eyes were studying Edward. I decided I would ask Carlisle if he would go with Rosalie and me to search Edward's room. A third person helping would make it go more quickly, and despite how unhappy he was, I could trust him to search
thoroughly. He would also be able to witness what was found.

Though it was Edward's room, within Carlisle's and Esme's house, I did not need permission from any of them to conduct a search. No one interfered with someone's mate, and no one would keep me from finding whatever might be there that belonged to her.

"Carlisle, would you assist us in searching Edward's room?"

His golden eyes flicked to me, and a small sigh escaped him. "Yes." His troubled gaze dropped to the floor. "I have always strived to afford everyone some measure of privacy, as difficult as it can be at times. I know we have all endeavored to be considerate of one another and show respect for each other's boundaries and private quarters, but …" Another weary sigh escaped his lips, and his hand went to rub his forehead. "I fear, in this instance, a line may have been crossed." He glanced quickly at Edward and then to Bella. "I suppose we should get started." He turned slowly and made his way toward the stairs. He paused for a moment to look over the destroyed stairway, and then crouched slightly and sprang up to the second floor landing.

Smiling at Bella, I trailed the fingers of my right hand across her cheek. "If you have any problems, let me know. But I'm sure you, Emmett, and Esme will be fine."

"We will be." Bella smiled back. "And please don't destroy his room."

"Yes, Darlin'." I nodded at Rosalie, and we headed for the stairs, leaping together to the landing above. I asked her to wait for me as I walked quickly down the hall to my study to find another shirt. At the rate Bella was tearing them off me, I'd have to go shopping soon. Noting the few I had left, I grabbed a dark green V-neck t-shirt out of the wardrobe. Hurriedly slipping it over my head, I rejoined Rosalie.

As we made our way to Edward's room on the third floor, I heard Esme say she would go get the Shop-Vac from the garage. When she reached the front porch, she told Alice to grab a broom and dust pan and start sweeping up the broken glass on the patio.

Bella, speaking a bit louder than she really needed to, said, "Edward, never mind about cleaning, you go stand over there by your spot in the wall while we start cleaning this up. Em, flip the furniture back over and push it back where it belongs. I hope Esme brings in some trash cans." I heard light thumps from the living room.

Near the door to Edward's room, Carlisle stood silently waiting for us, his arms crossed over his chest, and his head bowed. As I stepped past him, I placed a hand on his shoulder, trying to send him a bit of strength along with my gratefulness and compassion, to help him push aside his sorrow and disillusionment. Bella's revelations in her discussion with Edward were disquieting, but all held a ring of truth. It was troubling to me that I had not seen the depth of his … obsession? Mania? Carlisle had to be having similar thoughts. It seemed none of us had recognized the magnitude of Edward's obsession.

I had experienced the emotions Edward held for Bella and they had all appeared very like the exhilaration of infatuation that the humans frequently had for each other. Having noted his giddy pleasure at her presence, I had never delved deeper and had dismissed it as the musing of a smitten adolescent.

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Usually surprised at the depth of her feelings, and distracted by the lust and repeated frustration and rejection she had suffered through, I had been more absorbed in Bella's emotions. Normally, humans did not have the complexity of emotion that Bella had displayed and they certainly did not have the intensity.
After entering Edward's room, I stood in the middle of the floor over the spot where I had ripped Edward's arm from his body, and silently took in the room. Despite the fact that Esme had cleaned and aired it out, I could still catch the rather sweet scent of Edward's venom spilled on the floor. I couldn't help the self-satisfied smile that crept over my face.

The delicious, appealing fragrance of Bella's blood, mixed with her enthralling scent as a vampire, still hung faintly in the air. I was curious as to why Edward was not spending all his time in his room, surrounded by her scent.

Turning to face Carlisle and Rosalie, I spoke in a low voice to them both, hoping to keep Bella and the others from hearing me downstairs. "We will thoroughly search this room. I expect there to be some things here that Bella had left. Perhaps books, like she said. That is not what I am concerned with. Edward's guilt and shame were quite intense, so I don't think he was worried about a few books." I studied each of them. "We will be searching for Bella's belongings and anything that might contain her human scent. If you find anything, place it here on the floor."

I breathed in the faint traces of Bella's scent. It helped to ease the anxiety I felt being away from her. "I believe him when he said he didn't know Bella was my mate. A small souvenir of their time together, I could understand, though I don't think I'd like it very much. However, if he has something here to try to preserve her human scent …" I dropped my head and stared at the floor for a moment. "That would be beyond the pale." I raised my eyes to Carlisle who was standing by the closet. "That would be … fucking insane."

Carlisle's sad eyes met mine. "I have no explanation for this … behavior, Jasper. Perhaps because she is his Singer the attraction of her blood …" he whispered, shaking his head as if to force the thought away. "Previously, he had mentioned having little items — reminders — of their time together, but don't most indulge in that, whether they are human or vampire?"

"Yes, they do, Carlisle," Rosalie hissed. "Emmett and I have lots of souvenirs from our trips, but I never tried to keep anything with his blood or human scent on it!"

Downstairs, I heard Esme start the Shop-Vac and Bella squawked, "Those things are loud!" Next was Emmett's booming laugh. "Get to work, Belly-boo!"

It brought a smile to my face to hear her voice, but it was only fleeting as I thought of the unpleasant task ahead. "I'll start with the bed." Edward's bed; though he had bought it for Bella to use.

I found myself to be immensely relieved they had not used it together. A twinge of jealousy, then a hot bolt of possessiveness shot through me. Halting and containing it, I consoled myself with the reminder that Bella and I had actually been the last to put the bed to some use with my lying beside her as she fought against the fiery agony of the change. It was where I had taken as much of that suffering from her as I could. When I had found her inside her truck, so bloody and so badly injured, I had told her I would not leave her. Ironically, Edward's bed was where I learned I could not be without her.

Edward would probably have the bed removed as soon as possible. Luckily, I had my own bed. It just wasn't in this house.

Carlisle gave us a stiff nod and went into the closet to begin his search, the slope of his shoulders displaying his distress at the distasteful task.

The debris and crumbled drywall from where Bella had shoved me into the wall of the closet had been removed, but the broken studs and cracked door frame had not yet been replaced. Esme would have time to see to that once Bella, Rosalie, Emmett, and I left. Leaving her here to fix all the
damage herself didn't sit quite right with me, but I couldn't stay here to help her, and I did think I would need Emmett and Rosalie's help with Bella. Esme had Carlisle, Edward, and Alice to lend a hand. They didn't have the same skills that Esme and Emmett had, but I was sure they could manage with Esme's direction.

Squaring her shoulders for the task ahead, Rosalie marched to the north wall of shelves containing Edward's many books and CDs. She took his desk chair to stand on so she could reach the highest.

Taking a slow step toward it, I studied the bed for another moment. It still had the pale butter colored sheets on it, infused with Bella's and my scents. I hadn't been back in the room since Bella had awakened, and I found that the combination of our scents pleased and satisfied me, and reinforced that sense of contentedness I felt when I had Bella in my arms.

Perhaps that was why Edward was not spending time in his room? There wasn't only Bella's scent — my scent was blended with hers. That realization delighted the absolute shit right out of me.

The gold colored comforter was folded across the foot of the bed, so I started with that. As I took hold of the edge and shook it out over the bed, I heard a faint crackling sound. It was coming from a corner, and I lightly pushed down on it. It crackled again. As much as I was sure Esme or Edward paid for it, it shouldn't have been crackling. I examined the seam of the comforter near the corner and found a section of stitches that were marginally different from the others. My first impulse was to rip it open, but I reminded myself of the care Esme took when she chose items for our home, and Bella's request that I not destroy his room. Using my fingernail as a seam ripper, I carefully cut the threads and gently opened the seam. Hidden inside Edward's golden comforter was a quart-sized, zippered, plastic storage bag. Folded inside was a scrap of bloodied fabric.

As I slid the storage bag from the comforter, my hands began to tremble with the wrath that exploded inside me. I briefly closed my eyes. I had thought I might find something with Bella's blood on it or in it, but having that suspicion confirmed by finding my mate's blood in his room ignited a blistering rage so intense my entire body began to quiver.

Instantly, I fought to repress it, so I wouldn't project it throughout the room and the house. I didn't want Rosalie and Carlisle to be subjected to it. Bella had been all too aware of my emotions, and I didn't want her becoming concerned and distracted, or running upstairs to see what I had found. Searching for that subtle trace of Bella's scent, I took in a slow breath through my nose and exhaled just as gradually.

I tried to convince myself it was a just job I had to do. A task I had to complete. Right then I had to do that job without becoming emotionally invested in it, and without storming, raging, and destroying everything in sight. I couldn't allow my feelings to interfere. I would not destroy anything in that room. As badly as I wanted to, I would not destroy Edward because Bella didn't want me to. She had been right when she said he needed to remember the things he had done to her.

Inhaling another breath, seeking the scent of my mate, I willed my body to stop shaking. As I released the breath, I relaxed my shoulders and the muscles in my back. I stared at the blood-stained fabric. It was a piece of the t-shirt she had been wearing when she had been in the accident.

"Jasper … Jasper!"

Rosalie's voice finally broke through my spinning thoughts. "What is it?" My voice sounded dead and flat even to me.

"I've been trying to get your attention. I've found some photographs — some of Bella and some of Bella and Edward together. What do you want to do with those?"
If it were up to me, I'd strike a match to all those pictures, but that wasn't my decision. "We'll take them to Bella. She can decide what to do with them."

My fury wasn't too far beneath the surface, and I fought to keep it down.

"What's the matter? Your voice sounds funny."

Rosalie couldn't see the bag I was holding because she was behind me. I turned, holding the bag up to show her.

Her eyes widened and she gasped. "What … what is that?"

"It's a piece of the t-shirt Bella was wearing when she crashed. Finding this hidden inside Edward's comforter, I expect there to be more pieces of her clothing here somewhere."

Rosalie's hand flew up to cover her mouth. "Oh, now that's not just morbid and creepifyin', that's sick. What the hell is the matter with him? Was he going to huff her blood until the scent went away?" Then she twitched with a start and a baffled look formed over her face. "When the hell did he do that? How did he do that?"

Gaining control of myself, I shrugged. "Held his breath?" I studied the bag, turning it over in my hands. "We've all been a bit preoccupied, and he is fast."

I slid open the zipper and gave it a little sniff. Though I enjoyed the delicious bouquet of her blood as it wafted from the bag, it was in no way comparable to the tantalizing and provocative scent of Bella as a vampire. I had never smelled anything as entrancing as my mate, and a sensation of peace and well-being settled over me, enabling me to push my rage deeper and deeper.

Taking another small sample of the air from the bag, a smirk grew across my face, and a low chuckle began deep in my throat. I peered up at Rosalie. "I think he might have been a little disappointed. I can detect my scent." I felt better instantly.

A small smile formed on Rosalie's lips, and an evil glint twinkled in her eyes. "Serves him right."

"Jasper," Carlisle called softly from the closet. "Edward has a safe in here. You know we all keep cash and documents …"

"Open it," I ordered, interrupting him.

"I don't have the combination."

"Try Bella's birthday," I said as I zipped the bag closed and dropped it to the floor. "If that doesn't work, I'll go ask him."

I turned back to the bed and pulled the sheets off, bringing them to my face to take in Bella's and my mingled scents. I tossed them toward the windows before lifting off the mattress. Under the mattress were two more bags with pieces of Bella's bloodied t-shirt in them. I grabbed them and dropped them to the floor with the first one I found, and then began to closely examine the seams of the mattress.

"Bella's birthday worked," Carlisle's disheartened voice said from the closet. "There are two more of those bags."

He brought out the zippered storage bags and dropped them to the floor with the others. Inside those bags were pieces of the jeans she had been wearing. Nodding my thanks to Carlisle, I went back to work on the mattress.
For about three hours, Rosalie, Carlisle, and I had searched through and examined everything in Edward's room. All told, a total of eighteen storage bags with pieces of Bella's blood-stained clothing in them were found. Along with one little bottle cap. Edward had been a busy boy. I could not think of the significance of the number eighteen, unless there was one bag for each year of Bella's human life. To which Rosalie had commented caustically, "Eighteen. He's always been such a sentimental fool.”

Edward was fortunate he was downstairs. Rosalie had not been happy. She had hissed and snarled, albeit quietly, the entire time she had been searching. With the tenacity of a pit bull with a bone, she had opened and scrutinized every single CD and DVD, and had flipped through every single book. She had even removed every vinyl album and record from their sleeves to look them over before replacing them.

Carlisle had explored every pocket and felt along every seam of clothing in Edward's closet — finding several of the storage bags tucked between sweaters and behind shoe boxes.

Once I had completed my search of the bed and its frame, I turned my attention to the other furniture, inspecting every side, studying the bottoms of drawers and checking inside for false bottoms. I tapped and prodded everywhere else for hollow areas or hidden pockets. After finding one bag inside the mattress and three tucked up inside the box spring, Edward seemed to have used up his imagination for hiding places. Most of the bags were in the drawers of the night tables.

I even went over every square inch of wall and ceiling, and knocking and tugging all along the trim. There had been no odor or other evidence of fresh spackle or paint to try and cover any recent "repairs," but I wasn't going to let anything slip by me — not when it came to my mate. I also pulled at the carpeting, checked behind light switch covers and receptacles, felt and sniffed the curtains, and peered through the hollow curtain rods.

While by the windows, I did happen to notice Bella on the patio gathering up piles of broken glass and splintered wood with her hands while Alice swept and made more little piles. Bella would drop the handfuls into a trash can and quickly scoop up more. She and Alice seemed to be getting along well, though they didn't ever get too close to each other, and didn't seem to be speaking much. I supposed as long as I wasn't near them both, Bella wouldn't growl and try to attack her.

Rosalie and Carlisle also searched the bathroom just outside Edward's room, bringing Bella's strawberry-scented shampoo and other items to me, including her hairbrush, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, and tampons.

"The sealed package of tampons can be left in the bathroom." Let Edward have that small reminder of his obsession with Bella. "The opened box, we'll burn. She won't need them anymore. Her toothbrush and anything else that's been opened and used, also go into the pile we'll take to Bella."

Clinging to the well-being and serenity I felt when experiencing Bella's scent, I had managed to keep my rage subdued. Though I think that was due primarily to the fact the pieces of clothing that had been found had not included any part of Bella's underwear. I believe I would have lost complete control of myself if I had found her panties in one of those bags.

For once, Edward's overly strict, repressed, and guilt-ridden morals worked in his favor — but only partially. It hadn't prevented him from attempting to keep samples of her blood. At that point, I couldn't help wondering for a moment how Edward had become so excessively inhibited and puritanical in his thoughts and actions. From what I could remember of my time, people had not seemed so austere and prudish. That impression could merely be the fault of my lack of memories.
But I had lived through his era, and I'd met vampires who had been turned within that same decade. Perhaps he had been too young when Carlisle had changed him, or the horrors of becoming ill and losing his parents in the Spanish flu epidemic had scarred him and caused him to cling desperately to his rigid and unbending standards. He had been ill, near death, and feverish when he had been changed. Too often it appeared a human's last train of thought influenced some of their later behavior as a vampire.

Of course, the agony of the transformation, and the shock of becoming a vampire, left its own marks on the psyche.

Those may have been reasons, but they were not excuses for Edward doing something that he knew to be wrong, or he wouldn't have felt such guilt when he was caught.

Feeling no sympathy for him, as his plight was really no different than any other vampire's, I had shoved aside those thoughts.

Out of curiosity, I had opened and taken a sniff at each bag, gratified to find a trace amount of my scent in all of them. Some of them had even held a hint of gasoline. To add fuel to the fire we would be lighting shortly, I spit in each bag before sealing it again. Much to Rosalie's disgust. And that had given me an idea. I pulled a pillow case off one of the pillows and rubbed it over my head to make sure my scent was on it. Then I squatted down on the floor near the pile of Bella's things, licking my fingers before I picked up each item to place in the bag. When I got to Bella's hairbrush, I brushed my hair with it and then dropped it in the pillow case. I wouldn't be leaving any hairs behind, but my scent would be mixed with hers.

Childish? Perhaps, but there would be no mistake that I had handled everything, and it pleased my possessive side to be able to mark all of her things with my scent.

After treating the last of the items with my venom and putting them in the pillow case, I inhaled a deep breath and expelled it into the case then twisted the end to close it. I was sure the thread count was high enough that it would even hold water for a time. Curious, Carlisle watched me silently, arms crossed, the fingers of his right hand were at first spread over his face, then he brought his hand down and covered his mouth when realization dawned.

Rosalie just shook her head and rolled her eyes at me. "Are you through spitting all over everything?" she asked.

"Yes, I believe I am." I smirked at her as I stood up from the floor. "You know that's just one way to mark our territory." I tossed the pillow case over my shoulder, holding the end closed. "I trust that you both feel we've searched Edward's room thoroughly and completely?"

Carlisle just nodded. Rosalie looked toward the ceiling and said with a long-suffering sigh, "Yessss, Jasper. Can we go kick his ass now?"

"As much as I would fuckin' love to, there will be no ass kicking. I suppose if we're finished here we should head back downstairs," I said loudly enough for Bella and the rest to hear me down in the living room.

As we reached the bottom of the stairs from the third floor and prepared to jump to the main floor, I saw Alice by the front window where Edward's piano used to be. Alice glanced up at us and gave a little cough. I held my arm up to stop Rosalie and Carlisle. I wanted to give Alice a moment before we dropped down into the newly clean living room.

Alice nervously tugged at her blouse and shifted from foot to foot. "Well, since we're finished here,
maybe I'll just go back up to my room. Uh, Bella, it was nice working with you. I think we did a good job on the patio."

"Yeah, we did, Alice. Thank you for sweeping. I tried not to break the other broom." Sounding a little embarrassed, Bella spoke from near the patio where I couldn't see her.

"I know. It's a good thing we have a few of them." Alice gave an encouraging smile. "You'll figure it out soon. I know you will." Then she gestured toward the front doorway. "Um, I'll just go this way and jump up. If anyone needs anything, just give a yell." She nodded, gave everyone a little smile, and she walked quickly through the doorway.

I dropped lightly to the carpet, swung the pillow case down from my shoulder, and turned to find Bella. She was sitting in the chair in front of where the sliding glass door used to be. She was lovely. The early evening light coming in the windows on the south wall behind her gave her skin a soft glow. I filled my eyes with the sight of her and then looked over the rest of the room. Bella's was the best seat to observe the entire room, but I hoped she was sitting there waiting to see me. Emmett was in one of the recliners to the left watching the TV on the east wall, and Esme was on the couch to the right. She was turned slightly so that she could easily see the room and keep an eye on Edward who was behind her, still standing with his back to the damaged wall.

When Bella saw me her entire face brightened and in the next instant, she was across the room standing in front of me and smiling up at me. Her right hand reached out slowly, and she gently touched my left that was holding the end of the pillow case.

"Hi," she said softly.

"Hi," I said back to her, drinking in her scent and her beauty. Seeing her, feeling her touch, breathing in her inviting and soothing scent, released a tension I didn't know I still had. It slowly drained away from me and was replaced with feelings of relief, warm pleasure, comfort, and peace. I'd only been away from her for a little over three hours, but I had missed her. I raised my right hand to her face, my fingers brushing gently over her cheek.

Her fingers traced lightly over my hand and forearm. "What did you find?"

Chapter End Notes

Paraphrasing "I can kill you with my brain" – River Tam to Jayne Cobb in the Firefly show "Trash."

"morbid and creepifyin'." - Captain Malcolm Reynolds, describing River Tam, to crew from the Firefly show "Safe."
Chapter 27, I Dazzle

Jasper's POV

Carlisle and Rosalie dropped down beside Bella and me from the landing above, and each went immediately to their own mates. The extensive search through Edward's room had been stressful and disturbing, and I was sure they were seeking their own comfort.

My right hand went to cover Bella's on my arm, and I gently urged her to go with me toward the others. I studied Edward for a moment and honestly tried to put myself in his place. I found it difficult to imagine. If I had ever run across my Singer, there was no question — I would have drained him immediately. But if I thought I had been in love with someone and she left me or was taken? I didn't know what I would've done.

Since I had been turned into a vampire, I had not been in love with anyone, though there were a few that I did love. I loved Alice for giving me hope at a time when I had been hopeless. Rosalie was my sister in nearly every sense of the word, becoming even more so during recent events, and I loved her for that.

Emmett had always been like a brother to me. Despite his size and strength — being one of the strongest vampires I had ever met — even he had been initially frightened by my scars. But he had been the quickest to brush his reservations and fears aside, like water rolling off a duck's back. His approach to life as a vampire, and his methods for imparting his own brand of wisdom, were unique and, quite frankly, a breath of fresh air — though frequently annoying. But I didn't think I could ever find two more loyal friends than Emmett and Rosalie.

Except for Peter and Charlotte. We had been through Hell together. They had watched my back, and I had covered theirs the best that I could. They were more than brother and sister to me, and I could
even say that I loved them, though I would never admit that out loud. The good thing about it was they already knew. It didn't have to be said.

Esme was certainly a mother figure to Edward and Alice and was filling that role for Bella, but she wasn't such to me. I was long past the need for a mother. I loved her for her quiet strength, her kind-heartedness, and her wisdom. Over the years she had become a good friend. She was the perfect mate for Carlisle. I had a great deal of respect for Carlisle and his integrity and thoughtfulness, his ability to stick to his ideals, and his compassion for others.

Edward? I felt hatred for him. He had kept my mate from me. He had taken advantage of her and abused her trust — hurting and manipulating her over and over again. He had not raised a hand to her, but he had abused her. You couldn't see those scars, but I believed some of the anger she had been manifesting was a result of that mistreatment.

I considered his collecting blood-stained remnants of her clothing to be a violation of her, and, again, I fought back the impulse to rip his head from his shoulders.

Once again, I was amazed at Bella's strength of will to not kill him. I would have.

Carlisle had sat down behind Esme on the couch and gathered her in an embrace, burying his nose in the crook of her neck. Emmett and Rosalie had moved to the chair in front of the windows. Rosalie was sitting on his lap, and his arms encircled her completely. All were looking at Bella and me expectantly.

Edward no longer had a look of terror on his face. He appeared resigned to whatever his fate might be. He was one lucky son of a bitch that Bella was in charge of that.

I set the pillow case on the chair in front of us and raised Bella's hand to my lips, gently kissing each of her knuckles. "We brought you everything we found, Darlin'. Including a bottle cap." Snapping my gaze to Edward, a look of pain was etched across his face, and I saw his eyes slowly close. "I can't feel his emotions."

"I know. Do you think you want to?" she asked with a worried tone in her voice.

I bent my head to kiss the back of her hand and turned my eyes to Edward again. "Yes, I do."

She sighed nervously. "Okay." She stared at Edward for a second. His shame, resignation, and defeat flowed thickly over me. It was not as powerful as I had expected. Beneath those emotions were his grief and loss, but I did not sense love for Bella from him — though he was pining the loss of her. Or was he grieving the loss of her blood? He slowly opened his eyes and peered sorrowfully at Bella.

Not letting go of Bella's hand, with my other hand I reached forward and grabbed the bottom of the pillow case and up-ended it over the seat of the chair, letting the contents spill out. I was not really sure how she would react to what we had found.

Bella gripped my hand more tightly and drew in a breath as she stared at the plastic storage bags containing the scraps of bloodied fabric and the other items. She was still blocking me from feeling her emotions.

"I guess those are pieces of my bloody clothes in those Ziplocs?"

"Yes, they are." I watched her carefully.

At her question, I heard a small gasp from Esme, and Emmett's eyes darkened as they bored into
Edward.

A low growl began in Emmett's chest. "What kind of fucked up shit is that, Edward?"

Esme's eyes flicked to Emmett, but she didn't give him her usual warning of "language, Emmett." I suspected she agreed with him. Her hands gripped Carlisle's arms more tightly.

"Okay, hang on everybody," Bella said, raising her hands in a placating gesture. I saw her jaw clench for a moment, then she took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Let's try not to get too upset here. I know, ironic coming from me, but … but, uh …" She leaned against me and her hand came up to cover her eyes.

Her body tensed, and I put my arm around her. "Darlin'?"

"I just need a second," she murmured, and she turned, burrowing her face into my chest. Her hands gripped my shirt, and she pulled it up to cover the sides of her face as she mumbled against me.

"Bella?" I touched my lips to the top of her head. "I can't hear you."

She inhaled a deep breath and her face slowly rose. Her eyes were pleading for something, and I could not guess what it could be.

"What do you need, Darlin'? Whatever it is, I'll get it, I'll do it." My hand moved to cup the side of her face, my thumb brushing over her lips.

She reached up with her right hand to my hair, her fingers drifting over my ear into my hair, and she tugged my head down. Her lips brushed over my ear and she whispered, buzzing at vampire speed so no one else could hear, "Jasper, I want to kill him for that, but … but I don't really want him dead. I … I feel almost violated, but I shouldn't be surprised, right? I should have expected that, right? I mean, all he wanted was my blood, and … uh … but he's acting like a fanatical, obsessed stalker and it's … it's creeping me out." She shuddered and pressed her head against mine. "Help me be calm."

The rage I had managed to suppress before was very close to overwhelming me as I saw how upset Bella was; how she was struggling to control herself. As soon as I had the chance, I would be questioning Edward again to ensure we had found all of Bella's blood. My many years in Maria's service gave me a few options to choose from as far as the method I would use to obtain information from him, and I was looking forward to it. I wouldn't need to bite him or remove any fingers or toes to get what I wanted from him. Bella's technique of cutting and scarring was certainly an option. I took a moment to be thankful Bella had been shielding me and kept him from reading my mind.

I forced down my rage so that I could help her. I would do anything for her, and I would try my damnest to do what she wanted. Closing my eyes, I pressed my lips to the side of her head, breathing in her scent. The fingers of my right hand curled over the crown of her head and drifted down to follow the curve of her neck. My left slid down her side and across the center of her back, pressing her body to mine.

I whispered to her, "I'll help you, my Bella. Take another deep breath and feel the peace I'm sending you." I grasped onto the serenity and comfort I felt when I touched her and sent it to her — bathed her in it — until her body relaxed against mine and her breathing slowed.

She released the tight grip she had in my hair, and she slowly eased away from me. "Thank you." She took in another breath and slowly opened her eyes. "Thank you, Jasper."

"Better?" I asked her.
"Yes. Much." The tension had eased around her eyes, and a slight smile appeared on her face. She stepped back and looked up toward me. In a more normal voice she asked, "What were you going to do with those bags?"

"Burn all eighteen of them."

"Eighteen?" Her eyes slid to Edward.

"Yes. Since you moved to Forks only fourteen and-a-half months ago, I believe it's one bag for each year of your human life," I said quietly.

Emmett snorted angrily and a breathy "oh dear" came from an appalled Esme. Rosalie maintained her stony silence, and Carlisle briefly closed his eyes and hugged Esme more tightly to his chest. Edward's eyes snapped shut, and he dropped his agonized face to his chest. Humiliation surged up and out of him. It was thick enough I had to push back against it. It seemed my guess was correct.

Bella's eyebrows went up in surprise then dropped low in a scowl, and she huffed loudly. "That is kinda fucked up shit. I guess there's no doubt now what Edward found so attractive about me. The bottle cap, a lock of hair or one of those pictures there in the pile wasn't good enough?" Her eyes closed tightly, and her jaw clenched. She pressed her face into my chest again, gripping my t-shirt with both hands. "Jasper, please help me not kill him."

My arms went around her trembling body, and my hand went to hold the back of her head. "I'll help you whenever you need me, even though I want to kill him myself."

She was breathing heavily against my chest. "I just need another minute," she murmured. She pulled my shirt up to cover the sides of her face and she inhaled deeply. "I'm trying not to rip your shirt," she whispered. "But I'm really pissed off right now."

"I know, Darlin'. I've been kinda pissed off, too." I stroked her hair and ran my hand down her back. "I'm planning on burning those bags, but is there anything you want? The hairbrush? Maybe some of the pictures? We'll put what you want back in the pillow case for you."

She took in another breath, and I couldn't help feeling a bit smug. She needed me; she was breathing in my scent as I was breathing in hers.

She slowly raised her face. "I do want the hairbrush and the pictures of me. Alone." She glared at Edward. "I want the books and the elastic hair bands, too. Um." She paused and turned her wide eyes to me. "I think Edward can keep the pictures of him and me together? Okay?"

Needless to say, I wasn't happy about it, but I should have expected that from Bella, no matter how pissed off she was at him. She had always been so forgiving, even when it had caused her more heartache. It was such an ingrained part of her nature, not even the fire of my venom could burn it away. Would she be Bella if she was not that way? I glanced at Edward, who had not moved, and then back to Bella's bright red eyes. He might have a few photographs that would fade with time, but I would have her. If it took the remainder of my days, she would be mine.

Trying not to clench my teeth too hard, I ground out, "Whatever you decide, Darlin'."

Emmett nudged Rosalie to get up from his lap. As he stood, he clapped his hands together. "We have a metal trash can out back we can use as a burn barrel. I'll go get it and knock a few holes around the bottom. I'll be right back." He darted through the back door, and the sound of clanging metal soon reached us.

"Darlin'," I whispered to Bella as I tipped her head up to face me. "You've been holding him with
your shield for a long time, you've controlled your emotions very well, and I want you to know how proud I am of you. For a newborn, you have done so well."

"I kept hold of him because I didn't want him to get away and do something stupid. I knew you'd kill him if he did."

"Yes, I would have. But I don't care why you did it. The fact is you did it. I think you can let him go now. It doesn't feel as though he'll be running."

Bella pressed her lips together, and a slight frown crossed her features. Edward dropped to the floor with a loud thud. He slowly pushed himself to a sitting position and sagged against the damaged wall. Propping his elbows on his bent knees, his hands covering his face, he choked out, "Thank you, Bella." His words were not much more than mere wisps of breath. He was relieved at being let go, but his sorrow and shame soon overtook that relief.

Esme and Carlisle turned their concern filled eyes toward him, but Rosalie dropped back into the chair, gave him a loud "humph" and crossed her arms, turning her back to him.

Emmett came charging back into the living room, a large galvanized trash can in his hands. He set it on the floor next to the chair with Bella's things.

Bella's curiosity kicked in again, and she bent to examine the trash can. "How'd you get the holes around the bottom?"

"Punched it with my finger." Emmett grinned at her. He was quite pleased with himself.

"But what are they for?"

"You've never seen a burn barrel, Belly-boo?"

"Uh, no."

"Man, the fun stuff you've missed out on." He shook his head in disbelief. "The holes are so air can get in to make sure everything will burn. Like this box of tampons right here." He grinned even wider and quirked an eyebrow at Bella.

He — and Bella — might have been mad enough to tear Edward apart a few minutes before, but now Emmett was all about teasing her again.

For once, surprisingly, Bella was not embarrassed. "Yeah, guess I won't need those anymore, huh?" She shot him a sardonic look then started to reach for other items. I caught her hand.

"Tell me what you want, and I'll put it in the pillow case for you. The rest of it … have at it."

She sighed at me but pointed toward the items she wanted. "The hairbrush, hair bands, and the books. Maybe I'll be able to read them again without tearing them apart. I like the Jane Austen — Renee gave it to me — but the Romeo and Juliet …" She paused and sadness spread across her face. "I … I don't want that one," she said quietly. She grabbed it gently enough not to put holes through it, but then she ripped it in half and dropped the pieces into the trashcan. They landed with a couple of hollow thunks. Reaching for me, she wrapped her fingers around my left arm above my elbow.

I gently brushed the fingers of my right hand across her cheek to reassure her, then reached for the photographs and quickly went through them, separating them for her, as Emmett picked out the other things she wanted. Seeing photos of her being held in Edward's arms or sitting beside him sent sharp stabs of jealousy and possessiveness shooting through me. I quickly suppressed them. Whom was
she standing next to? Whom did she turn to for comfort?

When I had gone through the photos, I put Bella's in the pillow case and stiffly handed the others to Edward. He took them without looking at me and placed them in his shirt pocket.

Strange. He didn't thank me.

"Is that it, Belly-babe?" Emmett asked her.

"Yes, I don't suppose I'll need the toothbrush and toothpaste. Sure don't need deodorant anymore since I don't sweat. Or the lotion either since my skin won't dry up and get all ashy, and my elbows won't get crusty. Ew. But the body wash and shampoo I can use, even though they're strawberry scented. Maybe I could mix them with something else." Then she turned to me. "Speaking of mixing … why do I smell you all over everything?"

"Because he spit all over everything." Rosalie flicked her hand at me, rolled her eyes again and re-crossed her arms.

"You what?" Bella gawked up at me incredulously.

"I did not 'spit all over everything.'" I said, mimicking Rosalie's disdainful tone. "I licked my fingers before I touched anything I put in the pillow case." Perhaps I smirked just a little bit.

"Why would you do that?" Bella asked, staring up at me.

Emmett started to laugh. "He put his scent all over your stuff."

"Jasper." Rosalie was exasperated now. "You know you spit in every one of those plastic bags. It was gross."

Bella gaped at me. "Why would you spit in all the bags?"

Carlisle cleared his throat. "Bella, our venom not only contains a concentrated form of our scent, it is also rather flammable. Not quite as flammable as gasoline, but nearly so."

Bella covered her eyes with her hand. "Okay, maybe right now I don't really want to know, Jasper, you can explain this spitting thing to me later. I'm sure the explanation will be fascinating." She took her hand from her face and laced her fingers together. "Right now, I think I'd like a bubble bath, since I haven't had one of those yet. Would you help me, Rose?"

"Wait, Bells, you don't want to go out back with us and make fire?" Emmett asked, pleading with his eyes, batting his eyelashes at her. "You've already had, what, like half a dozen showers already? There ain't much that's more fun than making fire."

"No, Em. I think I'll sit this one out. We can make fire some other time. And I have not had half a dozen showers already. I've had two." She scrunched her eyes at him and cupped her ear with her hand. "Oh? What's that? I think I hear that bathtub calling me."

Rosalie stood quickly from her chair, going to Emmett and pushing him out of the way. "Yes, I would like to help you, Bella. I'd be glad to. We might even discuss why men spit." Rosalie gave me the evil eye then turned to Esme. "Esme, would you care to join us?"

"I think I'd like to speak to Edward …"

"No," I said firmly, cutting her off. "I'm sorry, Esme, for interrupting you, but I think Edward should
watch as we burn these things. It won't take long."

Esme pressed her lips together then let out a sad breath. Her worried glance went from Edward and back to me.

Carlisle gently squeezed her arms and kissed her cheek. "You go ahead with Bella, darling. Maybe peek in on Alice? I'll go with the men." He kissed her cheek again. "Everything will be fine." As they rose together from the couch, Carlisle lightly placed his hand against her face, cupping her cheek. "We'll be back in a little while."

Esme gave Carlisle a tentative smile. "All right, dear. We'll see you soon." She turned her pleading eyes to me.

I knew she was asking me not to hurt Edward. I put my arm around Bella's shoulders and pulled her into my side. "I told Bella I wouldn't kill him." I tried to send my sincerity to Esme and everyone else. I wouldn't kill him, but I *would* find out what I wanted to know.

Giving me a small thankful nod, Esme gave Carlisle a quick kiss, patted his chest, and walked slowly toward Bella and me.

Kissing the top of Bella's head, I released her to Rosalie and Esme.

Bella smiled encouragingly at Esme. "Um, yes, I'd like to hear about this spitting thing, and, uh, whatever else happens to come up." She studied my face, her eyes full of suspicion. She reached over and squeezed my arm almost hard enough to be painful.

Sweeping my fingers across her hand, I gave her a smile. "Don't worry, Darlin'. Everything will be fine. We'll be right out back." Bringing her hand to my lips, I kissed her fingers.

We watched the ladies gather up the pillow case, shampoo and body wash, and then they all jumped up to the second floor landing. The moment I heard the water start in Bella's bathroom, I was in front of Edward, seizing his arms and snatching him up from the floor.

"Edward," I began in a low hiss, staring into his eyes. "Look at me." His pupils were tiny pinpricks of black in the dark gold, but as I held him with my gaze and breathed across his face, the pupils blew wide, his fear exploded, and he began to tremble.

"Jasper, what are you doing to him?" Carlisle took a step toward us, but my low growl kept him from coming any closer.

"Just a bit of vampy voodoo. Giving him a taste of his own medicine," I said in a calm voice. "Which may be a bitter pill for him to swallow." I glanced at Carlisle. "Edward and I will be right out." At those words, Edward's eyes widened in dismay.

Carlisle's lips pressed firmly together, forming a straight line as he looked from me to Edward and back. He finally came to his decision, gave me a sharp nod and left the room. He went out to the patio and stood near the edge, facing the lawn and forest.

Emmett was puzzled and concerned, but he grabbed his improvised burn barrel and headed outside to wait with Carlisle.

"How fortunate you can't read my mind. I learned many things when I was in Maria's army — some of which included ways to gain information without killing the prisoner, or leaving any marks — unless I wanted to. I ran through a few of those methods and decided on this one." The edges of my lips turned slightly upward. "I suppose you never realized vampires could *dazzle* each other did
you?" I stepped closer to him. "You were always too busy using it against Bella."

I trailed my left hand over his jaw, letting my fingers brush over his throat, and drew him closer to me. "Vampires are quite a bit more resistant, but it can be done." I breathed across his face again, and he inhaled deeply. "I feel your fear and confusion, Edward. What could you possibly be confused about?"

I trailed my fingertips lightly down his neck until I reached the hollow of his throat. "I could turn it back on you, but I won't." Tipping my head downward and slightly to the side, I looked up at him as I dragged the backs of my fingers down the center of his chest. He stared into my darkening eyes, and his breath hitched as my hand reached the waistband of his slacks.

His fixated gaze lowered, and he was staring at my mouth. As I ran the tip of my tongue between my parted lips and raised my head, his eyes widened and grew darker.

I inched closer to him until our chests were nearly touching, and our eyes were only inches apart. "I could fill you with lust and desire, but somehow I don't think I'll need to." Drawing my spread fingers slowly up his stomach and chest, I whispered, "You need to feel your own emotions."

I slid my hand around the back of his neck, threading my fingers through his hair and tightening my grip. I tilted his head back. His eyes sluggishly moved back to mine. I lowered my voice. "Now you know how this feels." My nose was nearly touching his, and his breath was coming more quickly.

"But what else do you feel, Edward?" I loosened my hold on his left arm and unhurriedly dragged my palm up his arm and over his shoulder to his neck. "I told Bella I would not kill you, but if you ever do anything — anything at all — to hurt her ever again, in any way, I will break that promise." With my right index finger, I traced a line up his neck and along his jaw, brushing over the scars Bella had left on him, and I smiled. "You know the old saying, Edward? 'That which does not kill us, makes us stronger?' It's only partially true. That which does not kill us, leaves scars." I drew my fingers over his scars and then slowly across his bottom lip. He began to tremble under my hands.

Tracing my finger along his upper lip, I very lightly pressed my chest against his and felt the pace of his breath quicken. "If you ever hurt Bella again, I will hunt you down, and I won't stop until I have your cold ashes in my hands." Breaking eye contact with him, I moved my face closer, my lips nearly touching his, and he gasped. "You'll be screaming my name, but it won't be in pleasure."

I drew a faint line with the tip of my nose across his right cheek and to his ear. "Do you understand, Edward?"

He was breathing heavily and his voice was barely a whisper of air. "Yes, Jasper."

I spoke even more quietly to him. "I also feel your lust and your desire for me, Edward." I breathed across his ear. "Is that what has you confused? And ashamed? There's no need to be ashamed. You aren't the first male to lust after me." I brushed my lips over his ear and he shivered. "Not only can I make you feel fear, I can also make you feel … very good." I pressed my jaw to his and his lust grew. "But I don't need to influence you, do I?" I turned my head just enough so that my lips brushed over his ear again and he sucked in a breath.

"Do you have anything else of Bella's? Anything else with her human scent or her blood on it?"

"No, Jasper." His hands rose up from his sides and his fingers traced hesitantly over my elbows and up my biceps. As his hands came in contact with my skin, his lust increased, as did his shame.

"Don't be ashamed. For some, vampire sexuality can be quite … fluid, changing — dynamic." I
breathed lightly across his ear and his hair fluttered with my breath. "When Bella first awakened, I felt your desire for her. When you came up on Bella and me in the forest, I felt your lust then, along with your anger. Of course, I assumed you were feeling it for Bella. I didn't realize at the time that you might have wanted to be in Bella's place. Did seeing me on top of her excite you, Edward? Or did you wish to have me cover your body with mine?"

At his spike of lust, I believed I had my answer.

"You want me. I know you want to touch me. I can feel it through your hands on my skin. And you want my hands on you." His breath caught in his throat and a miniscule moan escaped him as my fingers brushed over his throat. "Your distaste and disgust for me hasn't been for my scars, but for your own … attraction to me? You want my hands on your body, but I belong to someone else." I drew back from him, inch by inch. "I am only hers." I trailed the fingers of my right hand along the scars on his face, pressing more firmly as I reached his jaw. "You will stay away from my mate, and you will never hurt her again." I brought my hands down his neck and over his shoulders, stepping back and pulling my arms from his trembling grasp.

Speaking in a more normal tone of voice so Emmett and Carlisle could hear me, I said, "Edward, we need to get outside and light a fire." I took another step back from Edward. His eyes were completely black. He finally blinked.

"Jasper," he whispered.

I raised my eyebrows slightly as I started to turn away from him to join Emmett and Carlisle.

"She loves you, Jasper. I saw it and heard it in her mind." He blinked again and his shaking hand went to comb through his hair. "It … it was there in the front of her mind before she showed me … her … her memories. It was there just beneath them, running constantly — over and over." His eyes closed and his head dropped. Slowly, his eyes opened again, he looked up at me, and his misery nearly overwhelmed me. "Bella loves you."

Chapter End Notes

"vampy voodoo" ~ from Bodice Ripper Oh Mercy by GeezerWench.

"That which does not kill us, makes us stronger." ~ Friedrich Nietzsche
Chapter 28, I Call

Jasper's POV

I was stunned at Edward's confession that Bella loved me, and the only thing that saved me from displaying any sort of reaction were my decades of hiding my true emotions from that bitch Maria. I merely raised one eyebrow, gave him a slight smile, and extended my hand, gesturing toward the doorway, urging him to go ahead of me.

Emmett's enthusiasm for making fire had been dampened somewhat during my questioning of Edward, but it didn't take him long to get back into the swing of things. He grabbed the trash can with a grin and darted out across the yard.

Edward was walking as slowly as a horse thief on his way to the gallows, but I resisted the urge to poke him in the back to move him along. By the time we had crossed the patio, Emmett had darted back and forth across the lawn and along the edge of the forest, finding three football-sized rocks to prop the trash can on. Enthusiastically waving a small box of matches, he was eager to get started. His makeshift burn barrel was set up about midway between the patio and the closest trees.

Thoughts in my mind were tangled and knotting themselves more tightly as I stationed myself with my back to the forest. I was facing the burn barrel so I could watch Edward, who was standing directly across from me. I suppose he thought having the fire between us would somehow shield him from me or slow me down if I were to go after him. Idiot. I've jumped over and through fire before.

Emmett was to my left, and Carlisle was to my right. I clasped my hands together behind my back, in the classic "at ease" pose and nodded at Emmett.
Another small smile appeared on Emmett's face as he reached into the trash can to pull out the two halves of the paperback copy of *Romeo and Juliet* Bella had torn. "I didn't bring out any newspaper, but I think this'll do." He glanced up at Edward as he began slowly ripping pages from the tattered book. He crumpled them slightly and dropped them in the trash can.

Emmett appeared happy, but there was a rigid tension in his jaw, and I could feel his anger and disgust. I knew that he found Edward's collection of Bella's blood to be unsettling, and he wanted to destroy it nearly as much as I did. He did seem to be deriving some satisfaction from Edward's aggrieved expression and his slight flinches as each section of pages were torn from the book.

"Well," Emmett began. "Making fire is much more fun in the dark, but I don't think anyone wants to wait a couple more hours until dusk." He tossed the remaining pages in the burn barrel, saving one, spit in the barrel, and stirred Bella's discards around with a long stick he had picked up in the woods.

As Emmett went to strike a match to that last page, I tried to catch my racing thoughts. Why would Edward disclose that Bella loved me? Did he gain any advantage by telling me? Did he say that to get a reaction, or was he finally admitting defeat?

He had made one last desperate attempt to gain Bella's favor, and he had received her wrath instead. It couldn't be any clearer what she thought of him and that she wanted him to stay away from her.

Even I had to admit a pissed off Bella was a little scary, especially when she had the ability to trap and hold you down without even touching you. Who knew if she could actually close down her shield enough to crush vampires?

Was what he said the truth? Did she love me? Or had he said that to try and distract me for some reason? He was the only one here who could read thoughts, and Bella had forced out her shield, opening her mind to him. Is that why he had looked at me with such anguish when she had first shown him what she had been thinking?

Was that the reason she kept blocking me from feeling her emotions, except for the few she chose to let me feel? Why would she do that? The answer to that question was fairly easy, even for me. For the same reason she had felt guilt after remembering Alice — I was still married.

Edward's sexual attraction for me was … unanticipated. In the over fifty years I had lived with the Cullens, I had never once felt that from him and had assumed I would have to influence him with a burst of lust in order to subdue and question him. Lust frequently worked better than fear because the … subject wanted to please me.

Edward's strongest emotions for me had always been distaste and disgust, but I had been able to trace those back to thoughts or memories of my time in Maria's army, a glimpse of my scars, or to my "slips" when I had attacked humans. Otherwise, as long as I kept most of my scars covered, we had gotten along well and had even enjoyed each other's company over the years. We had both, along with Alice, worked together to protect the coven — the family.

He had not displayed any such interest in other males as long as I had been with the Cullens, and, up until he had met Bella, I had occasionally thought he was asexual. Then he met Bella, and I had felt his desire for her when they had been together, though he vehemently squashed it time and again.

He wasn't the only male to ever have lustful thoughts for me, but what had caused his desire for me to surface? While with the Cullens, I had put myself in the background and remained there. Carlisle was the head, and no coven could have two leaders.

Yet another good reason to break away.
But being mated to Bella had certainly forced me into the foreground. Could that have sparked his interest? Or was his repression of it broken loose because of the emotional and physical trauma he had suffered in recent days?

Had Edward told me she loved me in order to distract me from his interest?

It didn't matter. Regardless of what Edward thought of or felt for me, I would do whatever was necessary to take care of and protect Bella.

From my position, I could also see the rear of the house. I glanced up to the windows of Bella's room and saw that someone had closed them, but had left the curtains drawn back. Looking quickly over the rest of the house, I noted that all the windows had been closed, at least at the back of the house. If any of the women cared to look, they could plainly see where we were and that Edward was still in one piece. He would be left in one piece — but only because it was what Bella wanted.

I turned my attention to Edward as the pages of the book flamed up in the trash can, catching the other items on fire. Acrid, black smoke from the plastic bags, with traces of the sweet scent of burning venom, began to drift up from the silvery can. It wound slowly between us before being carried away by the minimal breeze.

I knew Bella and Edward had read *Romeo and Juliet* together. They had also watched one of the film adaptations in order to do a report for English class. It seemed that book had more significance to both of them than as just an assignment for school. It had for Bella, at any rate.

Edward's face clouded with pain and he was projecting disappointment, regret, grief, and resignation. As each of the plastic storage bags gave a little hiss before melting, the contents burning away, his brow would furrow and the skin around his mouth would tense.

To me, that was further proof his only true interest in Bella was her blood. The fascination with the blood was stronger than any concern he may have held for her as a woman. How could he not have been interested in her? My anger at what he had done to her increased, but I tamped it down. I could easily dismember and be rid of him, but Bella wanted him alive to remember. I consoled myself with the fact that Edward would suffer for a very long time, as long as he didn't attempt and succeed at suicide by … vampire.

Carlisle had been staring down into the trash can and he sighed wearily as he took a small step back from the flames. "Edward, I cannot understand your motivation for wanting to save any part of Bella's human self, most especially her blood. As Bella said, a photograph or even a lock of her hair would have been understandable — even acceptable — but her blood?" Carlisle's saddened questioning eyes looked up to Edward's face.

"I can't … I'm not able to explain it, Carlisle." Edward's hands hung limply at his sides, and his shoulders sagged. His darkened eyes quickly glanced around at each of us before dropping to stare at the sickly yellow flames again. "I … I only know I had to have some small part of her. I needed …"

"That's bullshit, Edward," Emmett hissed, and his right hand sliced through the air in a chopping motion. His golden eyes had also darkened, and his normally cheerful face displayed a rarely seen hardness. "You've done some weird shit over the years, and who hasn't, right? But this," he jabbed a finger at the flickering flames, "is some of the most fucked up shit I've ever seen." He took his stick and poked at the smoking lumps in the trash can before spitting on one of the largest. Flames flared brightly over it, and Emmett stirred everything in the bottom of the trash can, ensuring it all burned completely away.

Considering the depth of Edward's obsession, I would have to make sure he wasn't able to collect
any of those ashes or lumps of burned plastic.

Emmett closed his eyes for a moment as he took in a slow, deep breath. "Edward, she probably would have let you keep almost anything you asked for if you wanted some little thing, but you had to go and be a pervert again. After that creepy shit, I wouldn't have let you keep one goddamn thing. I don't get it, but it's up to her."

His jaw clenched and he turned his head slightly to the side, flexing his neck before snaring Edward with his eyes again. "Do you realize how lucky you are to have your arms, legs, and head still attached? Do you realize how lucky you are to still be alive? I don't know how Bella kept herself from rippin' you to pieces. And with her shield, none of us would have been able to stop her. Not that most of us would have wanted to." Emmett snorted, looked away from him and into the small fire again. "Bella told you. Jasper told you, and now I'm telling you. Stay away from her. Jasper may have told Bella that he wouldn't kill you, but I didn't."

Emmett's eyes had darkened to a glittering black as he struggled to control his fury. "And one more thing," he growled as he jabbed at the smoking ashes and blackened lumps, the stick thumping loudly in the bottom of the trash can. "Don't think you'll be able to grab any of these ashes. I'm gonna make this shit disappear."

Pleased that Emmett and I were on the same wavelength, I gave him a grateful nod. I had stood quietly and watched the myriad of negative and fearful emotions flicker over Edward's face as Emmett spoke, then caught his shock and disbelief when Emmett threatened to kill him if he didn't stay away from Bella. I wasn't surprised at what Emmett had said, knowing how strongly he felt about her; how much he loved her as his sister and friend.

Carlisle sighed again and straightened his shoulders, though his worry and disappointment were weighing heavily on him. "Edward, you do need to stay away from Bella …"

"Then I should leave. I should go," Edward interrupted him. Bringing his fingers to the bridge of his nose, he added quickly, "I can pack a few things and go to Denali and …"

"You can't," I said forcefully. "You won't. As Bella said, to keep up appearances — maintain the charade — you need to attend her memorial service on Thursday and then on the fourth you need to go to your graduation with Alice. I'm sure the memorial speeches about Bella won't be too taxing for you. If anyone asks, Rosalie, Emmett, and I have finals and there isn't time to fly back from the east coast, make it to your graduation, and take the finals."

I finally shifted my position, moving my arms to my sides and lifting my head to look down on Edward. Destroying the last remnants of Bella's blood helped to keep my rage at bay, but I could feel my mouth curving into a sneer. "I don't care how difficult it may be for you, but you will attend Bella's memorial, and you will go to your graduation. When you all leave to go to the service, Bella, Rosalie, Emmett, and I will leave soon after. You will play your part, Edward, and you will do it convincingly. Just as we all have before."

Edward's anxiety was climbing higher and he gripped the bridge of his nose even more tightly. "I should leave. I'm sure everyone would understand why I wouldn't be able to attend …"

"Edward," I snarled, and I felt venom begin to form in my mouth. My hands had clenched into tight fists. "To ensure that you do your duty, I can remove a few select parts and keep them until you have … fulfilled your obligations. Being without a few extremities won't kill you. It would be painful, but that should ensure that you cooperate." I took a step toward Emmett to get closer to Edward.

"You wouldn't!" Edward gasped.
Faster than I've ever seen him move, Emmett backhanded Edward with a vicious crack, catching his arm against his face, and sending him soaring toward the patio. He struck the ground so hard he was embedded in the mulch and soil of Esme's flowerbed. I was there, kneeling on the ground, my right hand around his throat. The next instant Carlisle and Emmett were standing over us, one at each side.

Carlisle knelt at my right as he quickly examined Edward. "Your arm and your jaw have nearly been crushed. Lie still." Carlisle's own jaw flexed with his anger, but he reached around my right arm and cautiously took hold of Edward's crushed forearm and laid it gently over his chest.

On my left, Emmett dropped to his hands and knees beside the Edward-filled impression in the ground. "Didn't see that one comin' did ya? Eddie, ya just don't get it, do ya? No matter what you say or what you think, you are not goin' to run away again because shit got too hard for you. You need to man the fuck up."

"Yes, Edward," I said, adjusting my grip on his neck. "Time to suck it up and grow some balls. You've always run from your troubles, and the last time you insisted we all follow you. I don't think I'll ever forgive myself for that. Our leaving nearly cost Bella her life when she jumped from that cliff, and then again when she followed your sorry ass to Volterra." My fingers tightened. "Even if she hadn't gone to Italy, Aro would have found out about her from your fuckin' mind." I squeezed his throat a bit more. "We mustn't forget your melodramatic flair brought her to the attention of the Volturi. You're not running this time. Your immature, selfish, and fucked up actions will not jeopardize Bella's safety again." Flexing my fingers over his throat, I growled, "Do I need to remove any little parts?"

Edward could not speak yet because his mouth and face were still healing, evidently painfully, but his dull black eyes moved up to meet mine and he shook his head.

"I'd have to agree, Edward," Carlisle said with conviction. "Somewhere along the line, I failed in my duty and my responsibility as your mentor — as your father. I did not see it before now. Perhaps I didn't see it because previous situations didn't seem quite as critical as this one. Or perhaps I was blinded by my love for you." Carlisle bowed his head slightly. "I will not risk Esme. I won't risk anyone else, either. Our entire family is at stake, and I will do what I must to ensure our safety. All of us must wisely and carefully play our parts — especially you. As your mentor, your father — your coven leader — I am telling you that you will not leave. You will attend Bella's memorial and you will participate in the Forks High graduation ceremony." Carlisle's eyes narrowed at Edward. "Jasper may be leaving, but I think I can ensure that you will … do your duty. Edward, if you leave prematurely, you cannot come back."

Edward's eyes widened in disbelief at Carlisle's quiet threat.

"You may leave immediately after the graduation," Carlisle said quietly. "In fact, I think we all might need a little time away."

"Alaska is lovely this time of year," Esme said softly from the doorway to the living room. She walked slowly toward us, smoothing her slacks, and stopped to stand at Carlisle's side. She reached for him and her hand slid over his shoulder and down his back. "You know I will support you in whatever decision you make."

She looked down at Edward sadly, and I felt her pity and unhappiness change to resolve. "It will be difficult, Edward, but we all will get through this." She smiled encouragingly at him.

She looked up at me and the smile finally reached her eyes. "Jasper, Bella is still in her bubble bath. She does seem to enjoy the water. She's been listening to the music on Rosalie's iPod for the last few minutes so did not hear … all of this." Esme sighed lightly, then smiled fondly as she said, "She does
like to have the music up rather loud. Rosalie is with her, reading a magazine. I'm sure she'll be out soon."
She stooped down next to Carlisle and reached for his hand. "I believe we need to speak with Edward."

"Yes, we do, Esme." Carlisle reached for Edward's undamaged hand and urged him to get up out of the flowerbed. Carlisle assisted him out of the hole and began to help him brush off his clothes. Edward remained silent. He still seemed to be in shock that Emmett had hit him and Carlisle had threatened him.

Esme turned to Emmett. "Emmett, dear, could you fill in this hole before going inside?"

"I sure can, Esme. I got some ashes to take care of, too."

"Thank you, Emmett."

Since Esme and Carlisle had taken charge of Edward and were leading him toward the forest for their talk and Emmett would be taking care of the flowerbed and the ashes, it was time for me to take care of a few things myself. Like give Peter a call. That, and I needed to get away from Edward before I killed him and broke my promise to Bella.

"I'll be up in my study." I gave them all a nod, trusting Emmett to make sure the ashes of Bella's blood would disappear. I darted inside and leapt up to the second floor landing. I flashed down the hall to my study and dug my other phone out of the center drawer of my desk. Luckily, it was charged up enough to call Peter, but I'd have to remember to plug it in. Spotting another Zippo lighter with a Confederate flag emblem on it, I grabbed it and put it in my pocket.

As I scrolled through the contact list on the phone, hit Peter's number and waited for it to connect, I began pacing quickly from the window at the north wall to the door at the south wall and back. I'd been away from Bella long enough and was beginning to feel anxious. Edward's continual adolescent drama and utter selfish bullshit did not help matters.

I kept thinking how much easier things would have been without him around.

But then I had Peter's own brand of shit to look forward to. From the time I had sired him, that bastard had seemed to know when shit was going to happen. He never called it a gift, and he said he didn't get visions like Alice — a stray thought or idea would just pop into his head. Sometimes it was "just a feeling." Though almost everyone seemed to get those now and then, Peter's intuitive flashes often appeared to be just a little bit more. Unfortunately, those stray thoughts and feelings didn't always come across with enough information or when you wanted them to, which just annoyed the piss out of me. Steeling myself against the onslaught of Peter's particularly aggravating variety of fuckery, I ran my hand through my hair and took a deep breath.

Finally, Peter answered the phone. "Major."

"Captain," I said calmly, despite my increasing restlessness. "How have you and Charlotte been?"

Peter laughed sharply. "Don't try to bullshit an old bullshitier. I knew you were going to call. You called for a reason, and it ain't to chew the fat. What's up?"

"If you knew I was goin' to call, why didn't you answer the phone quicker? Asshole." I sighed. "To get to the point then ... Think you're up to handling a newborn again?" I stopped pacing and was staring out the window in the north wall, looking out over the driveway and watching the new leaves rustling gently on the trees.

After a pause, Peter asked cautiously, "You have a newborn?" After another slight pause he said, "I
think Char and I can handle any newborn you got even if he is one of yours."

What the hell did he mean by that? On second thought, he had a point — I had sired both him and Charlotte. Besides that, Peter had a way of knowing things and he didn't know I had a newborn? I leaned my right forearm on the window frame and drummed my fingers anxiously against the window. Lowering my voice, I said, "This one's different."

"Whaddya mean 'this one's different?' A newborn is a newborn. They get stupid, and ya rip their arm off and beat 'em half to death with it. What's so hard about that?"

I didn't know why I was feeling more nervous by the second, but I was suddenly tongue-tied and couldn't find the words to tell him who the newborn was and how important she was to me.

"What's goin' on, Major?" I could hear the suspicion in Peter's voice. "We'll meet him and kick his ass if he doesn't behave. Piece of cake."

I swallowed nervously and whispered into the phone, "It's a her."

"A female? So, we'll kick her ass if she doesn't behave herself. You know I don't have a problem with kickin' some pretty little filly's ass and makin' her act right."

At the thought of anyone attempting to kick Bella's pretty little ass, an involuntary growl rumbled up through my chest. Regrettably, Peter heard it.

"Like I said, Major, what's goin' on? What's different about this female newborn?"

I swallowed convulsively again. Switching the phone to my right ear, and running the fingers of my left hand through my hair, I shifted my weight from my right foot to my left. I cleared my throat.

"Christ Almighty! Just spit it out already." Peter was getting impatient. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

Clearing my throat again I mumbled into the phone, "She's, uh, she's my mate." I noticed my fingers flipping the lock on the window and made them stop. I shoved my hand in my pocket.

The silence on Peter's end stretched out until I thought I would choke.

"Your mate?" he finally said. The silence dragged on for a few more seconds and then, "The newborn is your mate. HA! Didn't I tell ya?" Then he yelled right into the phone, "Char!" He finally pulled the phone away from his mouth before he yelled again. "Hey, Char! We got us a newborn vamp and guess who she is!"

In the background, I could hear Charlotte's annoyed voice. "Peter, I told you I was busy with these earrings. What on God's green earth are you talkin' about? Why the hell would we want a damn newborn? I had enough of that shit back in Mexico."

If I could sweat, I would have been wringing wet by then.

"She's Jasper's mate."

Dead silence. No pun intended. After several seconds, Charlotte's voice sounded much closer.

"Give. Me. That. Phone. right now, Peter Whitlock!"

I could hear a scuffle through the speaker of the phone. There were a few sharp cracks and a thud. It sounded like the phone hit the floor and bounced.
"Jasper!" Squeaked Charlotte's excited voice. "Oh! I'm so happy for ya, sugar! Who is she? When do we get to meet her? Will we get to meet her soon? It had better be soon or I'm gonna whip your ass!"

Her voice just dripped southern belle sometimes. I could imagine her grinning from ear to ear, bouncing up on her toes, and pale blonde hair flying around her. In spite of her threats to whip my ass, it was good to talk to her.

In the background, I heard Peter whining, "I would've given you the phone, sweetness."

"Hush up, Peter. Jasper! Well say somethin', honey. Who is she? We're goin' to meet her soon, right?"

Peter's voice broke through again. "Tell 'im I told him that black-haired shrimpy imp wasn't his mate."

"Hush up, Peter! I'm on the phone! C'mon, Jasper. Say somethin', sweetie. When do we get to meet her? Ya know I have to meet her!"

I drew my hand down over my face, sighed, and shoved my hand back in my pocket. "Yes, you'll meet her, Charlotte. I called to ask if you and Peter would meet us at the northern spread."

"Sure we will, sugar. Where are ya now?"

"We're still in Forks. We need to leave, but we're not leaving until Thursday morning around ten. Rosalie and Emmett will be coming with us. The rest of the Cullens will be staying here for a while then they may be going to Alaska."

Peter's voice came through the phone, sounding closer. "Tell him we can be there tomorrow, since we're not too far from there, and Charlotte will have the place nice and clean in no time."

Charlotte growled in warning, "Peter." Then she cleared her throat. "I guess ya heard that, Jasper?"

"Yes, I did. Thank you. If things go as I've planned, we should be there Friday morning. I'm hoping dawn or thereabouts. My plan is to only stop for gas, but we'll see how it goes."

"We'll have the place opened up and spic and span. We were by there about six months ago, sweetie — about the beginning of December — so it shouldn't be too bad. Hopefully, there isn't too much damage from the winter," Charlotte said and then she hissed, "Peter, quit it."

"Just gimme the phone, woman."

Charlotte growled at him again.

"So, Jasper." Peter began as he claimed the phone. "Rejoining the Whitlock Coven at last. Just like I knew you would. I told you years ago Alice wasn't your mate. Who is this gal? Have we ever met her before?"

"I remember you told me, and no, you haven't met her." I paused for a moment, my nerves kicking in again. "I told you about her last year when I called. It's … it's Bella." My hand had escaped my pocket again and was picking at a loose thread on the curtains.

It had to be some kind of record. Peter was speechless again. Not much kept him from running off at the mouth. He talked about as much as Emmett did.
"Bella," he stated. "Edward's human girlfriend. This has got to be a hell of a story."

"She's not human anymore, and she's not Edward's girlfriend," I growled.

"That's what I understand," he deadpanned. "How old is she?" he asked, the joking tone finally leaving his voice.

"A little over a day."

The silence that greeted me could only be categorized as "stunned."

I heard Peter suck in a deep breath, winding himself up. "Are you fuckin' kiddin' me? You're fuckin' with me, right? You're gonna try an' stick a psychotic, schizo newborn vampire in a little ol' metal box on Thursday when she's three days old and try to drive? And let us not forget this newborn female vampire is your mate, for Christ's sake! And you're gonna try and drive? I remember that newly mated shit … oh, sorry, Char. Just tryin' to drive home a point with Major Delusional here … like I said, Jasper, I remember that newly mated, uh, enthusiasm, and I'm kinda surprised you've been on the phone this long and been able to speak in complete sentences. That new mate stuff is, well … whew. And you're gonna try and drive all the way to the northern spread?"

"Yes. That's why Emmett and Rosalie are coming with us. And it's a crew cab truck, by the way." I thumped my head against the window frame. "She's been pretty good. She has a lot of control for a newborn — almost too much sometimes. But she's had her moments …"

"I imagine she has."

"I'm on the phone because she's taking a bubble bath."

"And you're not in the tub with her with all that hot, slick, soapy …"

"Shut up, Peter." I groaned longingly at the image in my mind of a naked, hot, slick and slippery Bella in a tub full of soapy bubbles, infused with her scent. I realized I was clenching my teeth. "Too many nosy Cullens around," I growled.

"No shit." He laughed.

"She can't stay here." My hand just wouldn't stay in my pocket. It found its way to my forehead and through my hair again. "We can't stay here. Her father lives in town. She has friends here. She … she runs a lot, and though she hasn't gotten away from me, I don't want to take the chance that she'll get loose and kill somebody. Or someone from town, or the wolves, see her. Then there's Edward and Alice. Not that I give a flyin' fuck about Edward."

"I'll just bet." I could hear the smirk in Peter's voice. "Edweirdo's still alive?"

"Yes," I growled again. "Bella asked me not to kill him. But Edward and I had a little … talk."

"I remember your little talks." Peter nervously cleared his throat. "So, uh, why are you waitin' until the day after tomorrow to leave Forks?"

"Of course, no body was found after she wrecked her truck, but her memorial service is Thursday. She's the Police Chief's only child so the whole town will be looking the other way when we leave."

"Oh, damn. The Top Cop's only child." Peter swallowed loudly. "Well, Major, I look forward to meetin' and hearin' all about the little newborn that has you stammerin' and stutterin'. Oh, and you'll get through the mountains just fine if you stick to your schedule. I think I should check the PO Box,
too, right?"

"What? You doin' weather reports now?" It was goddamn irritating when he did that. Always had been.

"Hell, no. Those assholes are always wrong. I know ya'll will make it just fine."

"I hope so. And, yes, go by the post office. It's a good idea to start checking it. I'll be expecting mail, and I need to get some more clothes and can't get out to shop. They'll be sent to the PO Box."

"Rippin' your clothes off, is she?" He laughed again.

I sighed. "Yes. But not quite the way you think she is. I'll order some more for her, too." I ran my fingers through my hair again. "Thanks, Peter."

"Don't mention it. I reckon it'll be fun."

"Fun" he says.

I looked to the heavens and sighed. I was beginning to wonder what I had gotten myself into, but I couldn't worry about that at the moment; I had shit to take care of. "Mark the perimeter, and if you need anything for the house or the barns, get it. You know which account to use." I sighed again and dropped my head. "And, uh, she does seem to like bubble baths. Tell Charlotte to pick up something with a vanilla scent. Nothin' too sweet." That was embarrassing. "Thanks again, Peter. We'll see you on Friday."

"Vanilla bubble baths." Peter chuckled. "Will do, Major," he said, laughing at me again, and disconnecting the call.

With relief, I pressed the end call button and went to my desk to get the charger. After plugging in my phone, I heaved a huge sigh, grateful that task was over and had gone as well as expected. Despite Peter's laughing at me, I knew I could count on him.

No one was immune from Peter's infuriating teasing, and I expected Bella to be prime target number one. Of course, thinking about Bella getting pissed off and biting him for it brought a smile to my face. I sat at the desk, opened my laptop and started putting in the passwords.

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Chapter End Notes

The Peter who "knows shit" is the brainchild of IdreamofEddy.
Jasper's POV

Having multiple levels of security on my laptop slowed things down, but it was the only way to go. It's not that I didn't trust everyone, though I was having a problem with Edward; it was just more prudent not to have to trust them. Bella would get all the passwords and codes, of course.

Speaking of Bella — would she be in that tub forever?

After getting through the passwords, I got online and searched for V-neck t-shirts. I ordered two dozen in a few different colors, making sure six of them were black, since Bella had said she liked it. All of them would be shipped to our new home. Then I looked for Levi's jeans and bought six pairs of those. Bella hadn't ripped my pants off yet, but I could hope.

That caused my mind to wander to what it might be like for Bella to rip all of my clothes off me. That led to thoughts of being naked, in a bubble bath with Bella. I let out a long, slow breath. The tub at my house was a standard size. We could remodel and put in a bigger tub if Bella wanted one. Shit, I'd build her a whole new house if she wanted.

Next on my list was to try and find another Calvin and Hobbes t-shirt for her. Might need a few of them. Maybe something with a Firefly TV show theme. Clicking through what I could find, I didn't think I'd like for her to wear something with "Captain Tightpants" on it.

A few more of those Henleys might be nice.
Absorbed in my shopping for Bella, and day dreams of vanilla and spice scented bubbles, I didn't notice anyone walk up to my door until I heard the light knocking.

Looking up, I sucked in a breath. Every time I had been away from Bella and then saw her again, it was like seeing her for the first time. She was a vision framed by the deep cherry-stained oak of the door trim. She was wearing stone washed jeans, her navy blue Converse, and a long-sleeved, deep red Henley. The three buttons at her throat were undone, and the sleeves were pushed up on her forearms. The red of her shirt brought out the gleaming auburn highlights in her rich brown hair, and her crimson eyes glistened like jewels. I was struck dumb and could only stare at her. It didn't matter what color she wore because any color she had on complemented the light ivory of her skin and enhanced the soft pink of her lips. Oh, my fucking God, she was beautiful.

"Jasper? Can I come in?" she asked tentatively. She brought her hands together and started picking at her fingers.

I must have looked like a drooling idiot with my mouth hanging open, eyes wide, and my hands poised above the laptop.

Swallowing the pooling venom in my mouth, I choked out, "Uh, yeah."

I stood quickly from my desk and didn't notice I had knocked my chair over until I heard the loud thump as it hit the floor. I quickly righted it and darted across the room to her.

She met me half way and reached out, her fingers delicately brushing over my arm.

Instantly, as her skin met mine, the tension and anxiety I had been feeling drained away. As I breathed in her tantalizing fragrance, my constantly smoldering desire for her rekindled, warming me from within. She had used the vanilla and brown sugar body wash again, but she had also used the strawberry shampoo. I hoped she used that up as soon as possible. I didn't want any more reminders of her time with Edward.

"Hi," she said shyly, tipping her head down and looking up at me.

Again I wondered if what Edward had told me was true. Did she love me? I adored her. I caught her hands in mine and brought them to my lips. "Hi," I whispered against her fingers. "I missed you."

Her eyes widened slightly. She started to pull her hands away, but I held them more tightly. "Stay. Please."

I moved my left hand to cup her face, and with my right, I brought her hands to my chest. She leaned into my palm, and her eyes slowly closed. A small smile graced her face.

"Bella, you are so beautiful." I stepped closer to her, and my right arm was around her back, pulling her body into mine. I bent my head down to kiss the top of her head. "I missed you," I repeated. Inhaling deeply, I closed my eyes; sinking into the peace and contentedness I felt whenever her scent surrounded me.

She tried to pull away from me again, and I held her more firmly against me. "Please, Bella." More than anything I had ever wanted, I wanted her to stay with me, be near me. And not just at that moment, but forever.

"Uh, but Jasper, um ..." she said, turning her face up to mine. Her eyes widened, and she gasped. "Oh!" She jerked away from me and bumped into the deep green couch I had placed diagonally in front of my desk. "Your ... your eyes are so, uh, black," she stammered out as she backed away from me toward the end of the couch and in the direction of the open door. Her thigh grazed the
corner of the oak end table causing the lamp to begin rocking.

I darted forward and caught the lamp before it fell over. "Next are you going to tell me what sharp teeth I have?"

"Very funny." She crinkled her nose at me and smiled nervously as she backed away another step.

I settled the lamp and stepped toward her. "Before anyone else interrupts us, I want to tell you that Alice is giving me a divorce." With my right hand, I stroked her gleaming hair along the side of her face and down her neck. "I should have the papers in a few days."

I couldn't feel her emotions, but her face was colored with surprise. "She is? I didn't think she … I mean, I thought that she would, uh …" Ducking away from my hand, she skittered sideways around the table, avoiding the lamp, and quickly went behind the couch, never taking her eyes off my face. She backed away from the couch until she hit the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves at the front of the room. "Oh!" She gasped again, looking quickly to her left, at the open door, and back at me. She nervously yanked up the sleeves of her deep red shirt and crossed her arms.

I took a step toward her, but was angling to put myself between her and the door. "You thought she would fight it? Why would she? I'm your mate," I whispered, gazing into her eyes and taking another step closer to the door. "You are my mate. No one can fight that."

Wanting her so badly, I could feel my dick lengthening, my breath coming faster, and I longed to have her in my arms. I took another slow step toward the door. One more and I would be able to reach it and swing it closed.

"Er, uh, Jasper." Bella had backed herself into the corner. "Rose went to get Emmett. They'll be back any minute. Um, I think Alice is in her room down the hall."

I took that last step toward the door, grasped the edge and pushed it gently closed until I heard the latch click; my eyes on Bella the entire time.

Her eyes dropped slowly from my face, down over my chest, and as I turned to face her, her eyes dropped to my groin. The bright red began to darken, and her eyes snapped back to mine. She gulped.

"Um, did you burn all those bags and stuff? Because I kinda smell burnt plastic, paper, and something sort of sweet on you." She fussed with her hair, running her fingers through a lock over her shoulder.

"Yes," I whispered, taking a step to begin closing the distance between us. "Everything was burned to ashes. Emmett enjoyed it quite a bit, as did I." Another slow step. "That sweet smell is burned venom."

Her dark eyes dropped to her fidgeting fingers, and she pulled at the ends of her hair. "Did, uh, Edward have anything to say?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"He mentioned wanting to leave and go to Denali, but we convinced him it was in his best interest to stay and meet his obligations."

I had taken two more quiet steps over the wool Oriental rug and was almost close enough to touch her. My right hand reached out involuntarily to her.

"He wanted to leave? You mean he wasn't going to go to my memorial and his graduation?" Her hands clenched into fists, and her black eyes were sparking with her instant anger. "You mean he
wanted to run away again, that son of a bitch!" Then she was off and pacing, past the couch and my
desk toward the north wall and back. She was fuming. "Granted, I've done a lot of running, but I
have an excuse for being out of my mind — I'm a newborn!" She stopped in front of me and flung
her arms out. "He's over a hundred years old!"

She flashed to the back of the room and spun around, her shining hair swirling around her shoulders,
causing her delicious and intoxicating scent to fill the space. She put her hands on her hips. "When
smelling my blood was too much for him, he took off. Now he wants to take off again, the jerk. How
did you convince him to stay?"

Thwarted in my quest to seduce her, I sighed heavily, crossed my arms, and leaned against the
bookshelves on the east wall. "I told him I could remove a few parts. I would return them later if he
did what he was supposed to. Emmett backhanded him, and Carlisle told him if he left before he
gave to your memorial and the graduation, he couldn't come back. I also had my hand around his
throat."

Bella blinked with her surprise. "Emmett hit him? Wow. He didn't see that coming and duck?"

I smirked at the memory. "I think he was distracted watching the last of your blood burn away."

She nodded. "Did you break off any parts?"

"No need to yet." I took a step toward her.

"You guys were busy out there."

"A bit. Emmett volunteered to get rid of those ashes so Edward wouldn't be tempted to try and save
any of them."

"What? Do you think he would do that?" she asked incredulously.

"I wouldn't put it past him."

"He has been kind of a creeper like that." She leaned back against the bookcase and crossed her
arms, a look of disbelief on her face. "And Carlisle … Wow. So Carlisle said he couldn't come back.
Wow. That's … wow. I never thought I'd see the day."

"Neither did I, but I think Carlisle and Esme are a little disappointed in him." I took another step
toward her. "His mind reading is useful, but Carlisle managed to survive many years without him.
He and Esme could do so again. I think Edward may realize this, and I think he would prefer to stay
in Carlisle's good graces. Edward's safer with the family around him for protection."

I strode toward her and her arms flashed to her sides.

"Just closin' the curtains, Darlin'." I winked and raised the left side of my mouth in a slight smile,
watching her eyes darken further as I let my accent come out a little more. "It'll be dark soon." I
tugged the curtains closed and then turned to face her again. "There are a few things I want to talk
about, and I'd like for you to look over the IDs I ordered for you. They're in my desk."

I went to my desk and pulled my chair out of the way, rolling it toward the window. I opened the
center drawer and lifted out the manila envelope. "I ordered these several weeks ago. Rosalie went
and picked them up." I peered into the envelope. "I'm not sure who, but she or Emmett added the
photos. Emmett, I think." I closed my laptop and pushed it to the back of the desk. Fortunately, I'd
completed my orders. Pulling the papers and cards from the envelope, I laid them out, making three
piles so Bella could see them and stepped back.
Downstairs, we heard a door slam. Looking heavenward, I said, "Emmett's back."

"You can always tell when he's around." Bella smiled fondly.

She came toward the desk, crossing her arms under her breasts, and looked down at the papers and documents. She frowned.

"Isabella Elizabeth Cullen? Isn't 'Elizabeth' Edward's mother's name?" At my nod she snorted. "He wasn't ever going to change me, so after a couple decades I would have looked like his mother. I don't think so," she said scornfully. "You can burn that set." Then she looked up at me, her eyes were back to a clear, bright red. "You ordered these several weeks ago?"

I was surprised again that she could remember something like Edward's mother's name. "Yes. It was inevitable that you either be killed or changed since the Volturi have … been made aware of your existence. Thinking we'd eventually go with the wiser choice, I thought I should have these ready. We have no idea when one of them may happen to show up to check — unless Alice has a vision of it. But she told me her visions haven't been coming in very well."

Bella just nodded at that, pressing her lips together, and looked down at the other sets of documents. "So how come you do this?"

"It's part of what I contribute to the … family. I can make them myself, but sometimes it's good to delegate. I prefer it. Jenks, and his father before him, have worked for us for years and have always done good work." I leaned against the corner of the desk. "Sometimes I think handling the documents became my job because I'm already the black sheep of the family. And I'm good at it."

"I think maybe Edward has taken over that title now, the stupid-ass," she mumbled and frowned slightly. Then she nodded her head again. "Isabella Emma McCarty?"

"Emmett's sister or cousin?"

She smiled at that.

"Isabella Marie Whitlock?"

"Yes. At the time, I could've chosen any of our names. Esme's Platt, Edward's Masen, Alice's Brandon, Rosalie's Hale, or mine. I've been using Hale here since Rosalie is supposed to be my twin, so I chose Whitlock. With your dark hair, you wouldn't look enough like our sister. I wanted to have at least three sets so you could choose."

"But things have changed since then." She looked at me from the corner of her eye.

"Yes, they have." I studied her eyes, wondering what she was thinking. I couldn't feel her emotions, but there was a subtle tension in the air. Was she angry at my choosing to use my name? "I got these so that we would have them here and available. I could get a set for you with any name you like, but they take time." With the way things had changed, I hadn't thought she would want to use the name Cullen, but I didn't know if she would want to use Emmett's name or mine, or choose something else entirely. "I could call and order a set today if you want. We'd get them in about two weeks."

"So, when we leave, if I used 'Whitlock' I could be a family friend, your cousin, your sister, or …"

"Or my wife," I said quietly, intently watching for her reaction. She had not been impressed by Edward's plan to propose to her. She seemed opposed to marriage, and I was suddenly afraid that my choice of words would anger her. Though the thought of her being my wife was appealing, she might not think so.
She turned her head away, her hair falling over her shoulder and hiding her face. Her right hand went to her mouth, and she nibbled at her fingernails as she looked over her new identities. She sighed lightly. Her hand dropped from her mouth and went to grasp her other hand.

I could see a slight tremor in her fingers, and I wished, once again, she would stop blocking me and let me feel her emotions.

"Bella, what's wrong? I don't know unless you tell me."

As I stepped forward and reached for her, she turned to me. Her eyes were a shining, liquid black. My breath caught in my throat. Was she thirsty, angry about the names I chose, or …

She pounced on me, her arms going around mine and pinning them to my sides. Her mouth was on my lips, kissing me hungrily, and I was so taken by surprise I stumbled backwards. Her lips broke away from mine. Her feet hit the floor, and she pushed me into the corner of the west wall with a loud thud. We were between my wardrobe on my right and the bookshelf on the north wall. If she'd had any more momentum behind her, she would have pushed me through the wall and into Alice's bathroom.

But I really didn't give a shit.

My left hand wove through her silky hair, gripping her neck, as I bent to reach her lips. My right hand slid down her back and over her ass. I pulled her up my body and crushed her against me.

As her legs gripped my hips, her tongue swept across my mouth, and I moaned as I opened to her, tasting her. Her right hand was in my hair, and her fingers scraped across my scalp. Grabbing a handful of my hair, she pulled my head to the side, exposing my neck.

She was kissing and licking my throat, until she reached my ear, and she whispered, "I want you, Jasper."

Oh, damn!

A jolt of pure pleasure surged through me, and I groaned her name. "Oh, Bella." I pushed away from the wall, my right hand gripping her thigh, urging her to wrap her legs all the way around my hips. My lips were on her neck, tasting her, drinking in her spicy scent. Her left hand was under my shirt, on my waist, and slid around to my back, her fingers digging into my skin. "Yes, Bella, yes." I gasped into her ear.

I didn't have a bed in my study, but I did have a couch. If I couldn't make it that far, there was always the floor.

Kicking at my armchair to get it out of my way, I sent it tumbling across the floor toward the bookshelves on the west wall. It crashed into them and fell over.

I didn't care about all the noise or who might be in the house. Bella said she wanted me and that was the only thing that mattered.

She yanked her hand from under my shirt and climbed up my body. Reaching for the neck of the shirt, she ripped it away. Her right hand tightened in my hair and she pulled my head to my left. Her tongue blazed a trail along my shoulder and up my throat, and then she kissed my jaw, whispering, "Jasper."

I was absolute putty in her hands. She could do anything to me she wanted.
Her hungry lips moved urgently back down my throat until she reached the top of my shoulder and the scars from her first bite after she had awakened, and she whispered "You're mine." As I sucked in a breath, she licked my skin, and her razor-sharp teeth sunk slowly into the muscle at the top of my shoulder. She began to growl.

The stinging pain and the exquisitely sharp pleasure shot through me, going straight to my dick. My legs went weak with the overpowering sensations, and I stumbled and fell to my knees, clutching Bella to me. The thud from my knees hitting the floor rattled the window. I didn't think we were going to make it to the couch.

I gathered her long hair together, pulling it away from her neck, and sat back on my heels, nuzzling into her hair as her growl continued to vibrate through me. The enthralling scent of her arousal drifted up and around me, saturating and taking over my mind.

Her weight pressed down on my dick, and her legs tightened around my waist. I groaned and grabbed her hips, thrusting up against her. She gasped, yanking her teeth from my shoulder, and threw her head back, a lengthy moaning "oh" escaping her lips. Her knees thumped down on the floor. She gripped both of my shoulders and tore the rest of my shirt away. She leaned forward and began licking my skin where she had bitten me with long, sweeping strokes across my shoulder and up my neck, ending with a wet kiss just beneath my ear. With each caress of her tongue, I shuddered and moaned.

Oh, my Christ, I couldn't stand it anymore. I pushed her down onto my straining dick. I must have hit a mighty sweet spot because her breath caught and she mewed like a cat against my throat.

"Jasssssp!" She breathed into my ear. Hearing my name like that from her beautiful lips was the sexiest thing I'd ever heard, and I nearly shot my load right then.

There was a soft knock at the door, and I heard Emmett's voice. "Jazz, remember what we talked about."

"You better get the fuck away from that door," I answered him with a growl.

Bella licked the corner of my jaw then shoved me to the floor hard enough that I grunted and the window rattled in its frame again. I expect that thud was heard throughout the house. Perhaps even outside.

She sat up and ground her hot sex over my diamond-hard dick, and I trembled under her hands. I had to be on her, inside her. I couldn't wait anymore — she was driving me insane. I rolled her over onto her back and shoved my right thigh between her legs, pressing my aching dick against her hip. My left arm was under her back, braced against the floor, keeping most of my weight off her, and I gripped her neck, holding her to me. Attacking her soft mouth with mine, she moaned my name again as I thrust my tongue between her lips. I squeezed her hip with my right hand then moved slowly up her side and over her ribs. As my fingers grazed over the thin cotton covering her soft breast, brushing over her stiff nipple, she groaned and arched up into my hand.

The quiet knocking sounded again. "Esme, Carlisle, and Edward are on their way back."

I drew my lips from Bella's and snarled. "A motherfucker's gonna need killin' if he doesn't get the fuck away from here."

"But," Emmett continued. "There's shit to do. You gotta pack, look at the truck, take Bella hunting … After she goes huntin', she's gonna want another bath …"
I started to pull away from Bella so I could go punch a hole through Emmett's head, but Bella's right hand was in my hair again. She clenched a fistful and forced me back to her mouth.

_Holy shit! That's fuckin' hot._

Deciding I would just rip Emmett's legs off and throw him out the window if he dared to open that door, I licked across Bella's lips and along the edge of her jaw until I reached her ear.

"Bella, I want you," I said, hissing. "Please."

Her hips thrust up against me, squeezing my thigh between hers. "Yessss." 

_She said yes!_

I groaned at hearing her say yes. "I need you." I ran my tongue along her neck. With my left hand I tilted her head to my left and licked her throat. "You're mine. Please, Bella."

"Yes, Jasper." She pulled at my hair again. "Jasper, please. Please," she whimpered into my ear. She dragged the fingers of her left hand down my side, leaving burning trails along my skin until she hooked her thumb in the waistband of my jeans. "Jasper, please."

I still felt the erotic sting of her bite and the urge to mark her as mine was growing. I reached up with my right hand and tugged the neck of her shirt and her bra strap to the side. I could feel my venom filling my mouth, and I licked the top of her shoulder, coating her skin with my scent.

"Can you feel what I feel for you, Bella? Can you feel how much I want you?"

She licked my ear and whispered, "Yes, I feel you." Her hand tugged at the waistband of my jeans, and her hips thrust up against me again.

My breath caught in my throat as her hip ground into my dick. "Let me feel you. Let me feel what you feel." I rolled my hips against her and licked across her shoulder again, spreading my venom and my scent over her.

Her desire and her need flowed over and into me, consuming me, and I was on fire with her lust and mine. I let it wash back over her, and she gasped. 

"Yes, Jasper, yes." She breathed into my ear. "I'm yours, Jasper."

When I heard those words from her lips, a growl reverberated up through my chest. "You're mine." My teeth grazed across her smooth skin and sank in, my venom flowing freely over and into her. I felt a sense of exhilaration and euphoria as my teeth entered her shoulder near her neck, and I fought to contain the orgasm that threatened to overwhelm me.

"Jasper!" she screamed and clutched my head to hers. A whining groan escaped her throat, and she curled into me, quivering, her orgasm sweeping through her.

Her intense, pounding sensations broke over me, crashed into me, again and again. I couldn't stop it. I didn't want to. I felt my balls tighten and draw up as my own orgasm suddenly erupted through my groin and flooded me with heat. Another rumbling growl started low in the center of my body and worked its way up to my chest as my body curved over hers. My hips ground into her over and over again as I came, the venom pulsing out of me with each thrust.

"Oh, Jasper. Oh … oh my fucking God," she gasped, and she clung to me, her fingers digging into my shoulders.
I shuddered against her, my hands gripping her neck and her upper arm, as the throbbing orgasmic pulses slowed and began to fade away. Gasping, I pulled my teeth from her shoulder as another wave of her pleasure crashed into me. My chest heaved with my breaths, and the compulsion to lick where I had bitten her overtook me. I needed to care for my mate and seal my venom inside her. I found myself pleased that it was a clean bite with no ragged edges.

After gently licking my bite and watching the edges seal together, I lifted my face from her shoulder and gazed into her shining black eyes. She was so beautiful.

Still floating on that cloud of bliss and the echoing tremors from both of our orgasms, my yearning for her nearly overwhelmed me and a trickle of uneasiness and doubt crept through that bliss. I grasped desperately at her. "Bella," I whispered. "You're mine. You're only mine. Please," I pleaded with her. Since I had awoken as a vampire, I had not begged for anything — not even my life — but I would beg, and do anything else I had to, if she would be mine.

The corners of her lips curved up into a smile, and then she kissed me. She lightly licked my lips and kissed me again. I could still feel her emotions, and she was contented, peaceful, happy, satisfied, and pleased. She brought her hands up to either side of my face and pulled me down to kiss me again. Her lips pressed softly against mine, and she whispered, "Yes." Her love surged out of her, going straight to my heart and filling it until it felt as if it would burst.

My eyes flew open, and I gasped against her mouth. Her love filled me, spreading golden warmth to every part of me, and I melted into her. I was so overcome, I could not speak, I could only manage to crush her to me and kiss her again. When my tongue brushed over her lips, she opened to me, and her hands gripped the sides of my head tightly.

I was lost in her, and after some immeasurable length of time, she ended the kiss and whispered, "Mine." Her peace, pleasure, and love circled around me and held me to her.

The adoration I felt for her shifted and grew as I fell into her black sparkling eyes, and I spoke the only words that came to my mind. "Yes. Always yours. I love you, Bella."

Venom tears welled up in her eyes as they slowly closed. "I know," she whispered. "I know you do. I feel it. I feel you."

I crushed her to me, burying my face in her neck. "Bella, you're mine." I was so … happy. So joyful. Ecstatic. I'd never wanted anyone as much as I wanted her, and she was mine.

"Always."

There was a faint thump outside the door in the hall, and Bella jerked in my arms. Rage exploded from her, and she hissed in my ear, "There's a motherfucker needs killin'." She shoved me away and was on her feet in an instant. A vicious snarl ripped through her throat.

From out in the hall came Emmett's fearful "oh, shit."

Farther down the hall I heard Rosalie say, "I tried to warn you. I think you'd better run fast, Emmett."

In a blur of motion, Bella hit the door, shoving it through the frame, ripping it from its hinges and splintering the jam. It slammed into her bedroom door across the short hall, cracking them both. They fell into her room with a rattling crash.

She came to a sudden stop in the hall, her dark hair swinging around her. Growling deeply, she twisted to face down the hall. "Which way?"
"He went out our window," Rosalie replied calmly from her room.

Bella disappeared.

_Oh, shit._

When she had shoved me away, I had rolled against my desk. I was struck stupid again, wondering how the hell she could switch instantly from idyllically contented to pissed off beyond all reason.

God knows I didn't want to, but I shook my head to reluctantly try and clear the heavenly, euphoric fog of Bella's love saturating me completely and, well, what was currently the best orgasm I'd ever had. I tried to jump up and immediately fell on my face. Stunned, I looked up and Rosalie was standing in the doorway.

"Problems?" She smiled sweetly and batted her eyelashes.

"Nothin' decapitatin' your fuckin' mate wouldn't solve." I got up a little more slowly and my pants dropped to my knees.

Rosalie slapped her hand over her eyes and spun away. "Jesus Christ, Jasper! Why the hell don't you wear underwear?"

"What's the point?"

Bella had ripped my damn pants half off, and I hadn't even noticed!

"Oh, fuck me." I growled.

"I thought she did."

"Not exactly." I growled again. "You saw her. She had all her clothes on, goddammit," I grumbled to Rosalie's back.

I sat back against my desk and yanked off my boots. It seemed there was a joke in there somewhere about cowboys doing everything with their boots on, but my brain just would not quite work right and find it.

I finished tearing my jeans off, using them to wipe my spent venom off my belly and my groin — which just pissed me off. I hoped that one day soon I might get to see Bella naked and have actual sex with her instead of cumming in my goddamn pants — though as intense as those orgasms had been, real intercourse with her would probably render me unconscious. I took my lighter from the pocket, tossed the destroyed jeans toward the window and darted to my wardrobe.

A navy blue t-shirt was on top so I grabbed it and a fresh pair of jeans. I dressed quickly, despite the remaining stickiness of the venom, and shoved my lighter in my pocket and my feet back into my boots.

"They went out your bedroom window?" I asked Rosalie.

"Yes, they did."

"Comin' with me?"

"I suppose I should," she said with resignation as we ran down the hall and into her room. "Somebody should put Emmett back together after Bella gets through with him."
Chapter 30, I Fit

Jasper's POV

Rosalie and I leapt from her second story bedroom window, landing lightly on the patio below. It was nearly full dark, but we didn't have any problem spotting the craters Emmett's huge feet had created when he landed in the yard. It looked like Esme would have him doing some more gardening.

Inhaling deeply, trying to catch Bella's and Emmett's scents, I caught her tantalizing fragrance mixed with the scent of my venom coming from my right. They'd gone west.

I bolted toward the end of the house and followed her scent to the garage. Emmett, the fool, had lead her around the garage and then in front of the house.

"I see their trail through the grass on the other side of the driveway," Rosalie said as she started across the lawn.

At least Emmett had sense enough to try and lead her northeast and away from the humans in Forks. After she had first awakened, Bella had also run in that direction, away from Forks. Even as a newly-awakened vampire, had she been trying to protect her father and friends from herself?

At the edge of the forest, something white caught my attention. I stopped, picked up an abused sneaker, and held it toward Rosalie. "Emmett's."

"Who else wears gunboats that size? Oh, God. It's got bite marks in it!" Rosalie took the shoe from
me. "Bella's teeth." She tossed the shoe over her shoulder in the direction of the house. "I tried to warn him. I knew she was going to get pissed off."

"Her? I'm still fuckin' pissed off! " I clenched my teeth as we raced into the forest, following their scents.

Bella taking off into the wilds again worried me, despite the fact she was chasing Emmett. I knew he would look out for her — when he wasn't too preoccupied with trying to keep her from biting him or removing parts.

Trouble was you never knew where a human might happen to show up; even at night. They were always getting themselves hopelessly lost, stuck in crevasses, attacked by wild animals, caught in avalanches, drained by vampires … .

One good thing about chasing her down was that it gave me the opportunity to check for the presence of any other vampires. Each time we had run through the national forest, I hadn't picked up traces of another. If anyone else had, they would have mentioned it. Even so, we didn't perform perimeter checks like we should, and I couldn't currently do it unless I took Bella with me. It didn't really seem like an option for me. Bella was a little too wild and unpredictable. If we ran across the scent of a human, I might not be able to stop her in time.

Though it became dark quickly as we entered the cover of the trees, Rosalie veered off to the right and grabbed what looked like a rag out of a clump of low bushes.

"Emmett's T-shirt ripped to shreds," she said with annoyance and tossed it away. "I wonder if we'll find an arm or a foot out here," she grumbled. "Or maybe even his head."

"Serves him right for being a stupid dick. I told him to get the hell out." Remembering his attempts at interrupting Bella and me was cranking up the anger a notch or two. I did recall our little birds-n-bees talk, and he had made a few valid points, but when your mate, who had been rejecting you, came right out and said she wanted you … well, you didn't pass that shit up, I didn't care who you were. I couldn't get my hands on her fast enough. Though, next time, I thought I might start ripping clothes off first thing. I expected a next time very soon, too.

Well, I hoped there would be a next time in the near future.

She loved me. She really loved me. When her love touched and flowed over and into me, I had nearly melted right into the floor. And I loved her. I loved her more than … I just loved her. There were no other words for the way I felt about her. Recalling the exquisite warmth from Bella's love filled my un-beating heart again and softly swirled throughout me. I needed to feel her, be with her, and my arms ached with emptiness. I wanted to be holding her instead of chasing after her because that fucking Emmett pissed her off.

"Jasper, slow down a little. I'd like to talk," Rosalie said beseechingly.

"C'mon, Rose. We gotta catch her."

She shot me an exasperated look. "You know perfectly well he'll lead her out for a while and circle back."

"Until she catches him and rips his legs off. Then where's she goin' to go?"

"Back to the house?" she said sarcastically. "I'm sure she would be able to find her way back."

I might have growled a little impatiently.
"Like Emmett said before, you're being kind of an asshole. She'll be fine."

Hissing my frustration at her, I slowed down.

"Emmett and I have discussed Bella and everything she's been through with Edward, and now with losing her family and friends. She does need some time to adjust to all of that."

"She's adjusting," I answered quickly. "That's why I need to get to her. I help her."

"Yes, you do. But the two of you together is a little … intense." Rosalie raised her eyebrows at me. "Maybe you could tone that down a little?"

"Uh, I can't. I've tried. According to Professor McCarty, that's because we haven't been, uh, together together. You all keep interrupting us every time we have more than a minute alone and …"

"As I said, Emmett and I had our own little discussion, and I'm sure he mentioned to you that here is not exactly an ideal location for total togetherness."

"He did. I even agreed with him. But Bella is … I mean, she's just … looking at her and smelling her scent and …"

"You can't help yourself?"

I shook my head.

A soft smile played over Rosalie's lips. "I know how it is." She looked at me from the corner of her eye. "I did notice she bit you again. When you were … almost naked."

My only answer was a self-satisfied smile. Okay, there might have been a touch of smugness, too.

We ran down through a gully and bounded up the other side, finding Emmett's shredded blue jeans. I waited for Rosalie to go through the pockets. She found his cell phone and his wallet, and when she pulled a small rock out of one of the pockets, a melancholy look stole over her face.

I was curious, but didn't ask her about the rock. It seemed to be an odd thing to carry around, but sometimes Emmett did act just like a little kid. Maybe I should have been wondering why he didn't have a toad or a slingshot.

Rosalie glanced up from the small rock in her hand. "Don't tell Emmett you saw this, okay?"

I nodded at her, more curious about the significance of the little grey rock even though I wanted to get going and catch up to Bella.

She held it up so I could see it. It was about three inches long and about an inch wide and thick. On one side was the white outline of a fossilized mussel shell.

Rosalie blinked quickly several times as if tears were forming, and let out a small breath. "He always carries this rock. A few years after he was turned into a vampire, he said he wanted to go back to where the bear had almost killed him. So we went," she said simply, shrugging her shoulders. "He found this rock and he said the mussel shell fossil reminded him of a wing. It looked like an angel wing to him." She sniffed, closed her hand around the rock and put it in the pocket of her jeans. "You know he was dying when I found him."

At my nod, she continued. "He saw me and said he thought I was an angel come to take him to Heaven." She shook her head as if Emmett had been delusional for thinking that. Then she smiled.
"He even thought Carlisle was God." She tossed the shredded jeans away. "I know you want to get to Bella, but you know Emmett won't hurt her or let her get into trouble. Well, not too much trouble." She gestured along the scent trail we had been following. "We can still follow them at a walk for a few minutes."

She was a bit uncomfortable and glanced nervously up at me before dropping her honey-gold eyes back to the ground.

"What's up, Rose?" Walking beside her, I patted her shoulder to encourage her to say whatever it was she had on her mind.

"We don't get many chances to talk privately — there always seems to be someone around."

"That's no shit." I snorted irritably, recalling every goddamn moment Bella and I had been interrupted over the last few days.

She chuckled lightly, but then her face took on a serious look. "You know how angry I can be at times. A part of me has always resented Carlisle and his 'playing God' when he found me dying. And the thought that he had turned me thinking I might be a good companion for Edward … oh, it gives me the shivers." She shuddered dramatically and smiled up at me. "He didn't want to change anyone else. Esme has turned out well, but Edward has always been so morose and guilt-ridden at being 'damned to this existence' as he puts it, and in many ways, I've been just like him."

"Rose." I took hold of her hand and gave it a little squeeze. "You are nothing like that fucked in the head asshole."

"Thank you for saying so, but I am. You know I've given Carlisle hell about it over the years, and I think that was part of his reasoning for not wanting to turn anyone else. But when I brought Emmett to him, he didn't hesitate. He did it just because I asked him to." She blinked quickly and gave me a small smile. "That was the greatest gift he could have ever given me. Emmett has always had the best … attitude about being turned into a vampire. He has always just accepted it. He even delights in it."

"That he does," I said, agreeing with her.

We'd come up to another gully and easily jumped across. The second of Emmett's shoes was in pieces at the edge of a ten-foot area that had been disturbed, for lack of a better term. The pine-needle-covered ground had been churned up and several saplings had been torn from the earth.

I stood with my hands on my hips, surveying the damage. "Looks like she almost had him here." Bella's spicy warm scent was fresh, as if she had just been there. I was beginning to feel a bit more anxious.

Rosalie searched around the perimeter of the torn up ground. "She didn't catch him or I think there'd be an arm laying here somewhere." She smiled up at me again and motioned with her head to continue. "Good thing they get along so well. It's annoying as hell sometimes, but he is the perfect brother for her. They fit together as brother and sister. Even when she was human and they would fight like cats and dogs."

Picking up the trail again by a large fir with a fresh two-foot long gouge in its trunk, I urged Rosalie into a jog by tugging at her hand.

"Okay, Jazz, I'll get to the point." She rolled her eyes at me but was right beside me. "Like I said, Emmett delights in being a vampire. He loves it. Practically the exact opposite of my feelings about it. But that's why he is the perfect mate for me. Emmett's outlook on this life is so laid back. He just
takes everything as it comes, finds something fun in almost everything, and I think I need to try and be more like that — try to be less resentful and hateful about it. He certainly isn't perfect, but he's been the perfect mate for me — we fit together well — and I think he'll be a good influence for Bella, too. Well, most of the time." Her chuckling laugh rang softly through the trees. "Over the last few days I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I see that I need to adjust *my* attitude a little bit."

Stunned, I looked over at her and asked, "What?"

"I know. It's a shock." She smiled faintly in chagrin. "Even your approach to life is something to admire."

"What?" I asked again in utter disbelief.

"No, really. With all the horrors you lived through, all the terrible things that were done to you, you just … sucked it up and soldiered on."

"There wasn't anything else I could do. I couldn't change what had been done, and I couldn't change or take back the things *I* had done."

Together, we jumped over a fallen tree and she grabbed hold of my wrist, urging me to stop.

"But you didn't let it destroy you. You didn't let it take over your life and make you miserable like Edward and I have."

"For a long time I did, Rose, even after I left Maria. Then I met Alice and she really helped me. She saved me."

Rosalie nodded. "I think she did, even though she wasn't your mate. I remember what you were like when you first joined us." She gave my hand a gentle squeeze. "I never wanted to see Bella changed into a vampire, of course. Some of it had to do with how Edward treated her — like she was a possession to be owned and controlled and not a person to share a life with. He's such an ass. But most of it had to do with how I've felt about being a vampire. She looked off into the dark forest surrounding us. "But, you can't change what's already been done." She winked at me. "I guess you could say Alice brought *you* to us. And don't you think Edward brought Bella to us?"

Hating to admit it, even if it was only to myself, Rosalie had a point. As much as I detested that fucking piece of shit, Edward had brought Bella into our coven. I didn't know if I would have ever paid any attention to her at all if he hadn't.

Sighing, I gave her a nod, but urged her to keep moving. We had to be getting closer to Bella and Emmett.

Running along beside me, Rosalie touched my arm. "And Jazz, you know Emmett is perfect for *me*. I have to remember that — somehow — I am perfect for *him*." She sighed. "You've been projecting quite a bit lately, and at times, it's been a little, uh, disconcerting?" She raised an eyebrow and her mouth turned up in a smirk. "But I've also felt your feelings of doubt. I recognized it because I've often felt that way about myself. I know Bella is the perfect fit for you, and you don't need to have any misgivings about yourself. You have to remember that you are the perfect fit for *her*.

For not being an empath, she had certainly described the doubt I'd felt about myself. I gave her a small, grateful smile. Regardless of how badly I wanted Bella, and how much I loved her, a tiny voice in my head did wonder if I was good enough for her. She was perfect. And she loved me so much. I felt it. Was I good enough for that love?

Giving my arm a squeeze, Rosalie smiled at me and said, "Remember, Jazz, perfect fit."
Off to the left, I saw a pair of dirt-stained white socks. I was astonished to find them both together. Scooping them up, I tossed them to Rosalie.

"Does he have any clothes left?" I didn't think I wanted Bella seeing him naked. If he was naked, I just might get pissed off again. She hadn't even seen me naked yet.

"Boxers, I hope," she said, laughing. "See? This is why you need to wear underwear." She flung the socks away.

Raising one eyebrow at her, I glanced at her and then away. She wasn't going to let that go. "They need to be clean, too? In case I'm in an accident?"

"Exactly!" She laughed again. "For that reason, and there's more layers to peel off when it comes to togetherness time." She waggled her eyebrows at me just like Emmett would have.

More clothes for Bella to rip off me? Intriguing idea, since I actually liked it when Bella tore my clothes off. I did own underwear, I just didn't usually wear them. That might be a habit I'd have to develop. Maria had ripped my clothes off now and then, but Alice hadn't. All those other women … it had depended on what was happening at the time. But none of them had ever excited me the way Bella did.

As Rosalie had said he would, Emmett had led Bella in a wide circle. Off to my right, I heard an angry screech echoing through the trees. Bella.

I turned toward the sound. "They're less than a mile away. Let's go." Bella was blocking her emotions again, but she wasn't keeping her voice down. Not needing to follow their scents any longer, I raced directly toward the sound of her angry snarls.

On our way up yet another low ridge, it began to rain. I guessed it couldn't hold off forever. As we neared the top, I heard Bella yell, "Dammit, Emmett! Come down outta that tree and fight like a man!"

"Fight like a man? Christ, Bells, I'm three times your size. I don't wanna hurt you."

"Hurt me? Hurt me? You're the one hiding up in a tree. I'm gonna kick your ass!"

There was a loud thump, as if Bella had kicked the tree.

"You already bit me once, Bells. I don't want you bitin' me again. That shit stings like a bitch."

She bit him? I glanced quickly over at Rosalie, worried she would be angry Bella had bitten her mate. She wasn't. In fact, she was amused.

Whispering at vampire speed, I asked, "You're not pissed off that she bit him?"

"No." She waved her hand at me. "He deserved it. And if that's all she does to him, he's lucky."

Halfway down the side of the hill, I put up an arm to stop Rosalie and held my finger to my lips. Through the trees, I could see Bella below, her back to us. She was fine, of course, though getting wet in the light rain. She was at the base of a large spruce, staring upward, fists planted on her hips. I couldn't see Emmett up near the top of the tree, hidden by the thick green of pine needles and leaves from the surrounding trees.

Bella punched the tree and put her hands back on her hips. "Come down here, Emmett, or I'm coming up."
"No, Bells," he said, a hint of caution in his voice.

"Whaddya mean 'no?' Then I'm knocking down this tree!" she shouted as she began tearing at the trunk of the tree.

"Cut it out, Bells!" Emmett was beginning to sound worried.

"I'm cutting it out, all right." She snarled as she ripped bark and splinters from the trunk. "You've interrupted me and Jasper for the last damn time. He's my goddamn mate, and I've had it up to HERE with you getting in the way when we're … we're, uh …"

"Having a moment?" Emmett supplied helpfully from somewhere in the tree tops.

My breath caught in my throat. That was the first time she had referred to me as her mate, and the heart I had always thought of as dead grew with even more love for her. I stood slowly from my crouched position and started toward her, needing to be next to her.

Rosalie reached out and grabbed my arm. "I thought you wanted to watch them?" She hissed quietly.

"She said I was her mate. That was the first time she said that. I have to …"

"Yes! Having a moment!" Bella screamed up at Emmett. She stopped ripping at the tree and stood stock still, shaking with her anger. "Oh my God, you are such a pain in the ass." She growled and stomped her foot.

About fifty feet up, I saw limbs begin to bob and sway. The movement of the branches gradually worked its way down the tree, and I finally saw Emmett at about the thirty-foot mark. Most of his bulk was still hidden by the tree trunk.

"I'm a pain in the ass? Who's the asshole who's stomping her feet and keeps bitin' people?" he yelled back at her as he dropped down to the last branches above the bare trunk.

"If you assholes would quit pissing me off, I wouldn't bite you!" Bella punched the tree again.

Emmett had spotted me and Rosalie, and he winked at us. He looked sternly down at Bella. "Bellzy-bub, you've bitten Jazz. Are you callin' him an asshole?" he asked in a taunting voice.

"Arrrgh!" Bella screeched again, shaking her fists. "He is kind of an asshole sometimes, but that's different," she spat out. Then she leapt up into the tree at Emmett.

"Oh, shit!" Emmett's eyes flew open in shock and he scrambled to jump away from her.

She must have anticipated his move because she caught his right wrist as he dropped, but her aim was a little off. She grunted as she crashed into the limbless trunk. Her left hand flashed up to grab a branch, and her legs came up to grip the trunk.

Caught by his wrist, Emmett was swung down and slammed into the tree, causing it to shake and needles to fall down over them.

"Ha! Gotcha, Em!" Bella shouted in triumph. "What are you gonna do now?"

Emmett hadn't even grabbed hold of the tree. With her hand around his wrist, he was hanging just below Bella, swinging slightly.

He pouted. "I'm goin' to tell Jasper you ripped all my clothes off and bit me in the leg."
"Oh, really?" Bella sneered at him. "I might take you seriously if you weren't wearing red Scooby-Doo boxers and whining." She jerked her head to flip her wet hair out of her face then swung Emmett against the tree again.

"Stop it! And there's nothin' wrong with Scooby-Doo boxers. I look hot," Emmett said, sliding his free hand down his chest, and assuming an arrogant look on his face.


"A totally buff and damn good-lookin' five-year-old." Emmett sprang into action, clawing up the tree and capturing Bella against the trunk. She squawked, releasing his wrist, and elbowed him in the ribs.

With a loud "Ooof!" he let go of her and fell back out of the tree. He scrambled, arms and legs flailing in the air, but he wasn't fast enough to right himself, and landed flat on his back with a thunderous whump on the wet ground.

As he grabbed his ribs and groaned in pain, Bella growled and dropped from her perch.

Rosalie and I had started running toward them when Emmett tried to trap Bella against the tree. It was going to be close, but I thought I could catch her before she landed on Emmett.

She landed in a crouch next to him, her dripping hair falling over her face and shoulders. She stood, sweeping her hair out of her face and then she saw me.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and her eyes grew wide.

I swept her into my arms as I jumped over Emmett and veered around the tree. Then my beautiful, little, dripping wet darlin' tripped me. I shoved her head into my neck and dropped my left shoulder, attempting to roll so I wouldn't land on her.

I hit the ground on the point of my shoulder and slid about ten feet through the pine needles and mud. Feeling my shirt tear away from my back, I dropped my heels and dragged them to stop us.

Bella tried to jerk away from me, but I held her tightly against my chest. I noticed her legs were on either side of my hips. Right where I wanted them to be.

"Dammit, Jasper!" She growled against my neck. "I wasn't finished kicking Emmett's ass yet."

"You got him in the ribs, Darlin'. I think he'll remember that for a while. I still do." I ran my right hand up her back and tugged at the neck of her Henley, stretching the wet cotton and moving it aside so I could see my bite on her shoulder near her neck. Even in the dark, her skin had a subtle glow. Reaching up, I kissed the scar and licked along the slight ridges.

"Ohhhh." She sighed. Lifting her head, she frowned at me. "Stop. I'm pissed off, and I want to stay pissed off."

"Why didn't you use your shield against him?" I nuzzled her ear.

"Uh, that would be like cheating." Her eyes closed and she leaned into me. "And I sorta forgot."

I tickled her ear with the tip of my tongue. "Darlin', you have to learn. When you're fightin' with someone, you gotta use everything you got. You always fight to win."

She sighed and squirmed against me. "But I was winning. Until he climbed the tree."
"But he was still moving. You hadn't won yet." I nipped her earlobe.

"Oooo." She shivered. "That's why I need to finish kicking his ass."

I licked, then kissed her temple. "So, I'm an asshole," I whispered.

"You are kind of an asshole. But you're my asshole." Then she frowned. "Wait. That didn't sound quite right."

I chuckled at her. I loved hearing her say that I was hers, even if she did call me an asshole. I whispered against her ear, "You did say I was your mate." I ran my tongue around the edge of her ear, and she shivered again.

"Well, uh, yeah. Now let go."

"That was the first time you said that." Gathering her wet hair with my left hand, I pulled it away from her neck. Licking across her soft shoulder and up her throat, I moaned. "You are delicious in the rain."

"Um, thank you. Let me up."

Both of her hands were caught between our bodies, and I felt them slowly open as she spread her fingers over my chest. I "mmmmmm'd" along her jaw until I reached her mouth. "Your lips are so sweet." I licked her, urging her to kiss me.

She gave me a little peck and pulled her head back. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"What am I doin'?" I pressed my fingers into her back and dragged them down over her ass. When she squirmed against my groin, I pushed my stiffening dick up against her.

"Oh." She gasped. "Um, you're trying to distract me so I don't go after Emmett."

I gripped her ass with both hands and thrust up against her. "Is it workin'?"

She moaned against my mouth and her lips were on mine. As I slid my tongue between her lips, her curling fingers ripped through my T-shirt. She pulled her face away with a gasp. "No."

"No? I'm crushed." I gave her my best wounded look.

"You are such an asshole. We're getting rained on and we're muddy. And I'm going to kick his Scooby snacks all over the woods." She lifted her head and looked around. "Where the hell is he?"

Coming to the realization my irresistible charms were being resisted, I sighed in exasperation and dropped my head into the mud. "They left about ten minutes ago."

"What?" she squawked and exploded out of my arms, landing about fifteen feet away. "Dammit, Jasper! You let him get away!" Her hands clenched into fists, and her eyes darted around.

"Goddammit! Which way is the house?"

She'd figure it out even if I didn't tell her, so I pointed over my shoulder. She took off, wet hair flying out behind her. I leapt up and started after her, pulling off my ripped, soaked shirt and dropping it to the ground.

Hoping her anger cooled down by the time she got back to the house, I raced after her. I spotted her running up the next hill. She was right muddy, and I expected she would want to take another bath instead of beat Emmett half to death. I hoped so, anyway. If she was still mad, and caught him inside,
the house might not survive.

I was catching up to her and could hear her grumbling to herself.

Watching her, and checking the air for the scent of any other vampires, I let her keep just ahead of me. I was thinking over a few things that needed to be done, and decided that while Bella was taking another bubble bath, I could pack what was left of my clothes, and see if Alice had any of my things left in her closet. If they weren't cashmere sweaters and Italian loafers. I thought I still had some hiking clothes left in there.

Bella would look good in a cashmere sweater. Then again, Bella would look good in a gunnysack. I'd have to gather up a few other things I wanted to take. Like my laptop, maybe a few books, my other boots. Then help Bella pack her clothes. Well, pack them for her. I think we'd be taking that vanilla and brown sugar body wash, too. Maybe do a little laundry because I might have a few things waiting to be washed and we would have to wash these clothes.

She would need to hunt tomorrow. That would probably require another bath.

I could finally look over the truck Emmett bought. He had seemed eager for me to see it.

It sounded like tomorrow was going to be a full day. But we still had tonight.

As we neared the house, I spotted Carlisle standing on the front porch. Bella's angry flight slowed to a walk, and I jogged up next to her.

Her fingers were busily picking at her nails, and she looked up at me nervously. "Do you think Carlisle is mad because I wrecked two doors and bit Emmett?"

I glanced ahead at Carlisle again, testing his mood, and wrapped my arm around Bella's shoulders. "No, he's not mad. He's … amused." I smiled down at her. "He's pleased and … feeling a bit of anticipation."

"Anticipation?" Bella's puzzled expression turned toward Carlisle.

"Yes. Knowing what people are feeling doesn't always help, does it? You have to watch them and take in the scene." I gestured toward Carlisle as we got closer. "There're two towels on the table between the chairs. It also looks like he has a few white T-shirts folded next to them." I grinned at Bella.

Her hand covered her eyes, and she dropped her head and groaned. "Oh, those are probably for you because I keep ripping up your clothes."

I squeezed her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "I would imagine so, Darlin'." I couldn't help chuckling at her.

Carlisle gathered up the towels and smiled at us as we walked up the steps to the porch. "Bella, Jasper. Good to see you." He handed a towel to each of us. "Fortunately, it's not raining too hard, but I thought you each might like to dry off a bit."

Bella reached tentatively for a towel and slowly opened it. She dropped it over her head, covering her face.

"Do you want me to help you, Darlin'?"
"Yes. I'm afraid I'll rip it," she said in a small voice.

Carlisle chuckled. "Don't be too concerned, Bella. We've been through all this before. Though I must say, you've certainly made it … very interesting. Are you still angry with Emmett?"

"Oh, God." Bella's shoulders fell and I could feel her embarrassment. "No, I'm not mad at Emmett anymore," she mumbled from under the towel.

Tilting her face up, I patted her dry and started running the towel over her hair. "Don't be embarrassed. We've all been there." Holding a corner of the muddied white towel up in front of her, I said, "Hold this."

"But …"

"No time like the present to practice."

She hesitantly reached for the towel and gingerly took hold of it.

I gathered her hair and laid it along her back, then tugged up the stretched-out neck of her Henley, a satisfied smile stealing across my face as I looked over my bite on her shoulder. I was sure Carlisle had noticed it and the possessive creature inside me hummed in pleasure.

Carlisle reached for the folded T-shirts and presented them to me. "Jasper, I brought these for you. You seem to be going through them at an alarming rate." His eyes twinkled with humor as Bella's eyes squeezed shut and she dropped her head again. "I thought that you might want to get a shower, and while you were doing that, it would give Bella and me a chance to visit."

"Bella?" I asked, taking the shirts.

She nodded, smiling faintly up at me. "I nearly chewed his face off, but we haven't had a chance to just talk yet. You go ahead and get a shower. Then I think I might need another bath." She frowned, looking down at herself.

Wrapping my towel around my neck after rubbing it through my hair, I leaned forward and kissed Bella lightly on her forehead. "Thanks for the shirts, Carlisle." Turning to him, I asked, "Where's Edward?"

I didn't want to be too far away from Bella if Edward was lurking about.

"You are welcome. Esme and Edward are in his room, discussing remodeling, I believe." Carlisle gestured toward one of the wicker chairs, urging Bella to sit. "Oh, yes. Emmett and Rosalie said to come to their room and use their shower."

"He could use mine, right?" Bella said as she sat carefully on the deep green floral cushion and drew her legs up. She dropped the towel on the seat beside her and carefully wrapped her arms around her knees. "What's wrong with the mudroom shower?"

"Jasper can use any shower he'd like." Carlisle sat next to her in the other wicker chair. "The, uh, mudroom shower needs a few repairs before it can be used again."

"Oh, my God." Bella exclaimed, dropping her forehead onto her knees. "Is it because I shoved Edward into the wall?"

Carlisle chuckled. "No, that one is because Jasper threw me into the stairs. Oh, Bella." At her embarrassed groan, he reached over with his left hand and patted her shoulder. "Please try not to be
"But I'm only like a day-and-a-half old!" She slapped her hands over her face.

I went to her, hugged her to my stomach and stroked her hair. "Bella, it will all be repaired eventually. The house will be fine."

She dropped her feet to the floor and wrapped her arms around my waist, pressing her face into my stomach. "When will it get better, Jasper?"

"The emotions take a while to control, but you're doing very well. The strength … that depends. You'll think you're doing okay and then you'll forget and break something. You do well with your feet and sitting, but you need more work with your hands. Practice moving the towel through your hands and putting it around your neck. That's a good place to start." Gently squeezing her arms, I moved away from her. "Remember, you're only a day-and-a-half old. If you rip the towel, Rosalie can use it in the garage." I smiled encouragingly at her. "I'll go get a shower and be right back, Darlin'."

"Okay, Jasper. But take your time. Carlisle and I will be right here. It's kinda nice out here on the porch watching it rain. It's really cool to be able to see so well in the dark!"

I brought her hand to my lips, and cupped her face with my other hand. "I won't be long. Thanks, Carlisle."

"You're welcome." Carlisle nodded at me as I made my way through the newly repaired front door and hopped up to the second floor. I was curious about what Carlisle might like to talk to Bella about, but it was most likely about how she had been feeling. I dashed to my study to grab some clothes and a clean pair of boots, and to tuck Carlisle's T-shirts into my wardrobe.

I listened intently and could just hear Esme and Edward speaking quietly in his room. I could hear their voices, but could not make out their words. Though I'd like to, it wasn't a good time to start eavesdropping on purpose. Well, not on Esme.

Time to clean up. I took my clothes back down the hall toward Rosalie's and Emmett's room and knocked at their door.
Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by hammondgirl, SecretlySeverus, bigblueboat, and remylebeauishot of Project Team Beta. Check 'em out on FFn!

A/N: I've been nervous about trying to write from Carlisle's point of view, but I'm going to give it a shot. I hope it doesn't suck too much. I sent the chapter to the betas, and while they had it, I re-wrote it. I just wasn't happy with it. When the first one came back, I sent in the re-written version. Then there was that little comma problem. We won't discuss the ellipses that were hacked and slashed. Yeah, I am kinda whining.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, A Different Forest (feed a tree!), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and Archive of Our Own (AO3).

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you

Ithaca is Gorges by giselle-lx (a classic, well written fanfic) on FFn

Seventeen by giselle-lx on FFn

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 31, I Teach

Carlisle's POV

Jasper's warm amber eyes gazed intently into Bella's bright crimson. Then the hard lines of his face softened as he kissed her hand and tenderly touched her cheek before releasing her and going into the house. He seemed very reluctant to be gone from her side or even to let go of her hand.

I'd never seen him behave that way with anyone except Bella. "Tamed" was not a word that could be used to describe Jasper but she had gentled him and smoothed his hard edges. They truly were mates.

It was most unfortunate that Edward's preoccupation and obsession with her had only been due to her being his singer.

I had been pleased and quite happy for him when he had met Bella, though I had been extremely concerned at first.

At the time, when he struggled so desperately with his thirst for her blood, I thought his flight to Alaska was a wise decision. I still believed it had been the correct thing to do. It was better to leave
than to injure or kill the girl.

When he had regained control of his thirst and returned, I'd had such high hopes. He had been surrounded by mated couples for years, and I understood the weight of that loneliness. I had experienced it for centuries before I had come upon him.

Mated couples. I supposed that wasn't entirely correct as Alice and Jasper were not mated in the truest or deepest sense of the word. Though one could say they were close companions and shared a sincere affection for each other.

After coming to know Bella, I'd found her to be quite intelligent, and she was a delight to be around. It was disturbing how obsessive Edward had become, and I could not find fault with Bella's interpretation of his actions. I believed she was right when she said his only interest in her was her silent mind and the call of her blood. I honestly hoped that with Esme's and my guidance we could steer him to a better path. I had not wanted to threaten him with ostracism from the family, but I had felt there was no other alternative. It would be difficult to monitor him and his emotional climate without Jasper's presence, but I felt Esme, Alice, and I would be up to the task.

Jasper did need to take Bella away from the area. Having a newborn vampire in Forks was just tempting fate.

In sharp contrast to that tender side Jasper displayed with Bella, his dominant side had most assuredly made an appearance. Shortly after he and Alice had joined us, he had spoken briefly with me of his history with Maria and his part in the Southern Vampire Wars. Of course I had been aware of the conflicts, though not personally involved, and knew that the Volturi had had to contain the unrestrained vampires of the south and their indiscriminate massacres — of humans and each other. That had been many years before Jasper had been turned by and served under Maria.

The Volturi had periodically sent spies to keep tabs on the southern vampires. They had heard of Major Jasper Whitlock and his sudden rise as Maria's second-in-command. Even I had heard the occasional account of the legendary God of War, though the problems of the south had been so far removed from my chosen life, I hardly paid any attention to them. I dismissed the more far-fetched stories as merely gossip — fairytales.

The vampire kings had been intrigued by his strength and his ability to dominate, train, and lead uncontrollable newborns, and they soon discovered that it was not simply a fanciful myth that he was the strongest empath our world had ever known. In order to lead, and endure, for as long as he had, he had to have been formidable.

After experiencing his more passive and sedate side over the last fifty-six years, the events over the past few days have been … very enlightening. I had gained a new respect for his capabilities, strength of will, and ability to survive. Despite his violent past, he had not ever immobilized all of us before or caused true harm to any of us. It was quite eye-opening to experience it first-hand. And, I would have to admit, not only had his strength been impressive, it had been frightening.

It had intrigued the Volturi that he could influence the emotions of many vampires at once and control groups of volatile newborns. But once they had learned of Alice's gift, they had not coveted him with quite the same fervor as before. Though, needless to say, the acquisition of him would surely not detract from their stature or position.

However, Jasper's gift of controlling emotions was temporary, whereas the Volturi's own Chelsea could form rather strong attachments between vampires, forcing them to be loyal to the kings and keeping their most favored guards bonded to them. It seemed that gift had a more lasting effect, but most of the guard remained in Volterra most of the time. It would not be difficult for Aro to order
Chelsea to renew or maintain those false ties. Though during my time with them, I learned that several of their guards chose to stay of their own free will — the most notable being their tracker Demetri, Felix, and those known as the witch twins, Jane and her brother Alec.

I was curious about whether Chelsea's gift would have any effect on Bella, or would her natural shield protect her? I would hate to see Bella under the influence of the Volturi. We must keep the knowledge of the extent of her shield from them. With the control she had exhibited already, I could only imagine she would become stronger. She and Jasper working together? They would be nearly unstoppable. It was a sobering thought.

Setting those quick musings to the side, I watched as Bella seemed to almost fold in on herself as Jasper went into the house. She turned to watch him and sighed sadly when he closed the door behind him. She carefully turned to face me again. She very gently placed her open hands on the arms of the wicker chair and shifted to face me, drawing up her legs, and wrapping her arms around her knees.

"Carlisle, can they hear us inside if we speak very quietly?" Bella's bright red eyes looked concerned.

I gave her a small smile. "If we talk like this, they may hear that we are speaking but not be able to make out the words. Why, if I might ask?"

Her eyes dropped to study her fingers. "I want to apologize and ask some questions, if that's okay?"

I leaned toward her. "Bella, there is nothing to apologize for."

"But, I could have bitten your face off, and I'm so sorry for wrecking your house!" Her hands flew up and covered her face. "I kinda knew that newborns would be really strong, but becoming a newborn … I mean, I had no idea how much stronger … I …"

Placing my hand on her knee, I attempted to reassure her. "Bella, as I said, there is no need for you to apologize for something that is very difficult to control. We have all been through it. Even I broke many things and tore my clothes until I learned to control my strength. And you've only broken the sliding glass doors and the doors to your room and Jasper's study." I brought my finger to my chin and watched her from the corner of my eye. "I brought my finger to my chin and watched her from the corner of my eye. "Well, there was a broom, the towel bar, a door knob, and a couple of remotes, but those are just small things that are easily fixed or replaced."

Bella blinked at me, groaned and dropped her forehead onto her knees. "And don't forget the back brushes and hairbrushes and all the clothes I've torn to hell. See? I've broken all kinds of stuff! And everything else is my fault! I broke Edward's CDs and shelves when I shoved him into them. It's my fault Jasper threw you into the stairs and destroyed them." Her brow furrowed. "Well, no. I'd have to say that was Edward's fault. He shouldn't have thrown Jasper into the piano like he did. That led to messing up the bathroom by the mudroom, the ass. Oops." She peeked at me, wrapped her arms around her head and mumbled, "Sorry."

I chuckled at her embarrassment. For just a moment, I thought fondly of her ready blushes when she had been human. "Bella, please don't worry about that. Being a newborn vampire is very difficult and stressful. Don't forget, I was one, and I've dealt with four of them myself; one of them being Emmett." I raised an eyebrow at her to let her know I was joking with her. "He still forgets himself and handles things a bit roughly. It's why he buys so many controllers for his video games."

I could see that she was smiling at that mention of Emmett, looking at me from the corner of her eye, though she didn't lift her face from her knees.
"I'll try to watch my mouth. It just comes out." She sighed lightly. "Speaking of Edward ... if I was his singer, why would he think he loved me? Why would he think I was his mate?"

Sitting back in the wicker chair, I looked out toward the light rain and considered her question. I had asked myself the same thing several times. "I really don't know, Bella. Edward had not shown that sort of interest in anyone before. I don't understand the intensity of the attraction of a singer, but I do understand the intensity of meeting your mate."

She finally lifted her face from hiding and smiled. "You really love Esme, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I met her while she was still quite young, and I was impressed by her strength and her bold approach to life." I smiled happily at the memory of such a young and vivacious Esme. "Remember? I first met her after she had fallen out of a tree and broken her leg." Bella and I shared a quiet laugh.

"So I didn't corner the market on klutzy?"

"Of course not, Bella. Humans have such mishaps all the time. If they didn't, I would be out of a job."

Bella finally turned her head to face me completely, and I could see her smile broadly at my little joke.

"You've become quite graceful." Shifting a bit to face her more fully, I rested my elbow on the arm of the chair and tapped at my chin. "Perhaps because Edward had not experienced it himself, he did not understand his feelings. He was there when I brought Esme to our home, and I knew right away that she was my mate once she had awakened as a vampire. I can only surmise that Edward compared his thoughts of you to my … concentrated and focused thoughts of Esme."

"Maybe, since he can't feel what people are feeling." She frowned slightly. "Why would he try to keep my blood? That was just gross and creepy."

"I have no answer for that. My only guess is he focused all his feelings and attention on the primary thing that was gone. Even knowing it was wrong to do, I think he could not help himself. It seems similar to an addict desperately trying to get their next fix."

"Seems like bullshit to me," she grumbled.

"Don't misunderstand me, Bella. I am not excusing his actions. He crossed the lines of decency, and he violated your person. Such actions will not be tolerated." I sighed wearily, remembering the threat I'd had to make. It was only right that he comply with Bella's wish that he attend her memorial and the Forks High graduation. If we were all human, it was something that we would do. "I thought that I had not given him enough guidance. When he left and was on his own all those years ago, I think I may have allowed him to come back too easily. There were no repercussions for his taking the lives of humans — even if they had not been good humans."

"Maybe you did let him come back too easily, but Carlisle, that's what vampires do. They eat humans. And I don't know how you all do it. I smelled that one human — I never even got near him — and it took Jasper and Esme to hold me down so I wouldn't attack him! I couldn't even smell him anymore, but I remembered what he smelled like, and I wanted him so bad!" She gripped the sides of her head with her hands. "Right now I can remember what he smelled like and …"

I reached for her arm and took hold, trying to offer her some small comfort. "I understand, Bella. It'll be okay. It will. Eventually the pull won't be quite so strong, and it will be easier for you. Don't be
too hard on yourself; you did so well."

I could see that she was struggling, but there was nothing I could do about a memory. "You have shown such strength for a newborn. I am very proud of you."

Her hands shook as she pulled them from her hair. "It's hard, Carlisle. It's really hard. I try not to think about it, but it's like there are ten brains inside my head and they're all thinking about different things. One of them keeps thinking about the way that man smelled." She drew in a deep breath and threw her hands up as if she were trying to ward off the scent of that human who had been delivering flowers to the house. "Smelling the rain helps maybe." She shook her head. "It was raining when I crashed my truck." She brought her hands back to her face and touched her forehead with her fingertips. "But if I shove those thoughts back in a corner and reach for one of those other brains … Okay, back to Edward."

She flexed her hands, spreading her fingers, and rested them on her knees. "How *could* you punish him for doing something that comes naturally to vampires?"

Fortunately, with *my* vampire brain, I could keep up with her rapid switch of topics. "You see my dilemma. Drinking from humans *is* natural for us. We are attracted to them, and they are attracted to us."

"Like a Venus fly trap." She offered quietly."

"Yes." I chuckled again. "Quite a bit like that. The coloring and scent of those plants makes them nearly irresistible to their prey. But, Esme and I had missed him, and he wanted to come back. In order to do that, he had to try to resist drinking from humans. He had to make an honest effort to do so, and he has done it. I know it's not been easy."

"Have you ever …?" she asked tentatively.

"No. And neither has Rosalie. But there aren't many who are as … determined as Rosalie." *Or as bullheaded*, I thought, *or opinionated*. Bella seemed to be a close second, however. Jasper would certainly have his hands full.

Bella furrowed her brow and stared out into the rain. "I don't know how you did it when you were all alone. If you all hadn't been here, I would have killed that man." She dropped her eyes to her fingers again as she began to pick at her nails. "Rosalie had the rest of you to help her."

"Yes, and we will all help you, too." I leaned back again and clasped my hands over my knee. "Bella, I don't often speak of it, but I do pray. I believe there is a higher power — something that set all this in motion." I gestured out toward the rainy night. "I don't know if it's all random or if there is any sort of plan. I don't know whether it's God, though I choose to believe so. I don't know whether it's even a consciousness as we understand consciousness to be, but I ask for strength and guidance. I don't know if it hears me or even if it cares about me, though I try to have faith that it does, but the act of centering my thoughts, for even a moment, does frequently help. I'd like to think that we are all part of some greater plan that is currently beyond our comprehension. Perhaps, one day, we'll learn of this plan."

"Heavy thoughts." Bella blinked rapidly a few times then turned her eyes to me. "But maybe it's just you."

"I don't know, Bella. It may be. Or it may be that my father had a greater influence than I gave him credit for, or it may even be that my many years on this earth have shown me that life is precious. It can be ended so quickly."
Bella looked down and carefully tugged at the towel on the cushion beside her. "Even the animals," she said very softly.

Smiling at her again, I replied, "Yes, even the animals. I believe we must try to respect them. We all have our place, our roles to fill — whether they are large or small. I've tried not to take more than I need. I think the most important thing is that we try."

"Heavy thoughts," she said again, nodding slowly. She gazed off into the light rain and inhaled deeply again. "This might seem dumb …" She glanced at me and away, suddenly uncomfortable as she picked at her fingers and bit her bottom lip.

"What is it, Bella? I will try to help you anyway I can."

"What is this mating thing? Um, how come I feel so much better when I touch Jasper?" she whispered. "I mean, I've touched you and Esme and it's nice, but I just feel so good when I touch Jasper." She shook her head, her tangled hair falling over her shoulder and hiding her face. "And his smell. He smells so goddamn good I could just lick …" Her head jerked up, her eyes flew open, and she slapped her hand over her mouth.

I couldn't stop the laugh that escaped me. Having a "young one" in the house again was delightful, despite the destruction to the house. She was such an engaging young woman, I couldn't help smiling at her. Her little uncensored exclamations were quite charming, and frequently amusing.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh, but your terminology is refreshing. Please don't be embarrassed, Bella. Your response to Jasper is very normal. As is his response to you." I rested my hands on each arm of the chair as I gathered my thoughts. "Keeping in mind that vampires are enhanced humans, many of our human traits seem to be exaggerated. It's not as obvious with humans as it is with animals, but humans are attracted or repelled by pheromones. Among humans, it is thought that when a person takes an instant dislike to another, it may be due to their scent. As I'm sure you've noticed, there are some scents that are more agreeable than others. Humans find their mates in that way, so why wouldn't vampires? But, with vampires, the feelings and reactions appear to be more intense."

Bella had hidden her face in her knees again but she peeked at me and nodded. "But humans can have more than one mate, er, spouse. Can vampires have more than one?"

"I don't believe so. In all my years, I've not ever heard of a vampire having a second mate if they've lost theirs, though they might have several very close companions over their long lives. Do you remember Marcus of the Volturi?" At her nod, I continued. "His mate was killed many years ago, and though he's seen hundreds of vampires and humans since then, he has not found another. The thought of losing one's mate was distressing. I could not imagine losing Esme. To allay my own discomfort, I decided to shift the topic slightly. "It is said that there is a special bond between mates when one has sired the other."

"Like you changed Esme?"

"Yes. And like Jasper changed you. It is sometimes referred to as bonded mates."

She nodded quickly and tapped her knee with a finger. "But what about the touching?"

I was pleased that Bella felt comfortable enough to share her thoughts, even though she was embarrassed by her transmission. I was more than happy to try and answer her question. "We were once mammals, and mammals require touch in order to survive and thrive. Many studies have shown that touch decreases the stress hormone cortisol and increases the release of the hormone oxytocin
which promotes feelings of devotion, trust and bonding. It only follows that, along with our senses of sight, taste, and hearing, that requirement or need for the sense of touch would also be enhanced.

"So, we touch each other because it feels good. Even touching anyone else?"

"Yes, it helps us to bond together as a unit or family — or coven. But, touching our mates pleases us the most, of course." At her quick nod, I continued. "It also puts our scent on them and on anything we touch. Humans can be very possessive and that's another trait that is exaggerated among vampires. We like to mark our territory."

With a thoughtful look on her face, Bella stared out into the diminishing rain. "Humans do like to mark their territory and write their names all over everything. There are label makers and special pens for marking metal and all kinds of stuff. Even at school. Once somebody claimed a desk or a table in the cafeteria, they got pretty upset when somebody else tried to sit there." Her eyes turned to mine and she smiled. "I guess vampires aren't all that different from humans really."

"True. In some respects, we're not so very different." I reached over and patted her hand on her knee. Her hands flashed to cover her face again, and she mumbled, "But what about the biting? I can't seem to help it. It's just crazy. I don't think I ever wanted to bite anyone before." She dropped her feet to the floor of the porch, and her hands slapped down on her thighs. "Sure, I've wanted to punch people, but I didn't do it. Well, not until … but anyway, the biting is … I mean it's … um … and he bit me and, uh …" She dropped her head to her chest, propped her elbows on her knees, and covered her face again. If she were human, I imagined she would have been blushing from the bottom of her feet to the top of her head. 

"Bella, please try to not be too self-conscious about any questions you may have." I was gratified that she felt, well, not comfortable, per se, but trusted me enough to ask about things that concerned her. I did enjoy sharing the knowledge I had picked up over my long years. I had often thought that I would like to teach — whether it was to vampires or humans did not matter to me.

"It can be rather personal, but vampires do have a distinctly robust urge or impulse to bite. It is a very strong part of our nature. We bite to defend ourselves, of course, and it is sometimes used in a disciplinary manner to correct an errant coven-mate. Much like a mother horse will nip a foal that is behaving badly or wanders too close to danger, or like any group of animals that choose to live together in a pack or herd. They will bite or nip a member of the group that is not conforming to their accepted standards."

"Like when I bit Emmett because he pissed me off," she said through her hands.

"Yes," I replied, chuckling. "Just like that. I expect Emmett will think twice before annoying you again."

"No, he won't. He does it because he thinks it's funny," she grumbled.

"And what do you think?"

"I think he's a jerk." Bella moved her hand slightly to peer at me and covered her face again. "But sometimes it is funny."

I had to smile at her again. She and Emmett had a special relationship. As Alice has said, they couldn't be closer if they were twins. "To use a word that isn't heard so very much anymore — he is a rascal at times."

Rolling her eyes, Bella replied, "He sure is. I'll probably have to bite him again."
Realizing she was probably right, I said, "I dare say, you will." Pausing for a moment, bringing my hand to my chin, I searched through my memories. "Not that there have been any studies of vampire biting behavior — my knowledge is merely observational and anecdotal — but biting, in some cases, is related to kissing and all it entails, along with that compulsion we have to mark or claim our territory."

Quickly warming to my subject, I continued readily. "Biting releases venom onto the skin and into the other vampire's system. This serves three purposes. Venom on the skin places your scent on them, and enough venom in the other vampire's system will alter their scent to a degree. As you know, venom leaves scars and marks the other vampire as your mate. So, along with scent, it is a visual cue to others. However, in Jasper's case, his many scars show that he has fought and won many battles. They are a warning to others that he is dangerous, and vampires instinctively fear him."

Bella shifted her fingers slightly and peered from between them. "But I'm not afraid of him."

"That's because he is your mate. He looks like a strong, capable male to you. To others, he may appear very strong and capable, but the scars make him something to be avoided. Like in the animal kingdom, any elk or deer that has lived long enough to grow a large set of antlers has shown that he is not to be trifled with. Other bucks will avoid him, except the occasional male who feels the urge to challenge him, and does will find him attractive."

A very low growl began to rumble in Bella's chest. "But I don't want other does to find him attractive."

I chuckled lightly. "In my experience, most female vampires who have met Jasper have been initially wary of him."

She turned toward me and her hands dropped to grip her thighs. Her eyes narrowed and she hissed. "Initially? Then what did they do?"

Seeing that Bella was becoming angry, I tried to ease her concerns. "As you know, Jasper is quite handsome and …"

Snatching her hands from her thighs, they curled into fists, and she hissed again through her clenched teeth. "Handsome? He's fucking beautiful." Her eyes narrowed to mere slits. "Then what did they do, Carlisle?"

Though I shouldn't have been, I was taken aback by her abrupt anger and apparent jealousy. "Well, they have found him to be attractive but, to my knowledge, he has always discouraged their attention and …"

In a flash, Bella was on her feet and her fists were quivering at her sides. Her eyes were flicking quickly between me and the door.

I darted toward the door and opened it, thinking to save it from her evident foul temper. "Er … Bella, because he was with Alice he didn't ever …"

Her lips curled back from her teeth in a quiet snarl. She raced past me into the house and was up on the second floor landing. Before I could even think or form any words of warning, she disappeared down the hall to the left. Perhaps I should not have mentioned Alice at that particular time.
"God of War" – first coined by IdreamofEddy in Colliding Meteors.
Chap 32, I Growl

Jasper's POV

Rosalie smirked as she opened her door to me and curtsied. It didn't have quite the same effect when the woman was wearing blue jeans and a tailored chambray shirt.

"Did you get clean underwear this time?" she asked.

Emmett was lounging in his armchair, wearing grey sweats, with bare feet propped up on an ottoman. "What?" He stared at me as I walked into their room, and he dropped his Gameboy in his lap

I waved him off. "It's nothing. Why are you still playing with that Gameboy?"

Rosalie got that mischievous gleam in her eye. "I happened to see Jasper's pants fall down after you got on Bella's nerves earlier. He goes commando." She handed me a blue towel and gestured majestically like a game show hostess for me to follow her into her room.

Emmett straightened up in his arm chair. "What are you doin' nekkid in front of my mate?"

"I didn't do it on purpose. Bella ripped my jeans, and I didn't exactly notice right away." I turned right at the corner after the short hall and stepped into the bathroom. "And yes, I do have clean underwear. Socks, too." I set my clean boots and socks outside the door and closed it quietly.
Emmett grumbled. "Jesus Christ. He's not goin' to have any clothes left. And how do you not notice somebody rippin' your pants?" He snorted loudly. "I play this Gameboy because I like the Tetris game, okay?"

"I just want to know how he gets muddier than you do, Em." I heard Rosalie's voice through the door. "Jasper, do you need some more shirts? You can have a couple of Emmett's."

"Carlisle gave me a few," I said as I stripped off the muddy pants, turned on the water, and stepped into the shower stall.

Emmett grumbled again. "I don't want him taking any of my stuff, except for the Forks High shirts. They'll get destroyed."

"Oh, it's not like Bella hasn't ripped any of yours," Rosalie hissed at him.

"Only two."

"And a pair of pants, a pair of socks, and a pair of shoes. Around here, men's clothing should be put on the endangered species list."

Trying to ignore their bickering, I lathered up with Emmett's bar of soap and rinsed as quickly as I could, watching the mud and pine needles gather around the drain. I guess smelling like Emmett's Emerald Isle for a while wouldn't be so bad. It was better than smelling like Rosalie's lilacs.

When the water finally ran clear, I shut off the water and gathered up the pine needles caught around the drain. I tossed them in the little trash can and then tried to dry off as quickly as possible. Grabbing the blue boxer briefs, I grudgingly put them on and slid on my jeans. I didn't bother with a belt. Carlisle's white V-neck T-shirt was snug across my chest, but it would work. Guess I would smell a little like Carlisle's cardamon for a while, too.

I ran the towel over my head again as I opened the bathroom door. Rosalie was waiting with a comb in her right hand; her left was propped on her hip, holding an ash grey Forks High gym shirt.

"Thanks, Rose, Em." I combed my hair straight back from my face while I shoved the gym shirt in my back pocket. "We should probably do some laundry after Bella gets up here."

"You're welcome. You know," Rosalie said with one of her crafty smiles, "since you're Bella's mate, you could move into her room."

Caught off guard, I stared blankly at Rosalie. Moving into Bella's room hadn't even occurred to me.

"Hellcat got your tongue, Jazz?" Emmett snickered as his thumbs moved in a blur over the Gameboy.

"Uh, Hellcat hasn't invited me." They were right. Bella and I were mates. Why hadn't she invited me?

Rosalie looked at me curiously. "Well, aren't you the polite young man," she said as she patted my cheek. "Maybe she doesn't know she can invite you. Perhaps you should mention it." She raised her eyebrow and smirked at me.

"It might not be a good time to make any more changes around here. She's had enough to deal with, and we'll be leaving soon."

"Making excuses, Jazz?"
"No," I answered tersely, hoping she'd drop the subject. I was planning on Bella being in my room in our new home, and I was looking forward to it. Quite eagerly, in fact.

Hoping to distract Rosalie from that topic, I said, "I have a few things left in Alice's room. I'll have to get them. Is she in there?"

"Yes, she's in her room. She's been very quiet." Rosalie took the comb back. "Do you want me to go ask her?"

"No," I said, leaning against the wall and pulling on my socks. "I should go see how she is. Edward and Esme still upstairs?"

"Yes, though they've been pretty quiet, too." Rosalie stepped a bit closer to me and began to whisper. "I hate to say it, but I've had a moment when I almost felt sorry for him."

A low growl started in my chest. "Are you shittin' me, Rose? I thought you wanted to shred him." I glared at her. "For a vampire, he's had it pretty fuckin' easy. He's lucky he's had Carlisle to take care of him all these years." I hissed and jammed my feet in my boots.

Emmett appeared beside Rosalie, an answering deep rumble in his chest. "He's always been taken care of. He went right from his momma to Carlisle, and he never learned how to take care of anything. That's what his problem is," he said, shaking the Gameboy at Rosalie. "He's never really had to grow up. His change into a vampire was no different than anybody else's. And he's always treated Jazz like the red-headed stepchild." Emmett paused, rubbing his chin. "I wonder how he likes it?"

"But what could have happened to him to make him obsess on Bella's blood like that?" Rosalie asked, a bit of worry touching her face.

Frowning, Emmett shoved the Gameboy in his pocket. "I don't fuckin' know, Rose, and I don't care. I ran across my singer and drained her."

I scowled at Rosalie. "I haven't ever run across one, but I don't give a shit what could have happened to him. Tryin' to save Bella's blood like that was fucked up." I hissed again. "He's lucky Bella doesn't want him dead. I'd be happy to oblige her if she ever changed her mind. But I don't think she will," I said, sighing in frustration.

"It's just … I wonder what would happen if I ever ran across my singer? If I didn't drain him, would I want to stay near him? Would I keep looking for him?"

Emmett pulled her into his arms, her back to his chest, and kissed the side of her pale gold head. "I don't think you'd have to worry about that, Babe. The pull is so strong; I think you'd drain him."

"Emmett, that's not helping." She pushed his arms from around her and stepped away from him, her brows furrowed.

I leaned toward Rosalie. "I don't even have to think about it. If I ever ran across my singer, if I even have one, I'd drain him. Problem solved." Stepping toward the short hall to their door, I turned back to Rosalie. "Rose, I've seen thousands of humans, and never ran across one. I think the odds are good you won't." I started to leave their room, but turned back once more. "Try not to worry about it. And don't waste your time worrying about Fuckward."

After closing the door behind me, I turned left in the hall and knocked lightly on Alice's door.

She opened the door slowly and smiled brightly as she saw me. "Hi Jazz. Come on in."
I stepped onto the pale cream carpet and stood by the door. "How have you been?"

"I've been okay. Working on my designs." She smiled and gestured to the right toward her drafting table in the corner. It was filled with white sheets of paper covered with splashes of color — long-legged females with sky-high heels, dressed in short, ruffly skirts with matching jackets. So typically Alice.

I followed her into her room. Looking around, not one thing that had belonged to me was left, not that there had ever been much. It was as if we hadn't spent the last half century together — as if I'd never been there. Funny, but that didn't seem to bother me in the least.

The rooms we had shared over the years had always reflected more of Alice's Pollyanna-like personality than mine. That had been part of the reason I'd had my own study after joining the Cullens. We had always had our separate spaces. Her love of pink and other pale pastels had a little to do with it, too.

"I came to get my hiking clothes. Not that I'll need the flannel shirts and the long-sleeved shirts yet, but I should get my stuff out of your closet."

"Don't you want any of the suits?" Alice asked as she swung the bedroom door closed and opened the closet door. She politely flipped on the light and stepped back.

"No. I don't think I'll need them, but I'll get them out of here." I went in the closet and was surrounded by Alice's crisp scent — cool, citrusy orange and lemon with a hint of berries. I had always liked it, but it had never called to me like Bella's sensuous scent of cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger. She smelled so warm. She smelled like home. I couldn't wait to establish our own home together.

I gathered my flannel shirts, a few button-downs, and other cool-weather clothes from the shelves in the back. "Alice, I'll take these to my study and be right back to get my other stuff, okay?" I said as I came back out of her huge closet.

"I can help you, you know. There are just a few suits and shoes."

I nodded at her offer. "Thanks for not throwing this stuff out."

"I wouldn't throw your clothes away, and they're in the back of the closet anyway." She shrugged her shoulders as she took her turn in the closet and lifted three suits from the pole. She scooped two shoe boxes from the floor and turned toward me. She smiled again, but it was touched with sadness. "This is it. The older things have already been taken to Goodwill. You don't want the sweaters?"

"No thanks, Alice. They can go to Goodwill, too." I reached in and grabbed my two navy blue duffel bags from the top shelf.

I followed her out of her room and down the hall to my study. My door, and the door to Bella's room, were leaning against the wall. I didn't think I'd have time to fix them and the door frames properly before it was time to leave.

Alice smiled slightly as she looked over the battered doors, glanced back at me, and shook her head in amusement. "Bella sure tore up the doors. Emmett's lucky she didn't get hold of him."

"Yes, he is. But she did bite him on the leg."

"Oh, she did?" Alice's laugh chimed through the air. "I didn't know about that. But from what I did hear," she peered at me from the corner of her eye, "he deserved it." She chuckled again.
I smiled at her in surprise. I do believe she was teasing me, and I took that as a good sign.

She followed me into my study. "Where do you want these?"

"Just set them on the couch." I dropped my armload of clothes on the cushions and set the duffel bags next to them. "Thank you, Alice."

"No problem." She clasped her hands together, and her gaze fell to the floor. "I really hope everything goes well with you and Bella and your trip to … well, wherever it is you're going."

"I won't forget to call you with the address, but I'll call after we get out of Edward's range even though it's a PO Box. He'll probably read it in your mind, but that's okay. The PO Box isn't that close to the house. My place doesn't have an actual address."

Her hands fluttered nervously, and she put them behind her back as she shuffled from foot to foot. She peeked up at me. "Do you mind my asking why you never mentioned it before?"

"Security for Peter and Charlotte. They stay there now and then. They're nomads, for the most part, but I guess you could say they're nomads that move from house to house. They've never stayed in one area as long as the Cullens have. Sometimes they travel like true nomads, but even then they like to be in a house once in a while."

"That makes sense." She nodded her head. "Jazz, I was a little shocked at first, I guess you could tell, but I am happy for you and Bella. I don't want you to think I'm avoiding you, but Bella does kind of scare me. I thought I should stay out of her way until she calms down." She tugged at the pale yellow scarf she had knotted around her neck. "I mean, I know the newborn instincts are hard to control, and I don't want to make things harder for her. Or for you." Her hand brushed at her hair and then tugged at the collar of her shirt. "I want to be her friend again, but I don't want to make her jealous."

"She can't seem to help herself." I had a pretty good idea what Bella thought of Edward, but it didn't keep me from being a little jealous. I caught Alice's right hand in both of mine. "I know you want to be her friend, and I think you'll be able to again. Maybe when she's past her newborn stage. When I'm not near you both, you seem to get along okay."

"Yes." Alice smiled faintly. "We did well together cleaning up the patio and the living room." Her natural exuberance bubbled up again, and she laughed brightly. "So many things were smashed! Edward's piano was nothing but splinters." Her free hand clapped over her mouth, and her light amber eyes twinkled with her mirth. "I know I shouldn't laugh at that, but it was so funny. The flower petals and greens were everywhere. All the colors were gorgeous!"

I couldn't help smiling with her. "I didn't think so when he threw me into it, but now that you mention it…" Winking at her, I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You've been a good friend to me. I hope I can be so to you."

She squeezed my hand in return and then pulled away to lean against the arm of the couch. "I can't see it right now, but I think we will be. We've known each other a long time. We've helped each other over and over. I'd like to think that we'll continue." She walked behind the couch and ran her hands over the top of the cushions. "Of course, I'll be staying with Esme and Carlisle, so if you ever need me for anything …"

"Thanks, Alice." I grabbed one of the duffels and began shoving the long-sleeved T-shirts and the other shirts inside. The other bag would be for Bella's clothes. "It would be safer for you to stay with the family, but if you ever need me, just call."
"I will." Alice smiled up at me again and patted the back of the couch. "Well, I should go back to my room. I expect Bella will be up here soon. She does like to take baths." She moved toward the doorway. "Does your house have a big tub in it?"

"Unfortunately, no. I might have to put one in." If I did that, we'd lose a closet. That wouldn't really matter, though. Bella didn't appear to need the closet space that Alice had always required.

"Remodeling. That should be fun." Alice smiled again. "I'll see you later, Jazz."

I lifted the duffel bag from the couch and started to turn toward the wardrobe. "Thank you, Alice. For everything." It struck me that it felt like I was saying goodbye to her and a feeling of melancholy stole over me. I sent her my gratitude and the love I felt for her.

She took in a small breath and placed her hands over her heart. "I love you, too, Jazz." Then she darted away.

Grabbing the suits from the couch, I went to the wardrobe, dropped my duffel bag on the floor, and opened the doors. I hung the suits on the short pole on the left side and reached for the few remaining T-shirts on the shelves to the right. After dropping them in the duffel, I turned back and reached for my socks and underwear. As I tossed them into the bag, I heard a gasp at the door.

Bella was standing there, staring at me, with her mouth hanging open. Suddenly self-conscious, I looked down at myself and took a quick inventory, running my hands down my chest. Carlisle's white T-shirt, my blue jeans, and brown boots. Everything appeared to be in place. I glanced up at Bella and couldn't help noticing how lovely she was, despite the mud and her tangled hair. Just seeing her again sent a feeling of peace through me, even though she kept sneaking up on me.

"What's the matter?"

"Er, nothing." She stepped slowly into the room. "Uh, is that Carlisle's shirt? It's a little tight."

Oh?

Grinning at her, I slid my hands back up my stomach and chest, her eyes following their progress. She was blocking me from feeling her emotions again, but it seemed she liked the shirt. I'd have to remember that.

She took another step, stopped and inhaled deeply. She darted toward the couch and began to growl. "She was here. What was she doing in here? I smell her." Her bright red eyes darkened to near black, and she growled again.

Reaching out for her, I walked slowly toward her. "It's okay, Darlin'. I had a few clothes left in Alice's closet, and she helped me carry them in here is all." I touched her arm, and she was nearly vibrating with her emotions. I didn't need to be able to detect them to know she was angry.

She spun to face me. "I smell her. I smell her on your hands … on you." Her glistening black eyes slowly made their way up my chest and to my face.

Oh, shit.

Sensing I was in big trouble with a capital T — and I didn't even know why — I felt the urge to back away from her, but stood my ground. I hadn't ever backed away from anyone and was stunned that the impulse came over me while facing Bella's anger. However, I suppose it was stupid of me to have rubbed my hands over my chest after having touched Alice's hands.
Raising my hands up and speaking softly, I said, "Bella, everything is fine. Alice just helped me carry in clothes, and I held her hand to thank her."

She was practically quivering, and her eyes narrowed to glittering, dark slits.

I probably shouldn't have put my Alice-scented hands right up in front of her face like that, either.

*Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20.*

Bella's rage and suspicion blasted outward. I was suddenly shirtless, and the torn remains of Carlisle's T-shirt were clenched in her fist. "Dammit, Jasper, you're mine!" she spat out as she shook the shredded shirt in my face.

Before I could even think, the T-shirt was flung to the floor, her arms and legs were clamped tightly around me, and her teeth were embedded in the right side of my neck by my shoulder.

*Damn, she's fast when she's pissed off.*

I fell backward, trying to turn to the left so she wouldn't smash her forehead against the floor and thudded heavily to the rug, just missing the chair.

"Oh, fuck me." Getting bitten stings like hell when it isn't part of your foreplay or orgasm. Well, it stings then too, but …

Bella had my left arm pinned down, but my right was free. I began stroking her head and back and whispering, "It's okay, Bella. It's all right. Calm down, Darlin'.'"

Her angry emotions were spinning at top speed, and she was breathing quickly through her nose. She renewed her furious growls and sunk her teeth even more deeply into the curve of my neck.

"Son of a bitch." I squirmed with the fiery pain, drawing up my right leg. Previously, her bites had been very erotic. There wasn't anything erotic about that one.

Then I noticed Alice's scent was stronger down on the floor. The duffel bag my clothes were in lay just to the right of us, near my wardrobe, and it was saturated with Alice's berry and citrus scent. It had to be her scent on my clothes that set Bella off. As long as she could smell it, I didn't think she would let go. Though I thought I would be able to get up from the floor, I didn't know how Bella would react to my movement.

Her right arm slid from underneath me, and she gripped my left above my elbow and squeezed, pushing my arm down and holding it to the floor. With her newborn strength, she would be able to break it off without too much trouble. I didn't think she would let go. Though I thought I would be able to get up from the floor, I didn't know how Bella would react to my movement.

Her right arm slid from underneath me, and she gripped my left above my elbow and squeezed, pushing my arm down and holding it to the floor. With her newborn strength, she would be able to break it off without too much trouble. I didn't think she would, but I wasn't sure about that. Her jealousy, possessiveness, and rage were pummeling me, and I was having a difficult time not being overwhelmed by it.

I didn't know what to do to calm her down. I was good and trapped. With my left hand's limited movement, I eased up the hem of her still-damp Henley and pressed my fingers against the smooth skin of her back, hoping that would help.

"Bella, you can let go. She's not here," I whispered into her tangled hair. With my right hand, and despite the throbbing of her venom sizzling through my veins, I slowly gathered her hair together, twisted it around and laid it down the center of her back.

"Let go, please? Alice isn't here."
Seems I fucked up again. Bella's growls became louder at the mention of Alice's name. Her venom was burning down through my shoulder, up into my neck, and across my chest, but I couldn't think of anything else to do. I didn't see a way out of the situation without injuring her, or losing a chunk out of the top of my shoulder. If she hurt me like that, I was sure it would upset her.

Holding her in my arms, I whispered to her. "I love you, Bella. You know I love you." Tightening my arms around her, I breathed in her scent. "I love you." I sent all my love to her, hoping it would soothe and reassure her.

"Jasper, do you need help?" Rosalie, speaking quietly and evenly, was at the door. I was sure she wouldn't be able to see that Bella had her teeth in me.

"Yes. Alice's scent …"

Bella growled again, the vibrations going through my chest and arms.

"Do you want me to grab Bella?"

"No!" I barked out. I stroked Bella's hair again as she continued with her low growls. "I love you, Bella." The whirl of her rage and jealousy had slowed, but not enough for her to pull her teeth out of my shoulder. It had to be because Alice's scent was so close.

I spoke softly. "Rose, take both of those duffel bags out of here. I think I'll have to wash all those clothes and the bags. Bella bit me again and she won't let go."

"Pissed her off, did you? That didn't take long. You certainly get yourself into some interesting situations, Jasper." Rosalie darted into the room, snatching up the half-filled duffel from the floor and the other from the couch, and dashed back out to the hall. "I'll take these downstairs and be right back." In a blur, she was gone.

Bella's growling continued intermittently, though it wasn't as loud, and I ran my fingers through her hair. "Bella, the bags are gone. It's okay." It hurt like a bitch, but I turned my head to kiss her. "I love you, Bella." Breathing into her hair, I kissed her again.

She growled louder.

Plying her with kisses and sweet words of love wasn't working, so I tried to hit her with a small dose of lethargy. After a second, it bounced right back to me. Evidently, she decided to block my attempts to influence her emotionally. I was stumped.

Emmett's amusement preceded his appearance at my door. Arms crossed, he was leaning against what was left of the door jam and grinning at me. "So, I see you pissed her off this time."

Not wanting to dignify that stupid remark with any sort of response, I ignored him and stroked Bella's hair with my right hand and massaged the tight muscles in her back with my left. I nuzzled her ear and whispered to her. "You are my mate. I love you."

"Rose gave me a heads up. Ya know, I could open the window and maybe air out the place." Emmett suggested. "It stopped raining a little while ago."

Becoming just a touch frustrated, I hissed at him. "Well, then fuckin' do it. She's bitin' the shit out of me."

Bella didn't appreciate that. Growling again, she pulled her left arm from around my ribs, slid her hand down my side and pinched me right above my hip.
Oh, goddammit!

That hurt almost as much as a bite, and I jerked away from the sharp pain, causing her teeth to shift in my shoulder enough to make that shit hurt even more. I pushed my face into her hair and growled back at her. Clenching my teeth, I ground out, "Oh, Isabella, I love you so goddamn much."

During the pinching, snarling, and growling, Emmett zipped across the room, opened the window, and scooted back out to stand in the hall, cackling like a fool the entire time.

"Do you want me to pinch her nose closed so she can't smell anything?"

Where the hell does he come up with this shit?

In pain, exasperated, and a little more pissed off, I yelled at him. "Don't fuckin' touch her!"

Emmett's booming laugh rang out. "Maybe a bubble bath will distract her?"

I grunted into Bella's hair. At least he'd thought of something that might prove to be helpful. I was clean out of ideas. "Jesus Christ! Just fuckin' do it!"

As he went to run the water in Bella's tub, Rosalie reappeared. "Started the laundry for you, Jazz. Maybe a bath will help," she said happily. "And I'll go open a window in Bella's room, so we get a cross-draft."

Trying to calm myself down, I whispered to her, "Bella, why are you mad at me?" I nuzzled into her ear. "I didn't do anything, and I'm gettin' a little irked myself."

She growled again. She wasn't as angry as she had been, but tendrils of her jealousy were still winding through and around her swirling emotions.

If she was that mad at me because Alice had been in my study, I didn't think I should mention Edward's … attraction to me any time soon. Of course, that could have been a reaction to stress on his part. Though if I could be sure Bella would focus her jealousy on, and direct her anger at him …

From Bella's bathroom, which shared a wall with my study, I heard Emmett splashing the water in the bath tub. "Ohhh, Bellzy-bub," he sang. "Mmmmm. Just smell those vanilla bubbles." He made more splashing sounds. "Tub's gettin' pretty full and it is dee-licious." He splashed the water a few more times. "Rose said you liked the water nice and hot. It's just the way you like it."

I could smell the vanilla, so I knew Bella could, and, at last, the light bulb came on in my brain. Trying to explain to her, asking her, kisses, and loving words hadn't worked to make her let go, so I'd have to resort to attacking her back. I held her head tightly against me so her teeth wouldn't shift again, and I rolled until I hit my knees. I cautiously moved to stand. Her arms went around my ribs to hang on to me. A smidgen of curiosity joined the mix I was feeling from her.

"Darlin', I've been wantin' to get in the tub with you," I said seductively as I toed off my boots. "And now seems like the perfect time." I pushed down my sock with my toes, stepped on the end and pulled my foot out. After repeating the procedure with my other foot, I started walking toward the door.

Her legs tightened around my waist, and I felt the first glimmer of worry appear, taking her anger down a notch.

"Don't worry, Darlin'," I said as I carried her into her room. I lowered my voice and whispered into her ear, "I'm sure we'll both have an excellent time." I winked at Rosalie, who was sitting on Bella's
bed.

She smiled and waved her fingers at us. "You know, I could get a set of clothes out for Bella while you two are in the tub." With her reassuring smile, wide eyes, crossed legs, and hands daintily clasped together in her lap, she was the picture of guileless helpfulness.

Emmett was still in the bathroom, on his knees by the huge soaking tub, stirring the water and waving his hand through the bubbles. His face brightened when he saw us; he grabbed the bottle of bubble bath from the counter and poured another dollop into the tub. He closed his eyes and smiled. "Doesn't that smell wonderful? Ahhhhhh. Pretty damn sexy, too."

Bella was becoming more apprehensive by the moment, but she still didn't pull her teeth out of my shoulder. At least she wasn't growling anymore and that was an improvement.

Emmett turned off the water and hopped up from the floor, scraping the bubbles off his arm and back into the tub. "Well, since this is the last room you two love birds have with a door, I'll just make myself scarce. Maybe go check on the laundry." He came out of the bathroom and leaned around to look at Bella. He waggled his eyebrows and fist bumped her shoulder. "You two kids have fun."

I stepped into the bathroom, and Emmett quickly pulled the door shut.

"Now, Darlin'…" I said in a cajoling voice as I squeezed her leg near her knee. I ran my hand down her thigh and over her ass. "There's no need to keep bitin' me like that. You need to relax, and I know just how to help you do that."

I didn't know if Rosalie and Emmett had any idea what I was planning, though they seemed to catch on fairly quickly. At least they went along with it. Honorable man that I was, I was fully prepared to go as far as I needed to go to make her pull her teeth out of me. I slid my right hand down over the curve of her ass and reached for the button on my jeans. I paused, waiting to see if Bella would let go, but she didn't. I undid the button and slowly pulled the zipper down.

She yanked her teeth from my shoulder. "Stop, Jasper! What are you doing?"

Sweet relief settled over me. Her bite still stung like a bitch, but at least she wasn't still drooling her venom into me. Not that I really minded that so much. It did blend our scents together and it marked me as hers.

"I'm takin' off my pants to get in the tub," I said innocently. "You need a bath and you wouldn't let go …"

"No!"

"Since you're blockin' me, and don't seem to want to listen to me, I had to think of another way to … calm you down."

"No! Let me down."

I hooked my thumb in the waistband of the jeans, yanked them down a few inches, and slid my hand over her ass again. "Oh, now you want me to let you go?"

"Yes!" She tried to pull away from me.

"But Darlin', don't you want to get in the tub and clean up? You are pretty muddy." I dragged my left hand up her back, taking hold of her neck, and kissed her throat beneath her jaw. "I could massage and scrub your back for you. You're very tense."
"Ohhhhh." She sighed. "Uh, no. I can scrub my own back. Unless I break another back brush. Get out and send Rose in to help me get undressed."

Reaching between us, my fingers searched for the button on her jeans. "I can help you get undressed," I whispered into her ear.

"No!" She grabbed my hand as I undid the button, and she dropped her legs from around my waist. "Put me down, please?"

Heaving a huge sigh, I said, "If you insist." I gripped her waist and set her on the floor. Her bright crimson eyes dropped immediately to my jeans then flashed up to my face. But they didn't stay there.

"Uh … um."

It was one of those moments when I missed her blush. The little soldier was quite interested in the goings on, straining against the cotton of the boxer briefs, and I was sure human Bella would have been beet red about then. Regretting the decision to put on underwear, sure I would have enjoyed seeing the look on her face if I hadn't, I stepped back away from her.

Having to make a couple of adjustments to the little soldier and my jeans before zipping them up, I sighed again. I believe I was disappointed that she hadn't called my bluff. Not that I was bluffing.

Apparently the procedure was fascinating to Bella, and I asked, "Did you want to help me?"

She blinked and her eyes finally made their way back to my face. "Er … uh, no!" She covered her face with her hands and turned away from me. Her embarrassment flared and completely replaced her anger.

"I'll get Rose." I smirked at her, turned, and opened the door. Luckily, I still had Emmett's T-shirt in my back pocket — I didn't know how — and I slipped it over my head. "Rose, Bella would prefer it if you helped her get undressed."

"I can't imagine why." Rosalie grinned at me. "Bella, do you want the iPod?" She disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Emmett's shirt was huge on me, but at least it was a shirt. "Toss her clothes out here, Rose. We'll wash those, too." I'd take them downstairs and sort them with the rest of the clothes and towels. I hoped I could find some air freshener while I was down there. Spraying those suits in my wardrobe might be a good idea.

There was just a slight breeze coming through from my study to Bella's room, but I was hopeful it would dilute Alice's scent.

I heard little splashes and her happy sigh as Bella got into the tub. Rosalie cracked open the door and handed out the muddy clothes.

"You are such an asshole," she silently mouthed to me as I took Bella's bundle of clothes.

Agreeing with her, I grinned and nodded at her. "I'll be right back."

I made the trip down to the laundry and back in record time, barely pausing in admiration at all when I got to Bella's boy shorts and bra, and even after searching for an air freshener that didn't smell like fucking oranges or lemons.

Back in my study, I doused my wardrobe, the suits, and the couch with an apple and cinnamon spray
and then settled myself on the floor in the short hall into Bella's room, across from her bathroom door.

Rose came out after a few minutes, bringing Bella's enticing scent with her, and sat on the floor beside me. She patted my arm propped on my knee. "She'll settle down eventually, you know."

I nodded, closing my eyes and leaning my head back against the wall, breathing in Bella's scent. "In about a year."

Rosalie snickered quietly and patted my arm again. "I helped her wash her hair and now she has the ear buds in. She sure likes to have the music up loud. You'll have to get her an iPod." She sighed lightly. "Do you know why she bit you this time?"

I shook my head. "Mad at me, I guess. It's not like she could tell me with her mouth full of my shoulder, for Christ's sake." I ran my hand through my hair and sighed. "Alice helped me carry some clothes into my study. I took hold of her hand to thank her. Her scent was on my clothes and on me. Bella was pissed off and jealous. That's why I wanted you to get the duffel bags out. I thought she would let go once the bags were out of the room."

"Well, maybe that jealousy thing will calm down after … ahem, well, anyway … how's the bite?" She bumped my shoulder with hers.

"It sealed, but it still stings. She got enough damn venom into me."

Chuckling at me, she said, "You do smell more like cinnamon than you used to. I happened to notice that bite on her shoulder. Maybe you need to bite her a few more times. Do some venom swapping, as Emmett would say."

Barely opening my eyes, I looked at Rosalie from the corner of my eye and grinned at her. "I plan on it."

Settling back against the wall, I listened to the quiet sounds of the house: Bella moving slowly in the tub; water trickling and gurgling, and her soft splashes. Emmett was back in his room — humming lightly to himself, and probably playing with his Gameboy again. Esme and Carlisle were down the hall in his study, talking softly together. I could hear the washer hitting it's rinse and spin cycle downstairs.

Directly above Bella's room was Edward's, and I heard him moving back and forth. He was probably reorganizing his CDs and albums — again. I really couldn't blame him. Vampires tended to be a little OCD. Of course, Edward could be the poster child for obsessive-compulsive disorder. Well, I liked my books in a particular order. His shelves did get smashed the other day. I supposed it was time to rearrange them. I was just happy he was busy somewhere else.

Taking in a slow, deep breath, I drew in the tranquility of the house. I thought that was probably the first really peaceful moment I'd had since I had found Bella in her wrecked truck. I wasn't complaining, but everyone needed some quiet time now and then.

Even vampires who never slept were inclined to be a bit calmer at two o'clock in the morning. Unless we were feeding, of course.

I appreciated Rosalie's presence beside me. The fact that she didn't feel the need to fill the near silence with endless chatter was a blessing. Bella had her moments, but you could never call her verbose. There were times when I wished she would talk and tell me more. Like just a few minutes ago when she had her teeth in me.
Then there was Alice. She had always felt the compulsion to fill almost every moment with some sort of sound.

Bella's contentedness and Rosalie's sense of well-being were lulling me into a relaxed state. It was nice to be still.

Above us, even Edward's continuous self-condemnation, despair, and black gloom had eased up. I couldn't say he was happy; he just wasn't as miserable.

I was thoroughly enjoying the peace and quiet until I felt Edward's surge of alarm.

Instantly, I was on my feet. "Edward, what is it?" I was trying to keep my voice low so Bella wouldn't hear me, but I knew Edward could. I sent my senses out as far as I could, but didn't detect anything unusual.

"Wolves."

_Oh shit._
Jasper's POV

Wolves? The wolves were close enough to the house for Edward to detect them? What the fuck were they doing?

It didn't help in the least, but I stared up at the ceiling of Bella's room, willing Edward to be able to hear the wolves and what they were thinking. "Where? Can you tell how close they are?"

"He … they're maybe five miles out. West. They are thinking at me. In fact, they are shouting at me. To warn us, I think. They're not moving very quickly, but they're coming closer."

"How many?"

"Possibly three." He left his room, and I heard him running down the flight of stairs to Carlisle's study near the landing.

Rosalie was on her feet and wringing her hands anxiously. Her eyes were flicking between me and the bathroom door. Bella was still in the tub.

"Rose, get Bella's clothes and get her dressed. Turn the lights off. Emmett …"

"Lights and stuff are off, Jazz."

I darted to my study and turned off the lamps. Rosalie, Emmett, and I were not supposed to be in Forks. There wasn't anything I could do about the scent trails we left outside around the house, but at
least we could turn the lights off in our rooms. I grabbed my socks and boots and yanked them on. A strong impulse to grab Bella and run nearly overtook me, but if the wolves had sent a scout ahead to do any sort of sweep along the outskirts of our territory, I didn't want to chance running into him out in the forest. He would be able to communicate instantly with the other wolves through the connection of their pack mind. I thought Bella would be safer in the house surrounded by the rest of the family. We had them outnumbered with our seven to their three. Even as fast as the wolves were, it would take time for the rest of the pack to get here if they were summoned. Even if I had to kill the three that were on their way to the house, we would be able to escape if necessary.

As a newborn, Bella would be ruthless and out of control in a fight, which was the reason Maria used them so many decades ago. But she also used them because they were thoughtless, mostly unskilled except for the training I had given them, and expendable. If they lost limbs or were beheaded, it made no difference. We could always get more.

The thought of Bella facing the wolves in a battle sent fearful shudders down my spine. Her instinctive viciousness and her newborn strength wouldn't do much good. She would be the most vulnerable because she had no experience or training at all. Again, I pushed down the urge to gather her in my arms and race away from any potential fight.

It would not come to that.

According to the treaty, they shouldn't be sending any scouts to our territory, let alone to the house. I stopped in the darkened hallway to listen and send my senses out as far as they could reach. I could just barely detect the glimmer of otherness that signified the wolves. "Edward, I feel them. I sense three. They're three or four miles out. Alice, would you prefer to stay in your room?"

"No!" She peeked out her door. "I'll go in Carlisle's study with them." She darted from her room to Carlisle's door and disappeared inside. I heard Esme murmuring softly to her.

Rosalie hadn't shut the bathroom door completely when she went in. Bella flung the door open and appeared in the short hallway that led into her room. The door slammed against the wall in the bathroom, but at least she didn't tear it off its hinges.

Then I noticed she was wet.

And naked.

Oh, my Christ, she has a sweet ass.

It just fucking figured that the first time I got a glimpse of her beautiful, nude curves I wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

She was facing away from me. Her damp hair was swinging across her bare back, and I was completely awestruck. I also noticed that while she was still human she had gained back all the weight she had lost after we all left her, plus a few more pounds, adding nicely to the flare of her hips and the delicious shape of her ass. The clothes she chose to wear camouflaged her figure more than I had realized.

A pang of guilt stabbed at my heart — guilt for following along with Edward's idiocy and leaving her behind. Leaving her vulnerable and at the mercy of any creature that chose to pass through Forks. I blinked and shoved that negative feeling away. There wasn't time for that.

My eyes were drawn back to her and were absorbed in appreciating her exquisitely rounded ass and
her legs. Her legs were … they were great. They were gorgeous. Her thighs were smooth and firm, and they curved sensuously up into her ass and down to her calves, and I couldn't fucking wait to have them wrapped around my hips and …

And Emmett punched me right in the jaw, knocking me into the two cracked doors leaning against the wall.

"What the fuck, Emmett?" I said, glaring at him and rubbing my jaw. Then another thought struck me. "Did you see my mate naked?"

By that time, Rosalie had a towel wrapped around Bella and she was facing me, trembling.

"No, I didn't. Unlike some dickheads who drop their pants in front of other people's mates." Emmett stared angrily down at me, his fists propped on his hips. He pointed one of his huge fingers right at my face. "Jazz, you're being a stupid asshole, and we don't have time for that shit."

He was right. I didn't have time to stare at my stunning mate, who happened to be wet and dressed in only a sage green towel. Which was lovely against her skin, by the way.

I considered myself lucky he hadn't hit me hard enough to knock me and the broken doors through the wall and into Bella's bathroom.

"Jasper? Wolves?" Bella's frightened eyes looked up to mine and she took a step toward me.

The fear in Bella's voice snapped my full attention back to the current crisis. "Bella, you need to get dressed. Quickly. Get in the bathroom. Leave the lights off." I turned to Emmett. "You, Rosalie, Bella, and I should stay in Bella's room."

Then I remembered the open windows. "Oh, shit. Shut the windows." We didn't need that wolf-stink in the house. It set off an intense fight or flight response, and I had no idea how Bella might react to it, but considering the older vampires' reactions to the odor, I knew it would be a strong one. I raced back into my study to shut the window and yank the curtains closed. Meeting Emmett in Bella's room, I saw he had closed her window and pulled the curtains across them.

"You don't want to make a run for it?" Emmett asked.

"No. If they sent out a scout, I don't want to run into him in the woods."

Emmett was pacing back and forth in front of the curtained window wall and then returned to the built-in bookshelves on the right, placing a hand against one of them and leaning forward. "But they're not supposed to be running through our territory."

"They're not supposed to be coming to the house either." I stood by the wall opposite Bella's bathroom door in the short hallway and waited impatiently for her to come back out.

Keeping my voice low, I asked, "Edward, can you tell who they are?"

From down the hall came Edward's urgent voice. "One of them is Sam Uley. He is thinking toward me to warn us of their approach. I'm not sure of the other two. The pack mind makes it difficult to tell who is with him. Most of them appear to have phased, and I can hear them through Sam. As soon as I can determine who is with him, I'll let you know." Edward was very alert, nervous, and wary — much like everyone else — but he wasn't afraid.

Bella and Rosalie finally came out of the bathroom, and Bella was in my arms, her face pressed into my chest, her arms circling my ribs. Rosalie dashed to Emmett to be enclosed in his arms.
She had dressed Bella in jeans and another Henley, but this one was navy blue. I mentally kicked myself in the ass again. It wasn't the time to be paying attention to clothing and color choices!

Bella searched my face. "What are we going to do, Jasper? They can't know I'm here!"

I stroked her damp hair and held her snugly to my body, trying to calm her trembling. "We're going to stay here in your room and hide. They must have an important message for Carlisle. I don't think they'll be here very long, and they won't come inside." I kissed her forehead. "Our scents are outside, but I'm hoping the rain we had earlier dilutes them. I think your scent has changed enough that they won't recognize it."

Carlisle silently appeared at Bella's bedroom door. "Jasper, I believe you're right about Bella's scent. If they ask about it, perhaps we had a visit from one of our relatives in Alaska. Kate? Otherwise, Bella's remaining human scent shouldn't be a concern."

I nodded. "If they question our scents, Emmett, Rosalie, and I were here last week. We left Friday."

"Carlisle. Jasper," Edward called to us. "Sam Uley has Paul Lahote and Seth Clearwater with him. He wants to speak to Carlisle."

"Seth? He's just a kid!" Bella began to tremble again. She pulled her arms from around me, and huddled against me.

I kissed the top of her head and curled protectively over her, bringing my hand to her head. "Bella, I know Seth is young, but I think that's a good sign. They're not expecting trouble or they would have left him on the Reservation and brought a more experienced wolf. I'm wondering why Jacob Black didn't come with him instead. Edward?"

Bella's cries interrupted any answer Edward may have been about to give. "Oh, Jacob!"

I put my finger under her chin and urged her to look at me. "What's wrong, Darlin'?"

Even in the darkened room, her eyes were bright with venom tears, and she whispered, "I know I can't ever see him again, but I miss him so much, Jasper." Sorrow flowed from her and surpassed her earlier fear.

Knowing she loved him, and knowing she didn't love him the same way she loved me, I kissed her lightly, trying to comfort her. "I know you do, Darlin'. But you know you can't see him, or let any of the other wolves see you."

"I know. I just miss him so much!" She buried her face in the crease between my chest and arm.

Edward's sudden surge of jealousy and resentment startled me, but only for a moment. He had been extremely envious of Jacob Black's relationship with Bella, even before the young Quileute had phased into a wolf. I guessed it was too soon for me to hope Edward would be over it. It was Bella's flight to see the russet wolf that had put us in our current position, but I wouldn't change it if I could. It was that race to see the wolf that had taken her from Edward and brought her to me. I knew Edward also resented my mate status with Bella and would probably continue to do so for a long time.

The whirl of Bella's emotions was starting to gain speed, and I was becoming worried that she might lose her composure. She had been doing very well, considering she was a newborn, but if she couldn't control herself, it was about the worst possible time for her to start tearing shit up and get the urge to run off through the forest. "Let me help you calm down."
"I can do it." She insisted as her muscles tensed against me. "I can. I just … I miss him."

Thankfully, Edward pulled back his jealousy, and I heard him sigh in resignation. I could imagine his fingers gripping the bridge of his nose.

Hesitantly, Edward said, "Sam is worried about Jacob. Jacob hasn't come out of his house for days." He paused, apparently trying to search through Sam Uley's thoughts. "Paul can have a volatile temper, but Seth has a soothing effect on him." Pausing again, he finally said, "Sam is thinking about the scent of a strange vampire they came across. He's going to ask us about that."

A strange vampire? Instinctively, I clutched Bella to me more tightly. Could it be the vampire who discovered her at the crash scene first? The one who had bitten and left her? Could he have come back to look for her, or was it that he never left the area? The wolves couldn't have smelled Bella's scent. Even with all her running, she hadn't been beyond the borders of our territory. A deep, possessive growl started in my chest.

No! No one would take her from me!

As Bella tried to snuggle even more deeply into my chest, Carlisle reached forward and placed a steadying hand on my shoulder.

"Jasper, please calm down." Carlisle gave my shoulder a small squeeze and let go with a light pat. "I'll ask them where they found that scent. I'm not due at the hospital until six A.M., so I'll go and see if I can find anything with the scent on it and bring it back."

Bella's fear enveloped me and it amplified my anger and possessiveness. I shoved those feelings down and away. I had to take care of her and couldn't allow my emotions to take over. "Bella, don't be afraid. I'll protect you. You heard what Carlisle said. He'll try and bring a sample back. He may even recognize the scent."

I held her to me and moved from the short hall and into her room, then went left to place us between her bed and the closet. Bella's fear was climbing, and I stroked her hair to try and comfort her. "Bella, remember you have your shield. You can put it up and they can't hurt you. If we have to, we can run. As a last resort, we can fight them. There are seven of us and only three of them."

Bella's hands gripped my shirt, tearing it slightly, and she looked up at me with worry and fear in her eyes. "Jasper! You can't hurt Seth — he's just a kid! Please don't hurt him."

Cupping her face with my hands, I gently kissed her lips. "I'm hoping I won't have to, Darlin'. I don't want to hurt him, but we have to be prepared for anything."

I would kill every last one of them to protect her. She didn't like hearing about the possibility of a fight against the wolves, but I wouldn't keep things from her to spare her feelings like Edward always had. She had to know what we might be faced with. "Bella, listen to me. To hide from them, we need to be very quiet and very still. They'll be here soon. They'll most likely come to the front of the house. We can get out through your windows if we need to and jump up into the trees." I wrapped my arms around her shaking body, tucking her head under my chin. "They might be fast, but they can't climb."

Carlisle stepped further into the room. "I know Sam has my phone number. I wonder why he didn't call? Jasper, I'll go meet them on the front porch. That should be close enough for everyone to hear us."

Nodding to Carlisle, I sent my senses out as far as I could and still found only the three wolves.
"Edward, I still sense only three."

Wisely staying in Carlisle's study, Edward said quietly, "Yes, so do I. They'll be here soon. Carlisle, should I go outside with you?"

"I think you should stay inside, Edward." Carlisle turned away from Bella and I. "Because you've been in mourning, and haven't been to school, I think it's best. Should you hear anything … untoward from the wolves, you'll be able to let me know. I think Esme should greet them with me."

"I agree, Carlisle." I continued stroking Bella's hair. "Having Esme with you will show that you aren't excessively worried about them coming here, and she often has a calming effect on others. I won't be able to do it. They would sense it."

Emmett, eyes flicking quickly between Carlisle and I, with Rosalie held tightly in his arms, stayed near the bookshelves. They both became very still. I could see the strain and anxiety on their faces, but when I caught Emmett's eye, he winked and gave me a quick nod. I knew he was prepared to fight.

I studied Rosalie. She was worried, but determined. She would fight, and fight well, if it was necessary. Testing the emotions of the others, I found that Alice was afraid but her protectiveness was unwavering. Being with the Cullens was the only home she had ever known — she would defend it and her family.

Esme was nervous and as apprehensive as Carlisle, but together they would gather their usual serenity and be able to meet the wolves with their customary assurance and aplomb. Having experienced what it felt like to be mated, I knew they would do anything necessary to protect each other, and Esme would protect her family.

Fortunately, Edward had buried his resentment of Jacob Black. Or had it been a resurgence of his resentment of me? It didn't matter which, but it was still there below the surface. He remained alert and vigilant, though uneasy and wary, and his curiosity was piqued. I had been hating that fucker and had a real problem with his actions regarding Bella and several of the things he had done to her — I didn't feel as though I could trust him completely around her — but I was hopeful he would do what he could to maintain the security of his family, regardless of how resentful he may have been of me or what my personal feelings for him were.

*United we stand.*

Carlisle gave me a sharp nod and he turned to leave Bella's room. When he reached his study, I heard him speaking softly to Esme in a reassuring tone. She would do well.

Turning my full attention back to Bella, I began stroking her hair again. "Darlin', we must be very still and quiet. I think you should hold your breath."

She nestled farther into my arm and chest, clutching my shirt to her face. "Why should I hold my breath?"

Speaking very quietly, I said, "We don't need for you to get a whiff of them. Their scent sets off our instincts, warning us that they're dangerous to us. They have a very strong and … objectionable odor."

She peered up at me. "But I always liked the way Jacob smelled. He smelled kind of like the forest. Sort of like cedar and pines."

"They don't smell that way to vampires."
She adjusted her fingers in my shirt. "What do they smell like to you?"

I took in a breath, steeling myself against her reaction. I was pretty sure she wouldn't like it. "They smell like rotten, wet dogs that have rolled in pig shit."

She peered up at me and blinked. "Pig shit?" She blinked again, puzzled. "Pig shit, specifically?"

"Yes. Pig shit is especially aromatic. Perhaps I'll take you by a pig farm one day." I smiled at her and stroked her hair again.

"But I always thought he smelled good. Are you sure you're not just bullshitting me?"

"Wouldn't that be 'pigshitting'?" Emmett whispered from across the room.

Rosalie blew out a hissing breath. "Don't you two start that now," she said in a low, threatening voice.

From down the hall, Edward's voice was quiet but urgent. "They're here."

I pressed Bella's head against my chest. "Hold your breath. Cover your face with my shirt."

Fortunately, she complied without arguing with me. I kissed the top of her head as I shifted slightly so that my back was toward the bi-fold closet doors, but not touching them. I was facing Bella's bed and beyond that was the wall of windows. If I needed to, I could clear the bed and be through the windows, with Bella in my arms, within a matter of seconds.

Carlisle reappeared at the doorway to Bella's room, concerned for all of us. "Everyone doing well?"

"Yes," I answered in the same breathy manner.

"Good. Esme and I will go meet with Sam. He has phased to his human form. They are crossing the front lawn now." In almost complete silence Carlisle returned to his study and then he and Esme dropped lightly from the landing to the living room below.

I would have preferred to watch the proceedings as I listened, but the wolves' eyesight seemed nearly as good as ours. I wouldn't risk being spotted, and I didn't want to leave Bella alone in order to do it. We would be able to hear them well enough from our position.

Both Esme and Carlisle took deep breaths before opening the front door and stepping out onto the porch. They were both anxious and concerned, but were projecting some curiosity as they walked forward. In my mind's eye, I could imagine them holding hands as they went to greet the Quileute wolves.

As always, Carlisle's voice was welcoming and cordial. "Good morning, Sam. I see you brought Paul and Seth with you. How may we help you?"

"Yes, good morning, Carlisle. Good morning, ma'am. I'm glad that Edward heard us." Sam's deep voice, though cautious, was not unfriendly, and in his usual manner, he got directly to the point. "When Paul and Quil were on patrol, they came across the scent of a strange vampire today. Or, I guess it was actually yesterday. It had come across the eastern boundary line a short distance and left again. We followed the scent to Forks. It had been all over town, including Forks High, the police station, and … Chief Swan's house."

Somehow, I had been expecting it, but I still stiffened minutely at hearing it confirmed by the wolves' Alpha. I couldn't help thinking it might be the vampire that had gotten to Bella right after she
crashed. I slammed the door on my feelings of alarm and anger. Trying to cover my reaction, I brought my right hand up to the back of Bella's head and bent over her.

At the mention of her father, Bella began to tremble again in my arms, and her hands tightened their grip on my shirt, but she continued to hold her breath. I held her tightly and kissed her, hoping to keep her still and quiet. I tried to send her feelings of peacefulness, but they bounced back to me. She had strengthened her shield and blocked me from feeling her emotions. I didn't know if it was in response to hearing her father's name or if it was to keep me from influencing her. I stroked her hair, my hand sliding gently over her head and neck and down her back.

"We also noticed a different scent as we came closer to your house?" Sam's voice rose as if he were asking a question.

In a very human gesture, Carlisle lightly cleared his throat. "Yes. After hearing the … sad news about Bella, one of our family members came to offer her condolences."

"A family member happened to be in the area?" Sam asked suspiciously.

"Yes, a very good friend of ours that we've known for many years. We consider them part of our extended family. She and her family share our lifestyle, and they live in Alaska. She was not far when she heard the news. She came for a short visit."

Not lies, exactly, more like misdirection and small omissions. Carlisle did not like to lie, though it was necessary to maintain our particular lifestyle, and it was always better to use as much of the truth as possible. We did consider our Denali, Alaska friends to be our cousins, after a fashion. Bella could certainly be considered a family member, and she was only going to be here for a short while.

I bent my head down to press my cheek against Bella's forehead. She was still shaking in my arms, so I kept running my fingers through her hair and stroking her back.

Sam's voice sounded a bit closer, as if he had taken a few steps toward the porch. "Did she bring a friend with her?"

"No. She was alone." I could hear Carlisle's feet shift position on the floor boards of the porch. "You said you noticed this strange scent near Chief Swan's house? Do you think the vampire went inside?"

"No. Many of us have been to Charlie's house, so our scent is quite heavy there. After we found the scent there, I included his house in our patrols. We didn't detect any vampire scent inside except for Edward's."

Sadness touched Sam's voice, and I could also feel it from Paul, mixed with his disgust, but it was not as acute as it was from the young wolf Seth. As I caught the sound of a canine whimper, Bella shifted against me and began to tremble more.

"I brought you a few samples of the vampire's scent. It had apparently hidden in the brush at the edge of the forest around the high school and Charlie's house so I picked some of the leaves it had touched."

I heard the crackle of a plastic bag and then Carlisle's voice again. "It is a male, but I don't recognize his scent. Esme?"

My eyes narrowed at hearing it was a male vampire that had been near the police station and had hidden near Bella's former home and the high school, but I remained still. That seemed entirely too coincidental to me. I wasn't surprised that Carlisle had not recognized the scent. I was curious as to why he asked Esme. He would know many more vampires than her.
"I don't recognize the scent either, Carlisle." Esme's voice was steady. She was nervous, but she was covering it.

"Is Edward here?" Sam asked.

Guardedly, Carlisle answered. "Yes, he is. He's …"

"I'd like for him to come and smell this." Sam said, interrupting. "I'd also like to know if he has any plans on going to Bella's memorial on Thursday."

I hoped the wolves did not notice Carlisle's slight hesitation before he answered. "Edward is upstairs. Edward?"

As Edward went silently to join Carlisle and Esme on the porch, Carlisle answered Sam. "Yes, we had thought we would attend her memorial — Esme, Alice, Edward, and I. Bella had meant a great deal to all of us and we are saddened by her loss."

One of the phased wolves snorted and growled. I believed it was Paul. He was projecting annoyance and disdain. The sound of his low grumbles changed position, and I thought he might be pacing.

"Paul." Sam said sharply in warning. "What about the others?"

"Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper are back east. They have finals and aren't able to make it back."

"Finals." Sam repeated, thoughtfully. He didn't believe it, but he chose not to question it. Like us, he and his pack had to maintain a charade in front of the humans.

Though he was very quiet, I heard Edward open and go through the front door. It clicked softly closed behind him.

"How can I help you, Sam?" Edward asked with obvious sorrow in his voice.

"You heard what we said? I'd like for you to see if you recognize the sample we brought. Will you be attending Bella's memorial?"

I heard the crackle of the plastic bag. There was a pause and Edward said, "Yes, I will be attending Bella's memorial. I miss her a great deal."

The wolf Paul snorted contemptuously, Seth whined, and Bella twitched in my arms. I held her as tightly as I could, and continued to stroke her hair, speaking softly to her. "It's okay, Darlin'. I'm right here." Thankfully, she was still not breathing.

A small flare of irritation came from Sam.

Edward cleared his throat. "I don't recognize this scent. May we keep this?"

I had hoped that Edward or Carlisle would suggest that. I wanted a chance at that scent, and I thought that Bella should smell it also. Perhaps she would recognize it.

It was faint, but unmistakable. I could smell the wolves. Their scent must have been pulled into the house when Edward opened the door. I gave no indication, but I was becoming more concerned. I could only hope that Bella wouldn't take a breath. We didn't need to breathe, but it did become uncomfortable after a while. We gained a lot of information through our sense of smell, and we relied on it quite a bit. She just needed to hold her breath a little while longer. I also hoped the wolves would hurry and leave. I was grateful they had brought us a sample of the strange vampire's scent,
but it was time for them to go.

"Edward, do you think it's wise for you to go to Bella's memorial?" Sam asked.

"Why, Sam? You know that people would expect us to be there. If we didn't go, people would question it."

Sam was becoming uncomfortable and a small trickle of nervousness was coming through. "Jacob has been, uh, very upset. He plans on attending. I could order him not to go, but I won't deny him his chance to say goodbye. I don't want to resort to that."

When Sam mentioned Jacob, Bella's head shifted and she took a breath. Then she pulled in a deeper one. First shock, then alarm and fear burst from her, and she tried to pull away from me. Before she could make a sound, I clamped my hand down over her mouth.

Outside, I heard Edward say, "Yes. An Alpha order. Are you expecting trouble from Jacob?"

Using barely more than a breath, I called to Emmett. "Emmett. Come here. Help me hold her."

Bella was shaking harder and trying to get away from me. Her eyes had changed from bright red to black and were ringed with white. She was becoming desperate with her struggles to get away from me. I held her as securely as I could and spoke directly into her ear.

"They're outside, Darlin'. They won't come in the house. They'll leave soon, but we need to be quiet." I was praying that they would leave soon. "I'm right here."

Emmett stood directly behind her with a perplexed look on his face.

"Wrap your arms around both of us. We can't let her get away."

Wrapping his long arms around Bella and me, he leaned in close to my ear. "Maybe we should put her on the floor?"

I was having a hard time stopping Bella's emotions from affecting me as she became more frantic. I tried to send lethargy to her, and she stomped on the instep of my left foot. I clenched my teeth to stop the grunt from leaving my mouth. Luckily, she wasn't able to lift her leg any higher to put some real power behind it. All I could do was nod to Emmett and try to force her to the floor. She wasn't having it. She was trying to screech through my hand on her mouth. Then she bit me on the pad of my thumb.

We heard Sam clear his throat. "He blames you for her death," he said cuttingly. "I'm not sure he'll be able to control himself if he sees you."

I gasped at the pain from her bite. She jerked her head away, snarled and bit Emmett on his right bicep near his shoulder and clamped down. His only reaction was to grit his teeth and squeeze his eyes shut.

The wolves must have reacted to her snarl in some manner because Carlisle said quickly, "Alice has been distraught. I'm afraid all this talk must be upsetting her greatly. Esme, perhaps you should see to her."

I didn't want Esme to come in the house and bring more of the wolves' scent in with her, but there was no way to stop her. I knew Carlisle was simply trying to distract the Quileutes and remove his mate from the tension outside. I would have done the same. Hearing the front door open, I tried again to send lethargy to Bella. Since I could feel her emotions so strongly, I was hoping her shield was
The tautness in her body eased the minutest amount, and I hit her with a stronger dose. Unfortunately, Emmett would feel it, too. As Bella groaned and started to relax more, Emmett jerked his arm away from her. He started to sag toward the carpet, but he kept his arms around Bella and me. Rosalie rushed toward us, grabbing Emmett's sides, and helped me ease them both to the floor. It was working. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep Bella still without influencing Emmett, and as soon as Rosalie came close to us and touched Emmett, she was affected also. I clutched at all three of them, keeping Bella trapped between me and Emmett, and settled them to the floor the rest of the way as quietly as I could, meanwhile trying to push Bella's limp legs out of the way so Emmett wouldn't end up laying on them.

When we were on the floor, it was difficult, but I reached over Emmett, squeezing Bella against his chest, and shoved Rosalie away from us.

Esme came down the hall toward us but didn't enter the room. "Do you need help, Jasper? Is there some way I can help?"

"No," I whispered. "Not right now." We didn't need another unconscious vampire on the floor.

"Sam," Carlisle continued, "we will only attend the service and then we will leave. I understand that it is customary for a wake to be held afterward, and we will not go to that. We'll stay away from Jacob and any other members of your tribe." Carlisle cleared his throat during his negotiations. "We know that Jacob's father is a very close friend of Bella's father. We won't intrude on their mourning. In fact, I believe soon afterward, within a few weeks, we will be leaving Forks for an extended period."

Murmuring to Bella even though she was still and quiet, I tried to reassure her. "It's okay, Bella. We'll be fine. They'll leave soon." I lifted Emmett's limp arm from around me and eased him over onto his back. At the moment, I didn't want to disturb him or Bella too much by trying to pull his right arm from underneath us.

Rosalie groaned slightly and sat up, her hand going to her forehead.

"Rose, the wolves are still here. Be quiet."

She nodded and reached over to Emmett's arm, giving it a slight squeeze before releasing her hold.

Though I was still concentrating on Bella, I picked up a feeling of pleased surprise from Sam. It seemed he liked hearing that the cold ones would be leaving.

"Do you have any idea how long you'll be gone?" he asked Carlisle.

"We've not made any definite plans as yet."

Then Sam shouted, "Paul!" as I heard a loud liquid snap.

A different human voice snarled. "You leeches can't leave soon enough, and I hope you stay the fuck away. You being here attracts the other blood suckers, and we don't need it."

Apparently, Paul had phased and was standing there naked. At least he waited until Esme was back in the house.

Seth whined nervously again as Sam growled at Paul. "Paul, either put your pants on or phase back!"
Bella twitched in my arms at Seth's whine or Sam's shout, and I ran my hand down the side of her face as I increased the lethargy I was sending to her. "Bella, I'm right here." I held her head against my chest and kissed her forehead. "I'm right here, Darlin'. We're okay." I tugged my shirt up to try and cover her nose and mouth. I breathed steadily into her face, attempting to cover the faint shapeshifter scent that had drifted in.

Feeling his embarrassment, I could just imagine Edward's discomfort. It was Edward's opinion that everyone should remain fully clothed at all times. Under other circumstances it would have been funny, but I just wanted them to leave, and I wanted them to leave without Paul Lahote causing any problems. I couldn't get a good read on the wolves' emotions because I didn't dare divert my attention from Bella. It was taking most of my concentration to keep her under, and I didn't want to chance her breaking free.

As Rosalie slowly rose to a crouched position next to Emmett, Carlisle's firm voice said, "We appreciate the concerns you have, Paul, and it was not our intention to cause you further distress. We don't know who that other vampire is, but while we are here, we will watch for him. Thank you for bringing that sample of his scent."

Sam's human growl was nearly as vicious as his wolf growl. Again, there was that liquid snap and I heard Paul's throaty grumble in response. He must have phased back to his wolf form.

"Paul, you and Seth start heading back, I'll be right behind you."

In answer to Sam, Seth gave a small relieved yip and Paul's growling rumble could be heard again. Their large paws struck the ground with loud thuds as they moved away. Paul was clearly showing his displeasure. I knew how quietly they could move when they wanted to.

"Thank you for bringing this sample, Sam. We do appreciate it," Carlisle said cautiously.

"Yes. Since Edward and Alice haven't been to school," Sam said with some irritation, "I thought I would bring one to you to see if you knew who it was. We'll see you Thursday, though I would prefer it if you, Edward, would not go." Sam sighed, and I heard his footsteps as he ran toward the trees.

The wolves were aware that Edward and Alice had not been to school? Thinking over it again, I supposed that was not really out of the ordinary. I was sure the rumor mill had been running at full steam over the last few days.

Carlisle and Edward were back in the house and up on the second floor a moment later. Alice's voice rang out, "Oh, Edward!"

"Alice, I'm fine. We're all fine."

Carlisle came immediately to Bella's room, but stopped with a jerk when he saw me, Bella, and Emmett on the floor. "I heard her snarl, and so did the wolves. I thought you might have knocked her out. Why haven't you let her go yet?"

"I want to make sure they are far away before I release her. She was afraid and upset by hearing Jacob's and her father's name." I continued running my fingers through her hair. "She bit both Emmett and I, but then I was able to subdue her. Edward, are they gone?"

"I can still hear them. Sam is chastising Paul for losing his temper and phasing, but they are fading."

Just another minute or two and they would be far enough away. I wanted to get Bella outside before I released her. I didn't know if she would come out of it afraid or pissed off. In either case, it would
be better if she wasn't inside the house.

"Carlisle, would you open the curtains and the window? Rose, pull Emmett away from us. He should start to come to once he's not touching Bella." I carefully got to my knees, keeping my hands on Bella, as Rosalie dragged Emmett away. I cradled Bella in my arms as I got to my feet, tucking her head under my chin.

Emmett sat up and groaned. "Damn. That almost feels like a hangover. If I remember what hangovers feel like." He shook his head. "Don't think I want to remember that." He looked up at me. "Are the wolves gone?"

From down the hall, Edward answered. "Yes. They're out of my range. Can you feel them, Jasper?"

Carlisle was standing by the window he had opened, waiting for me to carry Bella over. I spoke quickly to Edward. "I can't check right now, Edward. I'm keeping Bella under until we get outside."

Carlisle reached for Bella as I neared him, and gently touched her cheek then lightly gripped her limp hand. "With her shield, I'm surprised you were able to affect her. Was she blocking you before she snarled?"

"Yes. She was blocking me until Sam mentioned Jacob. She misses him." I kissed her forehead and turned to face the room. "Who wants to take a chance outside with a newborn that might be pissed off?"

Esme came quickly into the room. "I will, Jasper. Perhaps I can help keep her calm."

Carlisle seemed concerned, but he kissed Esme on the cheek as he held her hands. "All right, Darling. I'll see to Alice and Edward. We had a very close call this morning. I hope we don't have any more unexpected visitors." He released Esme's hands and stepped back. "Jasper, Edward has the bag with the sample of that vampire's scent in it. You take Bella outside, and I'll go get it. It was a male, but I have no idea who it is." He darted from the room.

Emmett and Rosalie had been hugging each other but then they came toward me. "We'll go out with you, too, Jazz." Emmett smiled. "There ain't nothin' much more fun than a pissed off Belly-boo. Well, unless she's pissed off at me." He rubbed his arm where she had bit him. "She's a pistol."

"She is that." I grinned down at my "sleeping" mate and kissed her forehead again.

Carlisle returned with the plastic bag and handed it to Emmett. "You go ahead. If you need anything, Edward, Alice, and I will be right here in the house. I'll be here until about 5:30. Good luck with our little newborn." Carlisle smiled fondly at Bella and clapped his hand on my shoulder.

I gave them all a quick nod and stepped out of the window, landing as lightly as I could on the patio below to keep from jarring Bella. I moved quickly out into the yard and away from the house, as Esme, Rosalie, and then Emmett took their turns jumping out of the window. Thankfully, it wasn't raining.

I turned to face them. "Stay there by the house. I don't want her surrounded. I don't know if she'll be afraid or pissed off when I let her go, but I think if she sees you all there by the house, her instincts will cause her to run away from you and into the woods."

Emmett started to laugh. "Or she'll go after you and kick your ass."

"She might." I smiled down at her again and glanced up at Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett. "Ready?"
At their nods, I concentrated on pulling back the heavy dose of lethargy and sent Bella the peace and contentment I felt whenever she was in my arms. I bent my head to her and whispered, "I love you, Bella. You've been doing so well. I love you." Her eyes fluttered open, and I felt it as her awareness grew.

She blinked rapidly several times and then her bright red eyes focused on me. "Jasper?"

"Yes, Darlin'. I'm right here. Everything is fine."

She reached up slowly and ran her hand over my hair, lightly threading her fingers through a handful at the back of my neck. "Are the wolves gone? Is everyone all right?"

"Everyone is fine, Darlin'. The wolves are gone. How are you?" I pressed my lips to her forehead and breathed in her warm scent.

"I'm fine," she said softly. Then her fingers tightened in my hair and she pulled my face away from hers. Her eyes had gone from bright red to deep black. "I'm gonna kick your ass."
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Beta services provided by thir13enth and Gigi Scott of Project Team Beta.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and A Different Forest (feed a tree!).

A/N: Have you guys been reading Witness by duskri123 on FFn? OMG, it's so intense!

Yeah. I was slow updating with this one. I couldn't leave it alone. I haven't sent chapter 35 to the betas just yet either. {hangs head in shame}

Nominations for the Golden Twi-Fic Awards are open! 03/11/2013 – 04/11/2013. Go vote for your favorite fic. Even if it isn't me.

the-golden-twific-community . blogspot . in/

Take out the spaces. I hope that link works. It's also on my profile.

Oh, my goodness! I Live was nominated for the Energize W.I.P. Award in the category "Most promising Twilight FanFiction ~ non canon"

The Voting will be from March. 13.2013 – March. 20.2013

Since FF net won't let us post links, just change the * into . please

www*energizewipawards*blogspot*com/2011/09/nominees*html

Gosh, when somebody says they feel honored to be nominated, now I know what they mean! *squee* Now, back to our regularly scheduled programing …

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you

Accidental by evenflo78 on FFn

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_Open wide, I'm ready for the battle_

_Her fight, this burning bed_
See the bones that bullets have shattered

And I feel every drop of blood you've bled

Lay down these promises broken

Take me into your hurricane

While violent clouds roll over

I'll hold your hand till the colors fade

I'll be here till your dying day

"Sing Loud" by Alpha Rev from the album Bloom

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Chapter 34, I Conquer

Jasper's POV

With a handful of my hair gripped tightly in her fist, I asked Bella calmly, "Now, Darlin', why would you want to kick my ass?"

Cradled in my arms, she glared at me as I brought her closer to my face. Either she was so mad she couldn't speak, or she was being obstinate and refusing to talk to me. I couldn't tell because she was blocking me from feeling her emotions. With my superior skills of deductive reasoning however, I'd lay money on her being stubborn, bull-headed, and just fucking ornery, and refusing to speak to me.

I kissed the end of her nose, and her fist tightened in my hair.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "There's no need for that, Darlin'. How am I supposed to know what you're pissed off about unless you tell me?" I said in a soft voice. It struck me that it was a near-perfect teaching opportunity for my newborn mate. The danger from the wolves was past, but their scent would remain. Hugging her to me, I started walking toward the east side of the house. I was planning to take her around front and immerse her in the scent of the shape shifters.

Esme, Rosalie, and even Emmett were emitting nervousness, uncertainty, and curiosity. To be honest, I had expected Bella to start screaming and take off into the forest to uproot and tear apart some trees once I removed my influence from her. I would imagine they had thought the same thing. Once again, my little demon surprised me. When Emmett had started calling her Bellzy-Bub, he had hit that nail right on the head. Not only was I surprised, I was becoming annoyed.
"Why ya goin' around front, Jazz?" Emmett asked tentatively.

I glanced quickly at him and returned my gaze to Bella's black, angry eyes. "My Isabella and I need to have a talk. She needs to experience the aroma of the wolves again. Then perhaps she'll tell me why she's pissed off."

Emmett whispered rapidly to Rosalie. "Oh, shit. He called her 'Isabella.' He only calls her that when he's pissed off at her."

Rosalie sucked in a sharp breath. "Maybe we should follow …"

"No," Esme and I said at the same time, cutting them off. Esme's love and encouragement settled around me, and then her chagrin tickled at the corners of my awareness. It caused me to wonder if she and Carlisle had once had such a learning opportunity when she was a newborn. Even if that were so, I was pretty sure no supernatural wolves had been involved.

Esme cleared her throat lightly. "Emmett and Rosalie, we'll just have a nice little chat right here on the patio."

Emmett's and Rosalie's uneasiness and confusion followed me as I continued around the side of the house. As I was looking thoughtfully into Bella's glittering black eyes, she sucked in a breath and held it. Her eyes narrowed as we reached the front yard.

Finding the spot where the wolves had been was too easy. Their repulsive aroma hung heavily in the moist, still air above the wet grass where they had been standing. I planted my feet in the center of the wolf stink, my back to the house, and blinked slowly at Bella.

"Isabella," I said quietly, my voice deepening with my anger. "You can have all the temper tantrums you want. I can stand here all night and all day while you hold your breath. Problem is you'll never turn blue." I lifted her to bring her beautiful face closer to mine since she hadn't let go of my hair. "I'll stand here, holdin' you, until you tell me why you're pissed off at me, why you came in my study and bit me, and why you're pullin' my hair."

Taking a chance she might decide to bite it off, I ran the tip of my nose from her jaw, up her cheek, and to her temple where I touched her porcelain skin with the tip of my tongue and then kissed her. As angry as she appeared to be, I could not resist her or the feel of her smooth skin. I loved tasting and smelling my mate, even if she was bound and determined to be as contrary as hell.

"I can wait as long as you can," I whispered. "We're still leaving Thursday whether you breathe and feed or not. If needed, somebody else can pack our clothes and put them in the truck." I nuzzled her ear. "I'll sit in the back seat with you on my lap — Rose and Emmett can drive. When we get to my house, we can just sit in the truck. Maybe go sit on the porch. It doesn't matter to me." I kissed her temple again, letting my lips linger against her skin. "As long as I'm with you."

The fingers of her right hand that were clenched in the Forks High T-shirt shifted and loosened slightly, but her left hand maintained its tight grip in my hair at the back of my head.

Breathing across her face, I spoke softly. "I will do anything I have to in order to protect you — even if it pisses you off." I kissed her by the corner of her eye. "Even if it makes you want to bite me and hit me." I pressed my lips to hers, closing my eyes and speaking against her lips. "I will do anything."

I didn't know if my approach was working, but her bare toes twitched the slightest amount, and I thought I might be wearing her down. I wasn't sure if I wanted to seduce her or piss her off more to
make her breathe in the scent of the wolves, but when she did finally take a breath, I had to be ready. The scent of them could trigger an intense fight-or-flight response, even after getting used to it. We needed to work through it since she had caught their scent, and because, through her inexperience and stubbornness, she had nearly exposed us to the wolves.

Perhaps it wasn't my best idea to try a little seduction, surrounded by the rank odor of the wolves and an audience peeking out the windows of the second floor of the house. Of course, making her even angrier might earn me another scar, but I didn't care about that. Any mark she put on me was a badge of honor as far as I was concerned.

Her reaction would be a strong one, and it would probably involve teeth, but I think she needed to get the full effect and feel the fear and anger that smelling them caused. I wanted it to sink into her stubborn head that when I told her to do something for her safety, she needed to do it. Not just for her own protection, but everyone else's.

I also wanted her to tell me specifically why she was mad at me, though I expected we wouldn't get to that for a while yet.

She had been very annoyed with Edward telling her what to do. Maybe that was the angle I needed. Anger would work better anyway.

"I want you to feed before we leave — newborns need to feed more often than mature vampires," I said, stressing the word, "but if you don't, it's better if you do hold your breath while we're on the road." Pressing my nose into her hair, I nuzzled against her ear again, and she shifted in my arms. "And when I tell you to do something, Isabella, you need to do it. No questions asked."

Bella started to tremble, pulled her hand from my hair and pointed her finger right at my nose. Her anger boiled out and over me as she sucked in a deep breath. "Dammit, Jasper!" She growled. "You don't tell me what to … Oh, my God! That smell!" Her fury turned instantly to dread and fear. Her eyes widened, she pushed against my chest, and she started bucking and kicking to try and get away from me.

"That smell!" She yelped. "Oh, my God!" She fought harder, punching me in the chest as I tried to hang onto her. "Let me go!" She arched her back and tried to squirm away.

Before she managed to rip her clothes to shreds by trying to get away, I held her out away from my body and dropped her. She fell, landing on her feet in a crouched position, her frightened black eyes darting from side to side. Nose in the air, she inhaled deeply and spun to face to the west — the direction in which the wolves had gone.

Hissing loudly, her hands were shaking and her fingers were curling and uncurling spasmodically. Her fear was like a dense cloud around her.

"Where?" she asked, still hissing. "Where are they?"

"They're gone. I don't know where they are, but they aren't here. I hope they went back to the Reservation," I said evenly.

She backed into me, and I felt a pressure, like the air compressed around us, for just a second. Was it her shield? I thought that maybe it was. After smelling the wolves, her instincts had certainly kicked in. Had she sent her shield out to protect me, too? Her emotions were chaotic, but the fear was taking over. It almost felt cold as it surrounded us, and I pushed back against it. I wanted to be aware, but not be overtaken by it. I reached forward and lightly touched her shoulder.
"They left. They're not here," I said quietly.

"But they could hurt us! We should … we should …" A snarl ripped through Bella's throat as she dropped to her knees, and her hands went to the sides of her head, clenching handfuls of her hair. She began to tremble and her breaths came out in rapid pants. Her emotions were tumbling and spinning frantically from fear and dread to guilt, and back through the cycle again. Underneath were the feelings of possession and protectiveness, but they were overshadowed again by panic.

"We should what?" I asked.

"Fight!" she shouted. "We should … kill them!" She growled and lurched to a standing position.

I grabbed her, wrapping my arms around her and lifting her up before she could decide to run. I didn't know if she would run to escape their scent or try to follow them to fight, but after saying we should kill them, I felt she'd had enough. Holding her tightly against my chest, I spun and sprinted around the house, hoping Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett were still on the patio.

They were. "Follow," I said to them. "But not too closely. Spread out in case she tries to run back." I curved around and headed to the east and north.

"Jasper!" Rosalie hissed angrily as she and the others began to race after Bella and me. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Teaching."

"Don't interfere," Esme said cuttingly, and I could feel the amazement from both Rosalie and Emmett. Esme rarely ever used such a sharp tone with anyone.

As we passed the tree line and entered the forest, Bella began struggling more strongly against my hold. "Let go! Let go! Let go!" she screeched rapidly, her voice climbing higher.

Reducing my speed, I released her before she started kicking me, and she was running before her feet even hit the pine needle-covered ground. Thankfully, she ran straight ahead. I stayed close enough to her to make sure she didn't turn back and try to follow the wolves' scent.

Through the damp night air, she ran about five miles into the forest. Through the valley between a couple of ridges, she leapt gracefully over fallen trees, ducking limbs and branches, her hair flying out behind her. She hissed, snarled, and grumbled the entire time. During her flight, her panic receded, but her guilt flared several times. When her anger finally got a foothold, she suddenly stopped and whirled to face me, her hair whipping around her. Her chest was heaving, and her tightly clenched fists were raised and shaking. Abruptly, her emotions were cut off from me and her dark eyes bored into mine.

She was beautiful. She was magnificent in her rage.

I skidded to a stop about ten feet away from her and stood silently, not taking my eyes from her, my hands at my sides, waiting for her to scream or growl or begin kicking the shit out of the firs that surrounded us. Quickly, I sent my senses outward and felt Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett behind me. I couldn't hear them, but they weren't too far away.

Bella stomped toward me, shaking her fist. "Dammit, Jasper! What the hell was that bullshit back there?" She stopped about three feet in front of me, planting her feet solidly into the rain-softened ground. "You did that on purpose. You knew damn well I was going to panic when I smelled the wolves and … and …" She spun away from me and punched the rough trunk of one of the pines, knocking a soccer ball-sized chunk out of the side before spinning back around to face me again.
"You're a goddamn asshole for doing that to me when you know how bad they smell. You knew what it would do to me," she said in a low, rage-filled voice. In a blur of movement, she launched herself at me, teeth bared, and fingers curled into talons.

I caught her wrists and stepped back, my arms absorbing her momentum. Before she could react, I held her hands up and pushed her back so she couldn't kick me. "Darlin', I told you before that I was an asshole. You just haven't had the chance to experience it all yet. Yes, I did do that on purpose, and I knew you would react strongly. I just wasn't sure how." I stared down at her enraged face. Her eyes were practically sparking with her anger and her shining white teeth were still bared. "I tried to tell you how bad they smelled to us, but you wouldn't believe me. I tried to get you to let me help you, but you were stubborn and wouldn't let me. That's why I told you to hold your breath."

She hissed. "I did hold my breath!"

She tried to jerk away from me but I pulled her closer to me instead. "Yes, you did. But you didn't hold it long enough. You got upset and inhaled. You can't control yourself well enough yet, then you blocked me from helping you. If you had let me influence your emotions, I don't think you would have bitten me and Emmett and snarled. The wolves heard that. That could have blown it for all of us, Isabella. You could have gotten yourself killed."

Bella sucked in a deep breath and wrenched her arms away from me, stumbling backward. "I tried to hold my breath, but when I heard about Jake, I … I just couldn't stand the thought of him being so upset that he hasn't left his house in days." She glared at me again. "Then the vampire at Charlie's house and … and you slapped your hand down over my mouth." Her fists were at her sides and shaking, and she took a rigid step toward me. "Then you and Emmett were squishing the shit out of me, and then you fucking knocked me out!" Her hands were moving jerkily through the air as she spoke.

The more indignant and irate she became, the angrier I became. She seemed determined to argue with me and act as though she were the injured party. I understood that she had been a young, inexperienced human, and there were many things that she didn't know. She was currently a newborn and couldn't control herself. She needed to listen, she needed to learn, and she needed to trust me and understand that I was still on this earth because I learned over a century ago how to survive. She had a shield, and though she had used it well to hold Edward, she obviously couldn't maintain absolute control of it when she was upset. My little hellcat's hardheaded, single-minded resistance was pissing me off. Our encounter with the wolves could have ended with all of us fighting for our lives.

I suddenly realized my own leniency with my mate was partially to blame. I had fucked up when I hadn't taken control and restrained her the way I should have.

As her voice got louder, I dropped the volume of mine. It wouldn't be difficult to send her into a spitting fury and then subdue her. "Bella, I don't give two shits about Jacob Black or what he feels. I couldn't care less if he never set one mangy paw outside his house again."

That set her off as I knew it would. A hissing, snarling, wild-eyed newborn trying to rip me to pieces I could handle. As she lunged at me, I took her rage and pushed it back to her. When she stumbled at the potency of it, I grasped her left wrist with my left hand and yanked her to me. Stepping to the right, I shoved her to the ground with my right hand spread across the middle of her back. I dropped my full weight on her, forcing her legs apart with mine and grabbing her right arm. She had broken away from me with her newborn strength a few minutes earlier, but being spread-eagled on the ground with her face in the dirt again, should help her to remember she wouldn't be able to get away from me.
It didn't stop her from trying. She blocked me from feeling her emotions then she fought and snarled, and twisted and screamed. I let her carry on with that for five minutes until I'd had enough of that bullshit. I released her left wrist to seize her around her throat just beneath her jaw. She was so stunned, I had more than enough time to snatch her from the ground and wrap my right arm around her middle, capturing her right arm against her side and clamping my hand down on her left forearm. Before she recovered from the shock, I dropped us to our knees and held her tightly against my chest. I spread my fingers over her jaw and right cheek and forced her face up, exposing her throat.

"Isabella, you will listen to me," I whispered harshly in her right ear. I pulled her head to the left and placed my teeth at her throat under her jaw. She froze and even her rapid panting stopped.

I held her there, her back pressed firmly against my chest and stomach, taking in the scent that called to me; the scent that promised belonging, home, and sanctuary, and wished I didn't have to make her submit to me. I wished there was something else, anything else, I could do besides force her to her knees and put my teeth to her throat. But she was a newborn, and I had learned long ago there was no way to reason with them when their instincts had taken over or they had decided to be obstinate. And just like all those other newborns, she needed to be shown undeniably who was in charge.

I felt her fear and absorbed it, touching her with my feelings of possession and my craving for her as I let my anger quickly flicker across the edges of her awareness.

Sliding my teeth across her neck, barely making contact with her skin, I made my way to her ear. "You are mine, Isabella, and you will do as I say."

"I won't!"

"You will."

Since I took her fear away, her anger reignited, and she tried to jerk her head away from me.

"You can't get away from me." My teeth were on her throat and she stilled. I wanted to taste her skin so badly, but I wouldn't let myself be distracted. I couldn't. She was still trying to fight me, and I knew she wouldn't listen until she had given in. "You are mine and you will listen to me."

She hissed. "I'm stronger than you," she ground out from between her clenched teeth. "I know you're not going to hurt me."

She tried to wrench her arms free and my teeth brushed lightly over her throat. Instantly, she stopped struggling and held still.

My lips returned to her ear. "You are physically stronger than me — for now — but your instincts are even stronger, and I know how to use them against you. In this position, every time my teeth touch your throat, your instincts tell you to be still because it means you have already lost. If you move, you'll slice your own throat." I breathed heavily against her skin. "My instincts won't let me hurt you. I can't. Everything in me demands that I keep you safe, keep you from harm — do everything in my power to keep you from being hurt, even if you're hell-bent on trying to get yourself killed, because you're my mate. You're mine."

Bella blew out an exasperated breath. "Then how can you act like you're going to bite my damn head off?"

"In order to keep you safe, I will do anything," I told her again. I pressed her more tightly against my body, reveling in every inch of her that touched me. "I told you to hold your breath so you wouldn't smell the wolves. Their scent causes us to feel an extreme fight-or-flight response. We all feel it, but
the rest of us already know what they smell like. We can prepare ourselves for it. You hadn't smelled them as a vampire so you didn't know. But I couldn't let you smell them to experience it. I didn't know how you would react. I didn't know if you would try to run away from them or if you would try to run to them to fight. Either would have meant death. For them or for some of us."

Her anger flared and she tried to pull her head away again. "But nobody was hurt!"

"Only because I stopped you." I pushed her head back against my shoulder. "They heard you snarl. If Carlisle had not successfully distracted them, if I had not been able to knock you out, they would have become suspicious. Paul Lahote has a hair trigger, and he wouldn't have hesitated to attack."

Pressing my jaw against hers, I growled at her. "My mistake was not knocking you out as soon as the wolves were near. Did you forget you bit me and Emmett?"

"I was afraid," she said, gasping. "I ... I was trying to get away."

"I couldn't let you do that. The wolves would have heard you and seen you. They would have chased you down, and I would have gone after them. I would have killed all of them to protect you — including Seth."

She gasped again and tried to pull her head away again. I tightened my hold on her jaw and forced her head back against my left shoulder. "They would have had time to alert the other wolves. The entire pack would have come after us." My lips brushed over her neck. "Even though I wasn't here when the treaty was first written and agreed upon, I broke it when my teeth first touched you. That puts a price on all our heads. If they knew, they would hunt us down."

"But it didn't happen!" Bella growled and tried to break my hold around her waist.

As soon as my teeth touched the skin under her chin, she stopped.

After a moment, I put my lips to her ear. "It didn't happen because I was able to stop you. Either you didn't want to use your shield against me or you forgot. If the wolves had seen you, and you didn't think to use your shield, they would have torn you apart. You probably would have tried to fight them, and you would have been ferocious. You probably would have been able to crush one of them or rip their legs off, but the others would have taken you down." I sighed into her hair. "That's why Maria used newborns — because they were vicious and brutal. But they had an advantage over you — I had trained them. They had a chance to survive if they remembered what I taught them. You would have had no chance at all. The wolves would have destroyed you."

Fear clutched at my heart, and my breath hitched at the thought of anything like that happening to Bella. Suddenly I wasn't restraining her to keep her from escaping me, I was holding her in a desperate embrace. "I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

Growling again, she cut off her emotions from me and tried to jerk away from me. "Why are you holding me like this?"

I gripped her more tightly and pushed her head back against my shoulder again. "Because I know how to subdue a newborn. You don't know how to fight me off. It's a submissive position. On your knees, you can't get away."

"You are such an asshole," she mumbled.

"I am," I said quietly, gathering my anger back around me even as my lips brushed over her ear. "But I'm an asshole that's still here. You, Isabella, are young and inexperienced, and you need to listen to me. You need to hear what I am saying." I eased up on the pressure I was exerting against
her chin. "I'm not Edward. I won't try to micro-manage every minute detail of your life, but when it comes to your safety, I will tell you what to do, and you will do it."

Her reply to that was a snarl. I answered her with my teeth.

After holding her motionless for a moment, I moved back to her ear and spoke softly though urgently to her. "As your sire, it is my duty to teach you what you need to know to survive — to live. As your mate, it is my responsibility and my desire, my need, to protect and care for you."

Bella's anger flashed outward, glowing nearly white hot. She struggled to get away from me again. "You weren't the first one to bite me!"

Instantaneously, my anger exploded into jealousy, and my own instincts were demanding that I take her and possess her fully and completely. I crushed her to my body, while an involuntary growl worked its way up through my chest. I tightened my grip on her jaw and yanked her head to the left.

My right hand released its hold on her left forearm and slid across her stomach until I reached her right hip. I held her still as I slowly ground my hardening dick against her ass. The beginnings of lust were twisting and coiling up through my rage and jealousy, and I rolled my hips against her again. Jolts of pleasure shot through me, and I inhaled a ragged breath.

"You're mine, Isabella, and you will submit to me." I hissed as I touched my teeth to the front of her throat to stop her from struggling against me. I tightened the collar of her shirt aside with my chin and then licked along the top of her shoulder and up her neck. "My venom is inside you. You're mine and no one else's." I slowly bit into the muscle at the curve of her neck, my sharp incisors sinking easily through her flesh, and I drank in the spicy venom that bled from her wound. Tasting her and smelling her enthralling scent, my mind was overcome with my need to own her. My venom flooded my mouth, and I forced it into her system. She was mine, and the only marks anyone would see on her would be from my teeth. Everyone would know she belonged to me.

She sucked in a breath and it came hissing out as my venom flowed into her body. Her free left hand grabbed my right wrist, and she tried to pull my hand from her hip. I flexed the fingers of my left hand over her jaw and cheek and she stopped her movement.

Her anger pulsed outward and she tried to yank my hand from her hip again. I seized her hand and held it to her stomach.

Her anger wasn't giving up and she growled. "You didn't bite me first."

If she was trying to piss me off even more, she was doing a good fucking job. I snatched my teeth from her shoulder and snarled in her ear. "He left you. He bit you and left you. You're mine!"

In a flash, I had released her hand and grabbed a fistful of her shirt at the top of her chest, preparing to rip it from her.

A blazing stream of abandonment and grief shot out from Bella, then she snarled and her temper rebounded as she took hold of my wrist. Beneath her ire, I felt the love she had for me, and I stopped, stunned, the touch of her hand on my skin jarring me back to myself. I was suddenly filled with shame at my violent actions. I had nearly ripped her clothes from her so that I could take her … rape her. Guilt and remorse at what I had come so close to doing to her coiled snake-like around me and slithered through my mind.

Sickened by my own savage and cruel impulses, my teeth snapped together, and I inhaled her scent again; reaching for the contentment and security it held. I would not force her. I would not abuse her.
She was too angry, too vulnerable, and if I took her then, it would be rape. I would never — could never — do that to her. She was too precious to me. I had to be patient and wait for her. She would come to me eventually. I loved her, she loved me, and I would wait.

Clenching my teeth, I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly and deliberately, my face buried in her hair, trying to control my jealousy, my fury, and my rapidly growing lust. My voracious need to rip her clothes off and fuck her senseless was at war with the desire to love and console my mate and relieve her of her heartache and resentment.

My fingers gradually unknotted themselves from her shirt, and I clutched at her hand, holding her body to mine, breathing her in. Her scent both excited and soothed me, and I grasped at the peace and comfort that I felt whenever I was touching her. I tried to share it with her as I shoved away my violent and disgraceful urges and tried to send my shame away. She didn't need to be burdened with that.

Inhaling deeply, my venom mixed with hers was a steadying and reassuring scent that I felt to the very center of my being and it finally started to alleviate my rage.

I wanted Bella. I wanted her so desperately my body ached. I longed for her; I yearned to be inside of her and make her completely mine. I needed her — required her. My body craved her. I craved her. Marking her with a claiming bite, tasting her venom and putting my venom into her, was not enough to satisfy the hunger, the insatiable thirst I felt for her.

But I would wait for her.

After several minutes and finally gaining some measure of control, I reminded myself that Rosalie, Emmett, and Esme were in the forest behind us, watching and listening. If they thought I was hurting Bella, they would attack, and I would deserve whatever they did to me — whatever Rosalie might have done. Probably the only reason she hadn't attacked and ripped my head off was because she couldn't see everything I was doing.

I sent my senses out to search for them and was hit with outrage and indignation coming from Rosalie, and Emmett was annoyed and angry. Esme was emitting caution and warning along with her usual sense of strength. There was determination there, too. They were far enough away that I couldn't hear them unless they spoke in a normal tone. Esme had kept them from interfering, I was sure. She knew Bella needed to quit fighting against me so strenuously. In effect, Bella needed to learn her place. Regrettably, I had very nearly carried it too far. I needed to find that middle ground somewhere between torturing her to make her compliant and being so smitten and lenient that her unwitting actions risked our very lives. I needed to learn how to control my newborn mate without resorting to the methods I'd used so long ago so that she would survive, and we could survive each other.

I'd nearly lost complete control of myself, but Bella's love for me stopped me. She prevented me from acting on those heinous impulses. Fifty years ago, I wouldn't have stopped. I thought if it had been anyone but Bella, I wouldn't have stopped.

I could have easily stripped her naked and been buried deep inside her, but would she have ever forgiven me? As forgiving as she was, she would never be able to forgive me for that. Would she ever even be able to look at me again?

She would never love me again. I wouldn't deserve it. Would I be able to live with myself if I had done that to her? No. That would have been worse than anything Edward had ever done to her. Harming my own mate in that way would have been worse than any of the atrocities I had committed while I was with Maria.
I had to remember the most important thing — Bella's love had just saved me from myself. That was why I needed my mate.

That other vampire may have bitten her first, as my little demon-mate so infuriatingly reminded me, but it was my venom that filled and changed her.

If he had taken her, I wouldn't have my mate. I was so grateful that I had found her. Grateful that she loved me. And I loved her, no matter how much she pissed me off.

As my frantic and selfish thoughts calmed, I came to realize Bella was remembering how she had felt when Edward had abandoned her in the woods — when we had all left her. I thought it was a good thing that she was able to shove those feelings aside and let her resentment over being left behind take over. She needed to purge that. And she needed reassurance from me. She needed to know that I loved her I wouldn't hurt her and would never leave her.

"He left you, but I never will, Bella." I wasn't sure if I was talking about Edward or that vampire that had bitten her. It didn't really matter which one.

"You left me, too. You all left me." Her anger was simmering hotly beneath the surface and it wouldn't take much for it to boil over again. "I hated Edward and Alice for leaving me. He was supposed to love me, and Alice was supposed to be my best friend, and they just up and left me!" She growled again. "I was so mad and hurt that Esme and Carlisle left without saying goodbye. They were like my parents. And Emmett!" She hissed loudly. "Emmett was supposed to be my big brother!" She snarled and tried to turn her head to look at me. "But you and Rosalie never paid much attention to me anyway. I always thought Rosalie hated me. So that wasn't as bad as … But I loved you all and you left!"

"I know you loved us, Bella. I know." I kissed my fresh claiming bite then ran my tongue gently over her shoulder and neck, sealing my venom inside her. "You know Emmett loves you." I kissed her again. "I am so sorry that I left with them. I fought to stay and guard against Victoria. I thought it was a tactical error and dangerously stupid for the entire family to just disappear, but no one listened to me." I nuzzled her ear again. "It came to a vote, and I was outvoted."

Pulling back slightly from her ear, I whispered, "But you need to know right now that my coven with Peter and Charlotte is not a democracy. What I say goes. When we're there with Emmett and Rosalie, it'll be the same way. They already understand this."

She hissed again and tried to jerk away from me, but I continued to hold her body to mine.

"That's how it is. You need to learn this and accept it. Every coven has a leader even if there are only two members. It's really no different than a human family." I pressed my lips to her jaw. "Now listen to me, Bella. I was a fool. I should never have left. I should have fought harder. I should have done what I knew to be the right and correct thing to do, and never allowed that adolescent to dictate what I would do. He never will again." I kissed her temple, holding my lips to her skin and breathing in her scent.

As much as I wanted to calm her fears and ease her insecurities, it seemed the time to get it all out there. She needed to express and expel the anger she had felt at being abandoned. I expected it to be a topic that would come up again eventually. And I wanted her to know how I felt, too. I was preparing to piss her off again.

Taking in another deep breath, I recalled that Emmett had said there wasn't much that was more fun than a pissed off Belly-boo.
Then again, Emmett was kind of an idiot sometimes.
Standing in a field of voices
Find shelter from the blame
Even if you think it's all over
I'll be here till the colors fade
I'll be here till your dying day
.

Put down the knife you're wielding
Let high stone walls fall away
With gentle time will be an ending
And I'll be here till the colors fade
And I'll be here till your dying day
.

"Sing Loud" by Alpha Rev from the album *Bloom*
Chapter 35, I Submit

Jasper's POV

I was thankful that Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett were far enough away that they wouldn't hear us unless we became quite a bit louder than we had been. Except for the snarls and the growls. I was truly looking forward to when Bella and I would have some real privacy.

Knowing my next words would hurt her, I was going to speak them anyway. We needed to hash it all out, but I absolutely had to keep Bella's emotions from taking me over and had to stop her verbal knife-strokes from penetrating so deeply. Too much was at stake.

We were so closely connected that even when I couldn't feel her emotions, she affected me so acutely that she caught me flat-footed over and over again. She knew which blade to wield and she knew how to twist it.

Then, too, she affected me so profoundly, just the faintest touch of her love prevented me from descending into the noxious corruption I had wallowed in for a century with Maria. That was why I needed her so desperately — wanted her so passionately. She could save me; save me from myself.

I took in a steadying breath and touched my forehead to the side of her head.

"Bella, I want you to know I don't care about Jacob Black."

A growl rumbled through Bella's chest at my words and she glared at me from the corner of her eye. I kept my left hand on her jaw but I eased the pressure of my fingers on her cheek.

"Bella," I said in a warning tone. "As I said, I don't care about him. I care about you. More than anyone I've ever known. Next, I care about me because there is no one who loves you like I do, even as fucked up as I am. Like I said before, I will do anything I have to when it comes to taking care of you even if it means pissing you off so badly you want to bite the shit out of me. But I'll keep on doing it." I breathed in her soothing scent, letting it fill me and drain away the fury I had felt.

In a quieter voice, I asked her, "When you were running, I felt your guilt. What were you feeling guilty about?"

"When I smelled the wolves …" she began and her voice hitched. She tried to turn her head away from me, but I held her firmly against my shoulder. She sniffed and started again. "When I smelled their scent, it was as bad as you said it was. I … I wanted to run away and I wanted to fight them — all at the same time. It was like a voice was screaming in my head to … I wanted to kill them before they could kill me."

She shut her eyes, and the distress I knew she must be feeling clouded her face with sadness.

"I don't want to hurt them. But I … wanted to."

I was hopeful that some of what I was trying to tell her was finally sinking in, but I tried to reassure her. "I know how that feels. I feel the same way when I smell them. But I can prepare myself for it. I learned to control those feelings — those instincts."

My shame at my earlier actions struck me again, and I slammed down the door on it so it wouldn't affect Bella. I was sure she was experiencing her own battle with shame for wanting to kill her friend's pack. I didn't want her to think I was ashamed of her for what she felt, especially when she couldn't control it.
"Our instincts are very strong. You didn't attack them. You need to remember that part."

"The only reason I didn't go after them is because you stopped me." Her eyes slowly opened and she tried to turn toward me, but I held her still.

"I stopped you because I love you, and I don't want anything to happen to you." I kissed her cheek. "You know what they smell like now, and if you ever smell them again, you'll be ready." Kissing her again, I breathed in her scent. "I'll help you. You are mine, and I will not risk you. I waited a century and a half to find you."

Inwardly, a part of me cringed at my choice of words. I sounded disturbingly like Edward when he would tell Bella how long he had waited for her and that he would do anything to keep her safe and protect her.

Like a bolt of lightning out of a clear blue sky, a thought came crackling into the front of my mind, and I suddenly knew, without a doubt, why Edward was Carlisle's golden child. Why Carlisle, a vampire who was over three hundred years old, would let a mere teenage boy direct his life, and through him, everyone else's — his centuries of loneliness and then elation at finding Edward.

Carlisle's joy at finally finding a companion after centuries of wandering alone had led to his placing Edward on that quickly built pedestal.

There was no denying that Edward was intelligent, good looking, gifted musically, well educated in the medical sciences, as was Carlisle, and he was Carlisle's first. Edward was well-controlled and had given Carlisle hardly any actual trouble. He had almost always complied with Carlisle's requests when it had come to deciding what town they would move to or what personas might be chosen next. Edward had been a model son, except for those years he had "rebelled," as it was euphemistically put, when Edward had indulged in killing and drinking from humans.

Edward certainly had a useful gift that had smoothed the way and helped to protect the family on more than one occasion.

And Carlisle loved him. He had doted on him and when Esme had come along, she had taken to him and his genteel ways very quickly. He filled a small part of her heart that had been left broken and empty by the loss of her own son. She loved him and could refuse him nothing.

I had always thought they coddled Edward and should have used a firmer hand with him. I felt they had been blinded by their love for him. They hadn't done him any favors by doing that. They thought he could do no wrong, until they had heard how he had truly smothered and abused Bella and he had tried to squirrel away samples of her blood. They had been shocked to their very foundations.

And I was doing the same thing with Bella. I finally knew what the phrase "love is blind" truly meant. Bella was perfect in my eyes, and I have been so smitten, so enthralled, so enchanted by her, I was making mistake after mistake with her, and I wasn't doing her any favors by catering to her. My last attempt at indulging her could have gotten her killed.

I had been so euphoric at finding my mate my goddamn brain had been AWOL.

Having an epiphany about what a fucking asshole I had been was not pleasant.

Even as fast as my thoughts had streaked through my mind, I had been silent a little too long with them, and Bella tried to break loose again. Even though I couldn't feel them, her mood swings were dizzying.

"Stop!" I said as I tightened my hold on her. "I understand that you're a newborn and aren't even two
"Then why don't you train me like a goddamn newborn?" she shouted as she tried to twist out of my arms.

Evidently, she was still trying to piss me off. Christ knew we were both good at that. She wasn't going to succeed.

I sighed sadly and closed my eyes as I pressed my cheek against hers. "Because I love you, because you love me. You have saved me from myself, and I could never treat you like that. No one will ever treat you like that."

She snorted angrily and growled again, trying to jerk her hand out of my hold. As my hand tightened on hers, I felt her anger again.

"I won't keep things from you to spare your feelings or keep you from worrying. Ignorance of our world can kill you. Not doing what I tell you to do can get you killed. Arguing with me wastes valuable time." I took another deep breath, pulling her scent into me, resolving to tell her the truth and respect her obvious strength enough not to try and paint over the horrors of our world, or my part in it, with pretty words, or try to distract her with shopping trips and gifts of expensive clothes.

I would strive to keep my head out of my ass and not indulge her no matter how adorable I thought she was. Being adorable wasn't going to save her ass.

"Bella, I did anything and everything I needed to in order to control those newborns. I ripped their arms off. I beat them. I bit and tore chunks out of them. I filled them with so much terror, all they could do was scream and then I would rip their legs off so they couldn't escape."

Pressing my lips into her hair, I took in another lungful of her scent. "I told them they belonged to Maria — they were her soldiers — and if they fought well they would be rewarded. I would starve them and tell them if they followed orders, they would be allowed to feed and could drink until they were so full they could hardly move. That's if they survived their training and being thrown into pits or corrals with each other. Not many made it out. Those that were quickly defeated were left in pieces to suffer that agony. They would be lit on fire in front of the other newborns so that they would learn. When their year was up, I ended them. Pain is scary and an excellent teacher. It was the hard way and the best way to deal with them. I want to try to keep you from having to learn the hard way." I eased my hold on her and nuzzled her neck. "I could never do that to you," I whispered to her.

Bella's eyes squeezed shut and she gasped. "Jasper, you don't have to tell me anymore." She sobbed and tried to turn her head toward me. "You were one of those newborns. You survived all of that."

Her voice cracked as she spoke. Her anger was gone, replaced by her sorrow and compassion. "How did you live through all that?" she asked in a tear-filled voice.

"I survived, and not because I was lucky. Maria saw that I was an officer, and she knew there was something different about me. She wanted to use me." I loosened my hold on Bella the barest amount. "I had a gift I could use against the newborns, but at first it nearly crippled me. I had no idea what was going on. I thought I had gone crazy, until I realized what was happening. Then I learned how to control it and not let all of their emotions overwhelm me continuously. It was a constant struggle. But until then, I had to fight. I fought, and I won."

I released my hold on Bella's jaw and drew my fingers lightly down her throat and across her collar bone to her left shoulder. "I trained Maria's newborns to fight. Later, I trained the humans I had turned into vampires. No one else could control them like I could. With the military experience I
already had, and the training I gave them, we won most of our battles. Maria gained a lot of territory. Then we had to fight to keep it." I released her left hand and slid mine across her stomach and then up her right arm until my hand was on her shoulder. "You've never been taught to fight. You wouldn't be able to fend off the wolves or another vampire that might attack you." I brushed her hair away from her right ear and kissed the skin beneath. At last, she tilted her head to the left, lifted her chin, and took in a slow breath.

She didn't realize it, but exposing her neck to me in that way was a sign of submission. She was finally submitting to me, and there was a part of me that was relieved, gratified, thrilled — and aroused. Yet another part realized it didn't feel as though I had subdued her — she had conquered me. It was almost as if she was allowing me to preside over her. She was bestowing a special dispensation so that I might be allowed to remain in her presence.

Setting that feeling aside and taking command of myself, I bent to her throat, nipping her where her life's blood had once pulsed, accepting her submission.

Because I could not resist her, I licked her smooth skin, leaving a scent trail of my venom from the hollow of her throat to the corner of her jaw. Pressing my lips to the soft skin beneath her ear, I whispered, "Bella, there is no one who can take care of you like I can. There is no one who can teach you what you need to know like I can."

She lifted her left hand and brought it up to cover my right hand on her shoulder.

"I will not leave you, Bella."

Her sorrow and disillusionment draped thickly over both of us and she sighed sadly as she dropped her head. "I … I've heard that before. Promises were made to me and broken, and I can't forget that," she said sadly.

I lifted her from her knees and turned her to face me. My hands went to cup her face, and I gently raised it so I could look into her still-black eyes. My thumbs brushed lightly over her cheeks. "I know promises were made to you and broken, but I've kept mine, Bella. When you were fully human, I said to you that you were worth it. You were then, and you are now. When I found you near death in your truck, I vowed that I would protect you, help you, and take care of you. I am doing everything I can to fulfill those promises, even if it makes you angry — even if it upsets you." I sighed again. "I'm not perfect — I'm goin' to screw up; I have been screwin' up. I'm goin' to get pissed off. This is as new to me as it is to you, but I promise I will do the best that I can. I promise that I will love you, and I will not leave you."

I sent all my love to her. All my respect, admiration, gratitude, and the adoration I had for her. Her eyes slowly closed and she took in a long, quiet breath. She leaned into my hands as her arms came up and went around my waist. My arms encircled her, drawing her into me.

"Jasper, you found me and took care of me. You could have finished me off and left me there. It would have been so much easier for you — for all of you. You could have even stayed in Forks. But you saved me." Her shining black eyes slowly opened to look up at me. "Then while I was burning, you stayed with me." Her voice was a soft breath of air across my chest. "I knew you were there. I didn't know it was you at first, but I could hear your voice. I couldn't understand everything you said, but I heard you. I could smell you." Her voice caught in her throat. "I … I felt you. You helped me so much then. As bad as it got, as terrible as it was, you stayed."

"I love you, Bella," I whispered. "I love you more than anyone or anything. You are everything to me." I gently brushed her hair from her face. "I need you to trust me. Trust that I don't want to make you into something you're not — I love you. You have to have faith that I'll do the best that I can for
you. I've trained hundreds of newborns, but I can't do to you what I did to them. I love you." I leaned forward and gently kissed her.

Feeling her respond to my kiss, I broke. My shame and disgust at what I had nearly done to her crashed over me, and I flinched at the force of it. I tried to keep it from her, but it was so powerful it escaped me. I clutched Bella to me and buried my face in her neck. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Bella. Please forgive me," I cried into her tangled hair.

Gasping, her arms went around my shoulders and she held me tightly. "Jasper! What … what is it?"

I turned my face into her neck, practically sobbing. Of all the sins I've committed over my long life, the worst, the vilest was when I nearly raped her. I was choking on my confession, but I had to get it out. "I … I almost raped you. I love you more than anything in this world, and I almost raped you."

"But you didn't, Jasper! You didn't. I knew what you were feeling, but I knew you wouldn't hurt me. I knew you would stop. And you did. You didn't hurt me. Jasper! Look at me!" She pulled back and her hands gripped each side of my face as she stared fiercely into my eyes. "You. Didn't. Hurt. Me. I knew you wouldn't. I knew it. I know you love me, and you would never do that to me."

She had always been too forgiving, and I didn't deserve it. I tried to turn my face away from her so she wouldn't have to look at me.

Her grip tightened, she hissed my name then her love poured over me. It was swiftly followed by her pride and … adoration, and I was struck dumb by the amount and the force of her emotions, her feelings for me. I dropped to my knees, gasping for breath.

She crushed me against her stomach and whispered passionately. "I love you, Jasper. I love you. I'm so proud of you. You're so strong. You lived through so much and if you hadn't, I would never have met you. I love you." Her hands slid up my neck and were in my hair. "If you need my forgiveness, you have it. Always. I love you."

"Oh, Bella," I said, moaning in my disgrace, trying to turn my head away from her again.

Her hands forced my face up to look at her. "Know that I love you."

"But, Bella, I …"

One eyebrow went up, she looked down her nose at me, and her right hand brushed my hair out of my face and swept around my jaw. "Jasper? Do I need to bite the shit out of you again?"

Dumbfounded, I looked up at her, and the corners of her mouth began to turn upward. She bent down to me and kissed me. I realized my mouth was hanging open and snapped it shut.

Then it dawned on me that was the first time she had said she loved me. I had felt her love flowing over, through and around me, but she hadn't said it out loud before.

Her hands slid to the outside of my shoulders and she urged me up.

"Bella, I … I …"

"Shut up." As she kissed me, effectively shutting me up, she tugged at my shoulders. "Stand up," she said, making it an order.

I was still stunned at the strength of her emotions; shocked that she could ever forgive me for something like that. Astonished that even after what I had done she still loved me. I couldn't move.
"Jasper, I love you. Now stand up, or I might pinch you."

Not wanting to experience another one of her pinches, I stood slowly, tentatively reaching to wrap my arms around her.

She stepped into me, her arms going around my waist. She sighed happily as she snuggled into my chest, kissing me. "Do you feel how much I love you? How much I adore you? How thankful I am that you saved me, Jasper? Can you feel how grateful I am that you've put up with my temper tantrums, and crazy hissy fits, and all my shit, and you stayed?" Her eyes turned up to mine.

Speechless, I just searched her beautiful, dirt smudged face; not believing my good fortune, unable to fathom how I could have been so blessed after all the terrible things I had done throughout my life.

"I can feel your doubt, Jasper. I love you. I am so lucky to have found you when so many things could have kept us apart."

Her hands slid around my sides and up my chest, and then she placed her hands on either side of my face. Her shining black eyes had changed to a glistening red. "Don't doubt that I love you, and I need you. I need you to teach me and show me what to do. You said no one loves me like you do, and I believe you." She pulled my face toward hers and she kissed me again. "Besides, you're mine and don't you think I deserve the best there is?"

I gasped as her love swept over me again, and I clutched her to me, burying my face in her neck. "I love you, Bella, but I …"

She pulled back from me and covered my mouth with her hand. "Jasper, quit it before I get pissed off again." She sighed. "In the immortal words of the Backstreet Boys — I don't care who you are, where you're from, don't care what you did, as long as you love me."

I just gaped at her. My beautiful, magnificent, entrancing, eminently forgiving mate was quoting the Backstreet Boys at me and all I could do was stare at her in stunned amazement.

"Uh, Bella …"

Huffing loudly and her brows descending in a frown, she said, "Dammit, Jasper! What do I have to do to … Oh! I have another one." She noisily cleared her throat as she closed her eyes. She bent her head down then her bright red eyes turned up to me, sparkling with a glint of mischief, and she said, "You are my fire, the one desire. Believe when I say I want it that way."

Then she hit me with a blast of love and happiness so strong it pulled a grunt from me, and I would have fallen down if she hadn't clamped her arms around my waist to hold me up.

"Jazz, I don't know what I have to do to make you believe that I love you, I know you won't hurt me, and if you think you did hurt me, I forgive you. But you didn't hurt me. You have kept me from hurting myself and, mostly, everybody else." She snorted in exasperation. "As you keep telling me, our instincts are very strong. I said a shitty thing to piss you off, it made you jealous, and your instincts took over. But you beat them back. You won. You are so strong, you won that fight. I need you to help me fight against and control my instincts."

She raised her hand and her fingers grazed lightly over my cheek to my chin. She gripped it firmly and shook my head. "I don't want to feel that self-condemnation or guilt from you anymore. I heard that all the time from someone who shall remain nameless at the moment. That stupid asshole decided for me that what was best for me would be for him to dump me. In the fucking woods. Where said stupid asshole told me never to go alone. Then Mr. I-Know-What's-Best-for-Everyone-
Because—Well—I'm Edward convinced the entire family to leave. All in the name of love and what's best for Bella. But nobody asked Bella what she thought.” Tilting her head to the side and raising her eyebrows, she blinked several times. "Is someone going to decide they aren't good enough for me and leave me for my own good?"

All I could do was gasp at her words. She thought I could ever leave her?

Becoming angry, she let go of my jaw and started poking me in the chest. "Is someone else going to make all the decisions about my life down to what color socks I should wear? Well, if I was wearing socks." Her darkening eyes glared at me. "Is someone else going to start doing things to me and for me without even consulting me or mentioning it or telling me why they're doing it?"

Bella spun away from me, growled and stomped off through the dark to a fir tree and kicked it. "I mean, right now it's different because I'm having a hard time controlling myself, and it's not like I can go to Walmart and buy my own clothes and shit. I don't dare try to touch a laptop to shop online — I'd crush it."

She stomped back toward me, her arms gesticulating through air as she became more agitated. "At least when Rosalie bought me some more clothes she bought stuff I actually like, and it's not like I could've bought any at the time anyway because I happened to be incinerating myself from the inside out." She stared off into space for a moment. "Kinda like microwaving."

She twirled away from me and stomped back toward the tree she had kicked. "God forbid stuff gets ordered online because the Fed-Ex guy or whoever would deliver it, and I'd want to eat the poor bastard! I need somebody around to keep me from eating the Fed-Ex guy." She drew her arm back and punched the tree. "Nobody consulted me about moving either, but it's not like I can stay here in Forks because I'd probably eat somebody, and it might be somebody I like, so I do have to go somewhere else." She threw her hands up in the air. "I can't buy my own house. I don't have any money, except what's in my sock under my mattress in my old room, and that wouldn't be enough to even rent a room. I sure don't have a couple extra houses lying around, so, once again, it's not like I can decide where I'm going to go." She slapped the tree and turned back. "You happened to have a house, so we might as well go there, right?"

Stomping heavily through the pine needles, she made her way back to me. "In this case, I'd have to say making decisions for me is okay. The difference is you tell me what you're doing and why you're doing it. When I ask you a question, you actually answer it. When I think about it, it makes sense. It's logical, rational, and I can see why you made the decision. Unlike that other stupid immature asshole who kept changing the subject and lying to me."

She came to an abrupt stop right in front of me, her dirty, bare feet positioned a shoulder's width apart, and she began poking me in the chest again.

"To get back to the original topic … I'll tell you right now, goddammit, running away with your tail tucked is easy. Staying is hard. I don't want someone who says they love me enough to leave me. I want someone who loves me enough to stay with me." She crossed her arms, cocked an eyebrow and began tapping her foot. "Well?"

"Uh." I could only blink at her, still befuddled by the force of her emotions and then bewildered by the machine gun delivery of her rant. I had struggled to keep up with her tirade, and was trying to figure out what she was asking me. Fortunately, the light finally came on. "I could never leave you, Bella," I whispered.

"Good," she said, nodding her head. "Glad that's settled. I wouldn't want to have to chase you down and subject you to my mad, ninja-like pinching skills." Her face broke into a brilliant smile and she
flung herself into my arms. "I love you, Jasper."

Another grunt escaped my mouth as she collided with me. I wrapped my arms around her, feeling her joy and my own automatic contentedness at her being in my arms. My relief and thankfulness filled me, and my love for her swelled. I felt her relief, joy, and love pouring over me. Then a dose of humor and a touch of giddiness tickled the edges of my awareness and I welcomed it, basked in it — revealed in the love of my mate.

Nuzzling her neck through her hair, I inhaled her warm, cozy, loving scent and whispered to her, "I think you've been hangin' out with Emmett too much, Darlin'."

"Pffft!" She scoffed. "I've hardly hung out with him at all since I woke up. Except to chase him through the woods and bite him. That's hardly like hanging out."

I sighed into her hair. "I love you, Bella. I'm so sorry I …"

"Stop!" she commanded. "Or I'll hit you with another love bomb to the brain. We're good now. We know where we stand. Bella newborn. Jasper sire. I got it. I'll try to keep it." She huffed through my hair. "We should get back to Newborn 101. It's a lesson I can't afford to fail. Please review."

I kissed her neck and gently pushed her back so I could look into her lovely face. I was still struggling to keep up with her. "Bella, I've never loved anyone as much as I love you. I just can't do to you what I did to those other newborns. I can't."

"But I need to learn, Jasper. I need you to help me. I need you to help me control myself. I could have gotten us all killed. The teeth on the throat thing seemed to work," she said in chagrin.

"That almost always works. It's the least destructive method of getting a newborn's attention." I sighed. "Besides hitting them with a heavy dose of lethargy or some other emotion."

"Obviously, you can't be too easy on me. The thoughts in my brain just … explode, and I can't think." Bella backed away from me and her hands were clenching into fists again. "And I get so mad! I just want to tear things apart, and rip them to pieces with my hands and …"

I grabbed her flailing hands, bringing them together and up to my lips. "It's okay, Darlin'. Just feel how much I love you." I kissed her knuckles. "I won't go too easy on you. Sometimes you're going to get really pissed off." I pulled her into my chest, wishing I could wrap myself completely around her, and then kissed the top of her head. "But I won't be ripping your arms off. I care about you and love you too much. There have only been three newborns in this world that I cared anything about, and you're the most important."

"Who are the others? Peter and Charlotte?"

"Yes. Of the hundreds I changed, you, Peter, and Charlotte are the only ones I give a shit about. I don't even know if any of the others are still alive, and I don't care. I care about you." I couldn't resist running my hands over her hair and down her back, and kissed her again. "I don't love them like I love you. I, literally, tore their asses up."

Pressing my lips to her temple, I couldn't resist tasting her skin again with the tip of my tongue. "To review — if I think you're in danger you must listen to me and do what I say — whether it makes sense to you or not. Whether you want to or not. If you don't, I'll make you." I sighed with frustration. "I know this sounds like Edward's bullshit, but you have to trust that I will only do it for your own good, to protect you and to keep you from getting others hurt."

"You do sound a little like Edward." She lifted her face to me, the very edges of her lips turning up.
"I do trust you. It's like I know I can." She blinked slowly. "I know you're older than me and have seen and experienced so much more than I have, but I can't … I seem to want to fight against almost everything. Or bite it and rip it apart. When I don't want to bite stuff, I just want to cry, or laugh, or scream. It's like I'm going crazy at times. I'm sorry I've been such a … such a bitch." Her voice hitched again. "Jasper, I'm so sorry no one was there to help you when you were a newborn." She dropped her head and her eyes turned up to look at me. "Like you are for me."

Then her love flowed gently over me, soft and warm. It shimmered and nearly glowed in the night air around us, and I gasped at the strength of it. It wasn't as forceful as the earlier blast, but it caused me to become weak at the knees. I lifted her in my arms and sat down on the damp ground, drawing her onto my lap, tucking her head into the left side of my neck. My arms cradled her as my lips went to hers.

"I love you," I whispered to her. "I love you so much, Bella."

Her left hand reached up to my cheek. Her fingers trailed over my jaw to my chin. I loved it when she touched me.

"I know you do. I feel it." She kissed me. "I'll try harder to listen to you, Jasper. I will." She kissed me again. "We're going to have to work on my shield so I can hold it no matter what's going on around me." She blinked. "And if I can block you from feeling my emotions and stop you from influencing mine, and keep people from touching me, how can I hear and smell through it?"

It was still difficult to keep up with her mood swings and her rapid change of topic. I was basking in the comfort of her love, surrendering to it. It hadn't occurred to me that professing my love would turn into a discussion of her shield.

"I don't know, Darlin'. Light comes through it, too." I cupped her cheek with my right hand. "Different types of vibrations? Different frequencies? I don't know."

"Jasper?"

"What do you need, Darlin'?" I smoothed her tangled hair away from her face and brushed smudges of dirt from her chin. I looked down at her henley and her jeans and realized I had gotten her pretty damn dirty when I had shoved her to the ground and then forced her to her knees. My clothes weren't much better. I guessed that meant she'd be wanting another bath.

Her index finger followed the line of my jaw to my ear and back again. "When I was talking to Carlisle out on the porch he said vampires have a really strong urge to bite. They bite to defend themselves, of course, and they bite to mark their mates. But he also said they'll bite to correct a coven-mate who is behaving badly. Is that why you bit me?"

Without any thought behind it, my left arm tightened around her to bring her closer to me, my hand drifting up to her neck, and my right hand glided over her shoulder and down her side to her waist. "No, Darlin'. That was purely a bite to claim and mark you as mine. " My right hand slid from her waist to her hip. "To taste you and put my venom in you. Remind you who you belong to."

She looked down, her lashes brushing over her cheeks, and then she looked up at me. "I bit you because I was mad at you." She looked down and away, embarrassed. "I was mad at you because Alice was in your room and she touched you." She inhaled quickly and let the breath out slowly. "I'm trying not to get mad about it again."

I could see the muscles tighten in her jaw, and her eyes closed.
"I told you Alice helped me carry my clothes from her closet. I held her hand to thank her." I gathered her hair with my right hand and pulled it out from under my left arm. I also admired my new bite on the right side of her neck. It was a little higher than the one on her left. I was quite pleased it would show above a shirt collar. "I love you, Bella. I want you to know I'm not going to do anything on purpose to make you jealous. We'll come in contact with other females — vampires and humans, but you are the only woman I want."

Her love washed over me, and I gasped at the feeling. "I love you, Bella."

She smiled at me, and I saw that her eyes had returned to their bright red. "I'll try not to be jealous. I can't seem to help that either, but I'll try. All the vampire women I've ever seen are beautiful. Not that I've seen that many."

"Not as beautiful as you," I whispered against her temple.

Bella sighed lightly and wrapped her fingers around my right wrist and brought my arm to her chest, like she had when we were by the river. "Carlisle said we like to mark our territory, just like humans do. We put our venom on stuff. Do you think that's why I want to bite you? I mean, besides the last time when I was mad at you."

I smiled back at her and brought her hand up to kiss her fingers. "Yes. Except when you're pissed off at me. It's another one of those instincts. I want my scent on you so others know you're mine. You want your scent on me. I also happen to enjoy puttin' it on you." I licked her fingers. "My venom inside you changes your scent. Even though I put a lot of venom in you to change you, your body makes it your own. Adding venom later alters your scent. Like you biting me has altered mine."

"But I've bitten and scratched, well, practically everybody. Will that change their scent?"

"No. You didn't get enough venom in them." I had to smile at her. She had managed to leave marks on everyone except Carlisle, Esme, and Rosalie.

Sensing Esme coming toward us, I turned to look in the direction she was coming from. In the dark, I wasn't able to see her yet through the trees, but then I heard the rustle of wet leaves and pine needles to my right. Bella tensed and straightened.

"It's okay, Darlin'. It's Esme." I kissed her temple.

As Esme appeared from between the trees, I could see that she was eyeing us quite intently. She stopped about thirty feet away. When she saw that both Bella and I were relaxed, she smiled tentatively at us. "Has everything calmed down?"

"Yes, Esme. We're both … better." I smiled at her. "Where are Emmett and Rose?"

"They're back there." She gestured into the trees behind her. "Rosalie became a bit upset and …"

"Why was she upset? Because we were?" Bella asked.

"I'm sure she was angry at the way I was treating you, Bella." I placed my right hand on her cheek and whispered to her. "I was so pissed off at you and jealous I nearly lost control of myself. I could have hurt you, I could have …"

"Stop, Jasper." Bella reached up and brushed her fingertips over my mouth. "We already talked about that."

I turned my head away from her in shame. "Bella … I … I'm so sorry. I could have raped you. I
almost did.” It all came crashing down on me. Guilt filled me again. I had very nearly raped my mate; the woman I love more than my own life.

"Shhh, Jasper," she whispered. "You didn't. You stopped yourself. You stopped. And I was being a bitch and trying to piss you off. Now stop feeling that way. Look at me."

She tugged at my chin as her love enveloped me, but I couldn't bring myself to look at her. Her grip tightened and she pulled harder so that I would have to face her.

"Look, Jasper, I was being a jerk and trying to make you mad, but you didn't hurt me. You stopped. That is what's important. You stopped and you didn't hurt me. I knew you wouldn't hurt me. I wasn't afraid." She reached up and kissed me. "Well, I was afraid when you first grabbed me around the throat because you startled me, but that only lasted a couple of seconds. I wasn't afraid of you anymore because I knew you wouldn't hurt me." Her eyes dropped to the side and her embarrassment fluttered around me for a moment. "And I was trying to piss you off."

Her bright red eyes returned to mine and then her admiration joined her love as she kissed me again. "I am proud of you, Jasper. You've been through so much, and you can still find it in yourself to be gentle and compassionate enough to take care of me, think of me, when I'm being a raging, immature bitch. I love you, Jasper." Shifting in my lap, she brought both of her hands up to brush my hair back from my face. "Now cut it out or I'll hit you with another love bomb."

Even without her love bomb, I was overcome with my love for her and pure joy radiated from my very center. My arms went around her, and I squeezed her to my chest as I buried my face in her neck. "I love you, Bella. I love you so much."

I was supposed to be taking care of her, and she was comforting and consoling me. Forgiving me; loving me. If I could have, I would have cried in her arms, even with Esme standing only thirty feet away from us.

"Jasper. Jasper. We're fine. You're fine. Everything's good." Bella ran her fingers through my hair, and her hand slid slowly down my back.

She continued to rub her hand up and down my back as I pressed my face into her neck, breathing in her scent for several minutes. With her love swirling around me, I finally gained control of myself and kissed her neck in gratitude and in relief. Relief that she hadn't turned me away.

Then I realized she could no more leave me than I could leave her. We were mates. We were tied together, and not because my venom had transformed her. I'd changed hundreds and hadn't felt any connection to them. In fact, I had killed most of them. If anything ever happened to Bella, I didn't think I could survive it.

Bella ran her hand through my hair and to my neck, where she gave me a small squeeze. "Jasper," she whispered so quietly I was sure Esme couldn't hear her. "Are you okay now?"

"Yes. I'll be okay as long as I'm with you, Bella."

When had I become such a fucking whining asshole? I needed to get a grip. My emotions were shifting nearly as quickly as hers and if I were human, I'd be exhausted at the roller coaster ride they had been on.

Another one of those fucking epiphanies arced through my mind. Not only had she submitted to me, I had submitted to her, and it hadn't even required her teeth on my throat. There was that point where I had dropped to my knees in front of her to plead for forgiveness, and Bella had bestowed her grace
upon me. Because she loved me.

I, one of the most feared vampires in the world, had been on his knees to surrender to his newborn mate. Strangely, I found that I did not mind it in the least.

Bella pulled back away from me and smiled. "You're with me." She lightly kissed me and then drew in a breath. "So now tell me what you want me to do. There was something about hunting, and packing, and a truck?" She turned to Esme, "Esme, come over here and sit by us."

Esme seemed a little uncomfortable at our display, though I was sure she couldn't have heard us, but she projected her relief and pleasure as she came forward and sat down on the damp ground in front of me and Bella.

Bella reached out for Esme's hand. "I'm sorry I went out of control back at the house, Esme. I was being a jerk, and it could have been a disaster if Jasper hadn't stopped me."

Esme smiled encouragingly at Bella and squeezed her hand. "It could have been, but he did stop you, and it all worked out. I'm proud of you for having as much control as you do for a newborn. With everything that's been going on, you have done very well." Then she raised an eyebrow at Bella. "But you do need to listen to Jasper and do what he says, Bella. He loves you and he is your mate. He is not Edward, and you know that."

Bella dropped her head and drew her arm from behind my back. "I do. I really do. I've been a … well, I've been an idiot. I've tried to control myself, but it all kind of blows up inside, and I have to do something. Like run or …"

"Or bite?" I asked and smiled at her. "And you're not an idiot, you just don't know."

She sighed. "Yes. Bite. Or have temper tantrums. I'll try not to bite anybody anymore." She rolled her eyes. "I don't know about Emmett though." Then her eyes scrunched shut. "God! I've been acting just like a two-year-old!"

"I'd say you've been worse than any two-year-old, but the analogy isn't far off." I hugged her to me. "That's why newborns are called newborns. They need to be directed and taught."

Bella looked up at me and squeezed my arm. "I'll try, Jasper. I really will. It would help if I could turn my brain off for a little while. I think I miss sleeping."

Esme smiled and patted Bella's arm. "I know it's something I've missed. But there are times when I just sit back, relax and try to clear my mind. It can be restorative."

I placed a kiss on Bella's temple. "Then maybe baby needs a nap."

Sighing again, Bella leaned into me. "I wish I could take a nap. It might help."

I ran my fingers through her hair and rested my chin on the top of her head. "I can help with that. It won't be sleeping, but it can be restful."

Esme leaned forward and ran her hand down Bella's shoulder and arm as she looked to me. "I don't have that bag with the scent of the other vampire. Don't you want to check it?"

I did want to, I was extremely curious, but it had waited this long, it could wait a while longer. If Bella recognized the scent, there wasn't anything I could do about it, and it might upset her. I had no idea how she might react to it. So it could wait and with my gift, I could give us all a bit of respite. It seemed we all needed it.
"It can wait a while longer, Esme." I turned to call Rosalie and Emmett to us. "Rose, Em, come on over here."

"But don't we have things to do?" Bella asked me. She shifted in my lap, crossing her legs to sit Indian-style and leaning into my chest.

"Yes, but they can wait a little while, too."

Emmett and Rosalie came quietly into view from out of the darkness between the large tree trunks. As dark as it still was, I could see that Rosalie was still not happy, but the anger they had both felt was draining away.

"Here's my plan for the time being," I began as Rosalie and Emmett came closer. "The plan is to sit here quietly for a few hours. It'll be dawn soon, but there's no rush to pack, look at the truck, or hunt." I smiled down at Bella then I gestured with my left hand for Rosalie to come closer to me. "Rose, please sit here next to me?"

Rosalie cocked her head and raised an eyebrow at me as she walked over and lowered herself gracefully to the ground next to my left side. Silently, she mouthed to me, "You are a mother fucking bastard." Then she touched my forehead with the tips of her fingers.

She did not send me a love bomb. It was a wrathful, anger-filled, incensed, and righteously indignant, totally hacked off Rosalie bomb drilled directly into my brain, and I thought my head would explode.

I choked, unable to draw in a breath, and my head dropped back as I tried to keep it from overflowing to Bella.

Then Rosalie's fingers were gone from my skin and it stopped. My eyes snapped open and flicked to hers. I was utterly astonished. No one had ever done that before. Except for Bella, but hers was love. Rosalie had actually inflicted pain.

Bella glanced up. "What is it?"

"Just Rose letting me know she's annoyed with me. Are you okay, Darlin'?" I ran my fingers over her head to her neck.

"Sure. I'm fine," she said absently.

Rosalie's eyes narrowed as I watched her. I was relieved I hadn't projected any of that to Bella, and I agreed with Rosalie's assessment. I closed my eyes briefly, remembering how close I had come to abusing, and possibly destroying, my mate. Then Rosalie's fingers brushed lightly over my hair. Through her touch I knew she was still appalled and angry at my behavior but she still felt sisterly affection for me.

Bella's curiosity fluttered around me. "What are we doing?"

Smiling gratefully at Rosalie, I turned and reached toward Esme, urging her to come closer to me. "Darlin', we're going to have a time out. Not only can I knock everyone out or terrorize them, I can help everyone feel peaceful. I think we need it." I turned to look over my shoulder at Emmett. "Em? If you want, you can sit behind me. If everyone is touching me, I can make us all feel calm, and we'll still be aware of what's going on around us."

As Rosalie scooted closer to me and placed her hand on my knee, Esme moved to sit on my right. She leaned against my shoulder and rested her hand on my forearm.
Emmett sighed and walked slowly to stand in front of us. "I think I'll skip the group hug for now, Jazz. I'll go run a perimeter and be back in a while." He turned and moved silently in a westerly direction, mumbling to himself, puzzled. At my behavior, I supposed. He was still a little pissed off and probably needed to run it off.

I wanted to do the best that I could for Bella and when she had said she missed sleeping, I understood exactly what she was saying. More than a few times over my life I had wished I could sleep. Sending her what serenity I could was as close as we could get.

Inhaling deeply, I gathered the peace and tranquility I felt whenever Bella's skin touched mine. For the time being, I chose to ignore the excitement I also felt. Sitting on the damp ground wasn't the best location, but it seemed the perfect time to do it. The fragrance of the firs, the quiet movement of the air through the branches, the moist night air — it all leant itself to a serene atmosphere, and I hoped they didn't mind.

The scent of the other vampire would still be there in the Ziploc bag. Evidently, that vampire had not come near our territory or one of us would have noticed it. Had he purposely steered clear of us? Had he been searching for Bella? That seemed likely. But it could wait a little while longer. Right now my mate needed to rest, and I couldn't leave her to go in search of the strange vampire.

The truck Emmett bought would sit patiently in the garage, and Bella's and my clothes wouldn't be going anywhere. There would still be animals around for Bella to hunt, and if we were quiet for a while, they would come even closer.

"Think restful thoughts, ladies. It's nap time," I said in a soft voice. I closed my eyes and let the peace I felt flow out to them with a small amount of lassitude. I was thankful that Bella decided not to argue with me, and grateful that Rosalie did not choose to yell at me or beat my ass for being a dick. The direct shot to my brain had been enough.

"Thank you, Jasper," Esme whispered. Her love and pride touched me as gently as her hand on my arm.

All three of them sighed softly as they nestled against me. When their emotions registered their relaxation, I sent my senses out to guard against anyone coming near us. I detected no one but Emmett. He was about a mile away and moving toward the north. We would be safe.

-oOoOo-

It was a cloudy day, as usual, but the forest was brightening as the sun rose higher. I could sense Emmett coming closer. I finally heard his quiet footsteps as he neared us.

Bella twitched in my arms, and I stroked her hair and spoke quietly to her. "It's okay, Darlin', it's Emmett coming toward us. He's almost here. Everything is fine."

"Jasper?" she asked softly, her voice barely a breath of air.

"Yes, Bella?"

"This is so nice. It's almost like being asleep. Or maybe like when you just wake up, but you're not all the way awake yet. It's like being snuggled down in the warm blankets on a cold morning and you don't have to be anywhere in particular. You can lay there and enjoy the quiet. Thank you, Jasper."

She hadn't even opened her eyes. I moved slowly to kiss her forehead. "You're welcome, Darlin'." I
couldn't remember what she was describing, but I did know it felt so good just to have Bella sitting peacefully in my arms, her head against my chest. It was nearly perfect. Esme's and Rosalie's tranquil emotions were a comfort, and I had to admit that I was also enjoying them sitting with us.

Emmett walked quietly toward us, shaking his head. "I wish I could get a picture of that. You sitting there with women draped all over you."

I watched him walk closer. "You could join us."

"And drape myself over your ass? Hell no. Might disturb the women." He chuckled. "They look just like little angels." He cocked his head and grinned. "When they're asleep — just like the humans say about their kids."

"Yes, they do." I smiled down at Bella and glanced over at Rosalie and then to Esme. "You'd better stop talkin' or Rose'll beat your ass."

Bella stirred again, and I made sure to keep sending her the sense of peace I felt at her touch.

"Jasper?" she asked.

"Yes, Darlin'?"

"When are we going to hunt?"

"Are you thirsty now?"

"Not really. Just a little bit."

I nuzzled her hair. "Then we can wait a little while longer."

She snuggled into my chest and sighed. "Okay, Jazz."

Then her love and contentedness drifted over me again with the softness of a light spring breeze, filling me with a happiness I could not recall ever feeling before. It was a blessing. I wondered if I had ever been that happy when I was human. If I had been, I just couldn't remember it. I'd felt a strong sense of happiness from others, but had not quite experienced it to that degree myself. If nothing else, Bella brought me that blessing, and I would be forever grateful for that and for her.

Chapter End Notes

"Pain is scary." ~ Jayne Cobb to Captain Malcolm Reynolds from the TV show Firefly, "Serenity," pilot episode.

"I don't care who you are, where you're from; don't care what you did, as long as you love me." ~ Backstreet Boys from the album Backstreet's Back.

"You are my fire, the one desire. Believe when I say I want it that way." ~ Backstreet Boys from the album Millennium.
I Report

Chapter Notes

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I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and A Different Forest (feed a tree!).

A/N: No, I don't know anything about Seattle. But I did go to a town near Olympia once (over 20 years ago.) Chapter 37 is with the betas.

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

---

"Please don't Judas me"

"Treat me as you like to be treated"

"Please don't blacklist me"

"Leave me as you'd wish to find me"

"Don't analyze me, sacrifice me"

"Please don't Judas me"

"Please Don't Judas Me" by Nazareth, from the album Hair of the Dog.

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Chapter 36, I Report

Riley Biers' POV

"She's dead."

I continued walking quietly into the stale, stinking air of the abandoned factory. My voice was barely above a whisper, but I knew she would hear me. I knew she was there; somewhere close by. It was almost as if I could feel her. Feel her brilliant crimson eyes on me.

It was what she had wanted in the end, but I didn't know if she'd be happy about it. She had created all those fucking newborns to take care of the little human bitch and those fucking Cullens.
I looked quickly around the cavernous room, searching for her. There was trash thrown everywhere. The months-old bags and wrappers from the fast food joints still reeked of the slop the humans ate. Yellowed newspapers were mixed in with crushed beer and energy drink cans. There were needles left by the drug addicts and empty liquor bottles from the bums and teenagers who used to come into the building to hide, sleep it off, or have a little fun.

We took care of them a long time ago.

A few blocks away, along the main drag where the humans were ordinarily safe from us, I could hear the cars and trucks of the city traveling back and forth. I could smell them. The exhaust and the odor of fuel always seemed to hang in the air. Sometimes I would sit up on the roof of one of the old buildings there and listen to the hookers, the junkies, and the other human pieces of shit talk about the haunted blocks of warehouses and old factories. They thought the crumbling buildings might even be cursed. Eerie sounds and strange disappearances happened all the time.

They were haunted, all right.

It usually kept them away. We didn't need any humans making a habit of coming down our street and discovering exactly what was haunting the buildings. It wasn't likely, but there was always the chance a human would see something he shouldn't, somehow slip by those fucking moronic newborns and run his goddamn mouth.

It was unlikely that anyone would believe him, but we didn't need to take the chance.

If any humans did happen to wander into the old warehouse down the street … well, they got what they deserved for being so fucking stupid. They were sheep that should have stayed with their flock for safety instead of straying and being picked off, one by one. Then they became the next plaything — the next meal. If there was anything left after the newborns were finished toying with them and fighting over them.

So far, no little lost lamb had managed to escape.

After a dozen young, thirsty vampires fought over one or two of the stupid humans, there wouldn't be much left to drink, or to drink from. On the bright side, it was easier to get rid of the bodies when they were torn apart. It would be nice if the fucking assholes would remember to search the humans for money or any valuables and try to save some of their clothes before they ripped them completely apart.

The newborns weren't allowed in the building I had come to. It was where I always met her, and she didn't want them in there; didn't want them to see her. They knew better than to fuck with me, so they stayed out. Early on, I caught one who had slipped past one of the newborns I had promoted to guard. I ripped his legs off and carried him back to the others. It was their first lesson on how quickly a vampire would go up in flames. There had only been a few since then. If you burned the head and torso last, there were interesting screams to go along with the dark purple smoke.

Audio/visual aids always made lessons more … memorable. It was gratifying to see how it motivated the rest of them.

It had been easy enough to replace that ones that had been set aflame.

We'd had as many as fifteen, but were down to twelve — last time I checked on them two days ago. The way they tore into each other, there might only be half a dozen left. But I had to see her before I went to check on how many newborns remained.
After scanning over the trash, broken wooden crates, and rusty 55-gallon drums spread around and shoved against the walls, my eyes went up to the steel catwalks and girders about two stories up. It was nearly mid-day, and there was some light coming through the large windows at the top of the walls, but they were so filthy, and it was so cloudy outside, that it hardly made any difference. Of course, I didn't really need much light to see.

My eyes swept along the beams, looking for her.

I walked farther into the wide-open space so I could see more directly into the darkest corners. It was quiet inside the old red brick building. Nothing moved. Not even scuffles or squeaks from rats or coos from pigeons. They had all moved out practically as soon as we moved in. It was funny how the rats and pigeons were smarter than the humans that used to crash here or the teenage lovers who used to sneak away to the dilapidated buildings for a little skin-on-skin action.

That young blood was always the sweetest. Even if they were stoned or drunk, they didn't taste as bitter as the others who had been soaked in drugs for years and years.

Silently, I turned in place, studying the metal stairs and walkways. I couldn't smell her yet, mostly because of the ever-present odor of gasoline, diesel fuel, and trash, but I knew she was there; hidden somewhere in the shadows.

Whenever I came to meet her, she'd always show within a few minutes.

Where the fuck was she?

From the corner of my eye, I saw a faint trickle of dust and rust flakes floating down through the air from above. My eyes followed the trail of tiny particles, and I finally spotted her. She was up near one of the huge exhaust fans in the roof, three stories above.

"Riley, what was that you said?" she asked pleasantly as she dropped silently from her perch just beneath the four-foot fan to an iron beam below her.

Even though I'd been with her a year, her honeyed voice still sang through my veins. Hers was the first face I saw when I awoke as a vampire. I would do anything for her, and she knew it.

Swallowing the venom that formed in my mouth at the sight of her, I stepped forward, eager to be closer to her.

"The little human cunt is dead," I said again, quietly, watching her intently as she landed lightly on the catwalk above me. Her long, gleaming red curls settled over her shoulders, framing her angelically beautiful face.

She took a few steps along the steel grate walkway. She moved as fluidly as a cat. I thought again how lucky I was that she had chosen me — as her helpmate, her coven-mate … as her lover. I'd never seen any woman as beautiful as my Victoria.

She stepped off the landing of the iron stairs and dropped the two stories, landing gracefully in front of me. She had large-link silver chains crisscrossing her hips from belt loop to belt loop on her faded jeans. There were more chains looped around the ankles of her black boots and a twinkling strand brushed over the four-inch heels. Those had to be the chains we took off those bikers and their "bros" last week. Those stupid fucks had tried to put their hands on her.

Who could blame them? Nobody looked as good as Victoria.

I guess their mothers never taught them not to touch what wasn't theirs.
They didn't get to keep those hands.

The chains looked so much better draped around Victoria's hips than on those bikers' shoulders and wallets, anyway.

I didn't know how she had kept them from jingling as she moved. It wasn't surprising really; she was so graceful.

Taking slow, seductive steps, she walked around me, eyeing me from my boots to my face. I nearly trembled when her bright red eyes met mine. As she reached toward me, her denim jacket opened slightly, and I could see that she was wearing a low-cut, skin hugging, black top. I wondered if it was a tank top, though it didn't make any difference. She was so fucking sexy in anything she wore.

She extended her hand toward me, placing one finger at the corner of my shoulder, and dragged the tip along my back as she moved silently behind me.

"Why were you gone for so long? You know I miss you when you're not here," she purred. "Tell me what kept you from me."

Just her finger gliding along my back made me shiver with desire for her. I wanted her so bad, my breath caught in my throat. "I … I looked for that little bitch for two days. I was all over Forks. I went to her house, but couldn't get near it because there were so many people there all the time. Even at night, there were a couple of humans sitting on the front steps." I inhaled deeply to draw in Victoria's scent. It reminded me of cherries and licorice, and it was as sweet as her voice. "I went by the high school and waited for her."

Victoria stopped behind me and ran her finger down the middle of my back. "Did you see her truck there?"

"No." I shuddered at her light touch. I turned my head to look at her over my shoulder. "I watched, but I never saw her go in or come out of the school. I never saw any of those Cullen freaks either. But then I found out later she was dead."

"Never saw any of the Cullens?" Victoria asked. "That's probably for the best. Remember, I told you about the gifts they have. They might have sensed that you were near."

"No one spotted me. I remember what you said about them. I ran across their scents everywhere, but none of them were fresh."

"I wonder where they could be? They're so dedicated to their little human pet. But if she was truly dead, why would they need to go to school?"

"I don't know where they were. I didn't go near where you said their coven lived. I didn't want to take a chance I'd run into any of them." I looked over my shoulder to try and see her. "There was a weird scent at the school I never noticed before."

"A scent?" she asked, dragging her nails down my back. "What sort of scent?" She moved slowly to my side and her left hand slid up my arm and over my shoulder. Her eyes flicked up to mine as her hand crept toward my face, and she drew one red-painted nail over my chin.

"It was disgusting. I swear it smelled like wet dog but was so much worse. It was all around the girl's house and the high school. I waited a while then I headed for the diner you said her father likes to go to."

Sliding smoothly to stand in front of me, Victoria reached up to kiss my chin with her full lips. "You
I bent my head to kiss her as I grasped her waist. Her lips were delicious. So sweet. "No." My breath was coming more quickly. "No, I didn't see her there, she was dead by then, but I didn't know that at the time. I looked everywhere for her, trying to find her for you." I kissed her soft lips again. "Some of the men that had been at her house were there — the Native Americans from that reservation by the ocean. I swear that stink came from them."

"Why do you think that, Riley?" She leaned her body against mine and slid her arms around my neck.

Her breasts were pressing against my chest, and I couldn't think. "Um … I watched the diner for a while and then I followed that rank dog smell. It went through the forest right to that reservation. That smell was all over the place once I was a few miles from their little shanty town. It's like there were a dozen or more different ones all crossing through that one area. It would have been worse if it hadn't rained, but it absolutely reeked. It made me jumpy and kind of panicky. I wanted to get out of there. I left there and ran back to Forks. I went by the police station, but the girl and her father weren't there, of course. Two of the cops were inside, and I heard one of them mention the Chief taking off work because of the accident, so I listened to them for a while. They mentioned a *tragic* accident the Chief's daughter had been in. Then they were talking about a funeral with no body."

"I see," Victoria said quietly. She backed away from me and stepped to my right, running her hand up and over my shoulder.

With my left hand, I reached for her hair and ran my fingers through her tousled curls, bringing a shining ringlet to my nose. Her scent almost made me drunk.

She stepped around behind me, pulling the soft strands from my fingers. "What else did you discover for me?"

Both of her hands were resting on top of my shoulders. "The cops said where the memorial was going to be, so I went there this morning to make sure. I didn't want to bring you the wrong information. I wanted to make sure it was the right girl."

"That was very wise of you, Riley. And so thoughtful," Victoria said softly as she ran her hands up my neck and into my hair. "You know how important it has been to me to capture the Cullens' pet to lure them out at the right time," she whispered.

"I know." I couldn't help tipping my head back as her fingertips traced over my scalp. I shivered in pleasure at her touch. "I … I couldn't believe the amount of cars trying to go through town. I followed them to the cemetery and hid in the trees." I sucked in a breath, pulling in Victoria's intoxicating fragrance. "There were hundreds of people there, but I saw the Cullens. There were only four of them — two females and two males." I sighed as her nails dragged across my scalp, down the back of my head, and to my neck.

"Their scent was blowing right toward me, so I knew they wouldn't smell me. I don't know how they can stand to mingle with the humans. Why would they want to?" I swallowed noisily as Victoria's fingers glided down my neck and over my back. "I … I saw the girl's picture propped up on the casket. It was a photograph of her dressed in a hideous yellow cap and gown."

"Ahhhh. Describe the vampires to me."

"I couldn't see their faces, their backs were to me, but there was a blond male …"
"How long was his hair?" Victoria quickly asked, interrupting me.

"Um, short, I guess. Like a regular man's haircut?"

"Go on," she whispered, her breath tickling the back of my neck.

"There was another male with reddish hair that looked like he just got out of bed. One female had long, medium brown hair, and the other was tiny and had this stupid, spiky black hair. The male with the reddish hair had his arm around that one."

"Hmmm."

"Hmmmm." Victoria's hands slid around my waist. "Was there anything else that caught your attention?" she whispered. The tip of her tongue traced along the outside of my ear.

I leaned into her touch, and when I could think and speak again, I couldn't help stuttering. "Th-There were police officers from several different places. I saw police cars from a few different states. There were even a couple from Canada. There were some of those Natives there, too. There were seven of those stinking bastards near the little bitch's father, and he looked like death warmed over." I had to laugh at the irony of that. The dumb fuck was at his daughter's funeral, sitting across a six-foot deep hole from four of the undead — with an empty casket between them. "One man was in a wheelchair right next to him, there was a woman on his other side holding his hand, but the other five were standing behind him and were some of the biggest men I'd ever seen. They had to be between six-and-a-half and seven feet tall!"

"Oh?" Victoria leaned into my back, and her hands moved slowly up my chest.

"Uh, yeah. They were acting kind of weird. One of them was staring at the Cullens. Two of the other ones had their hands on his arms like they were holding him."

Her right hand started moving down my chest and over my stomach, unbuttoning my shirt as she went. "Did you hear any of them talking?"

Anticipating where her hand was headed, I gulped. "Uh, um, I could hear some of the humans talking. I wasn't close enough to hear if any of the Cullens spoke." I cleared my throat. "I heard that the girl wrecked her truck on the way to La Push this past Saturday. The truck caught fire. She must have been thrown out of it because they couldn't find her body. Somebody said there was a lot of blood by the trees at the side of the road. Somebody else said a giant bear dragged her away. Giant bears?" I shook my head in wonder at the idiocy of humans. But, to a human who was pissing his pants in fear, any bear would look like a giant. "If they didn't find a body, why would there be a casket?"

Victoria's hand glided down over my belt buckle to my hardening dick, and I gasped. Her left hand withdrew from around my waist and traveled slowly up my back to my neck. Her fingers crept around my neck to my jaw as she reached up and her tongue traced a fiery line up my throat.

"Perhaps they found pieces of the little whore in the forest and those are being buried." She kissed my cheek. "Did you hear anything else of importance?"

"N-no." I started to turn my head toward her, but she gripped my hard cock through my jeans, and I groaned in pleasure. "Ohhhhh. Since she was dead, I didn't bother going back to her house … to steal any of her clothes for the newborns to get her scent." I was nearly breathless with desire for her. "I left soon after that … after I was sure it was the right girl. Having vampires at the funeral seemed to make it definite." I tried to turn toward her again, but she pressed down on my dick, and I could have cum right then. "We'll have to think of … some other way … to get at the Cullens."
Victoria tickled my left ear with her fingertips. "Perhaps."

Before I could catch my breath, she slammed me down onto my knees, her left hand was clamped on the back of my neck, her nails digging into my skin, and her teeth were at my throat. I couldn't move. She had done that to me when I had first awakened as a vampire — because I had no idea what was going on, but she hadn't done it since. I had done everything she had ever asked of me. I loved her and would do anything for her — all she had to do was ask.

My mind was spinning out of control. I couldn't think of anything I had done wrong. I tried to look at her, but fear of what she could do to me kept me from moving my head. I tried to speak through my clenched teeth.

"W-why are you doing this?"

Her teeth slid across my skin. "My plans have been ruined. Ruined by that little, ignorant, worthless harlot killing herself." She hissed against my neck. "I wasn't going to use her as bait to draw out those perverted Cullens so that I could kill them. I was going to kill her in front of them! I wanted the newborns as guards so I could drink that little bitch dry in front of Edward. After I made her scream, of course."

Victoria nipped my neck and hissed again. "I was planning to torture her, break her arms, and crush her legs. Beat her, slice her open. Then have you lead those degenerate Cullens to me so Edward could watch me finish her. He was the male with the reddish hair you saw at the grave site. If the Cullens happened to kill the newborns, it would make no difference to me. Maybe those useless newborns would have killed some of them. I didn't care as long as Edward saw me kill his precious, precious Bella."

"I d-don't understand." I reached up to grab her left hand that was holding my neck, but her teeth were instantly at my throat again.

"Don't move." She growled and lifted her head just enough so that I could see her wild, black eyes. "You're not my mate. James was my mate, and they killed him! Edward killed him over that insignificant little human. Edward said she was his mate! That shows you what twisted, perverted, amoral creatures they are. They don't even drink human blood!" She laughed lightly. "Those deviants drink the blood of animals. Humans can't be the mates of vampires. They are cattle — they're food. They're less than nothing!"

My mind was reeling. Victoria had told me I was her mate. She said she had known it as soon as her venom had finished burning away the last bit of my humanity. I was her mate, and we would be together forever.

"But I …"

She growled and yanked my head back. "You were never my mate. James was my mate, and we vampires can only ever have one!" Her teeth were back at my throat, and I thought that would be the end, until she hissed again.

"Three of those corrupt creatures were missing. A large dark-haired male, a tall, blonde female, and their best fighter — another longer-haired blond male who is covered with scars." Her eyes jerked away from mine. "But they may not have gone to the funeral. They may have stayed at the house." She hissed. "That blond male would have been the most dangerous to the newborns. That's why I needed more of them! James and I had been through the south and heard tales about a blond demon named Jasper. He had yellow eyes instead of red when I saw him, but one of the Cullens had said his name, and we recognized him by his scars. I've never seen a vampire with so many scars." She
sucked in a rasping breath and stared directly into my eyes. "He fought in the vampire wars in the south, and he always won. He's another one with a gift. He can freeze you with terror without even touching you." She squeezed her eyes closed. "I cannot comprehend why he would have left all of that. He ruled the south, and he just … left it. To hide in the north and chase after … after disgusting animals." As her eyes snapped open, she spat on the floor. "He owned the south and he just walked away."

"Wars?" I gasped as she shook my head. "What wars?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing — she had lied to me about everything, but I was hoping I could stall her; hoping I would get a chance to break her hold and get away.

Victoria's lips nearly touched my ear as she hissed again. "There's a whole other history you know nothing about. A group of vampires that call themselves the Volturi are the self-proclaimed leaders of the vampire world. Centuries ago there was a war between the Volturi and the former rulers, the Romanians. Then there were the Southern Vampire Wars, the eradication of the Children of the Moon … apparently the Volturi didn't do a good enough job." Her hand tightened on the back of my neck. "That repulsive scent you came across? Those are the Children of the Moon — werewolves. I'd never seen them before. I'd only heard stories about them, until I came here and saw them with my own eyes. Those huge Natives you saw are werewolves." She sneered. "I should inform the Volturi about them and their relationship with the Cullens and their pet, but I don't want to expose myself to them."

Her teeth were at my throat again and she growled. "The Volturi frown on making too many newborns and not teaching them properly and keeping them contained. That's why the Volturi came to the new world and cleaned out the south long ago. Those ignorant vampires fought each other with hordes of newborns. They thought they were safe from the Volturi's notice and they wouldn't trouble themselves to travel all the way from Italy. The death toll of humans was so high the other humans blamed it on plagues! Those vampires were fools! They were drawing the eyes of the world toward them and the Volturi had to step in. They destroyed hundreds of vampires. The wars started up again with that Jasper, and he gained a lot of territory, but he did it intelligently. He controlled his newborns and kept them from the obvious notice of the Volturi."

She hissed in my face. "That's why I didn't want any of the newborns here to know who I am. Now I don't have to worry about it any longer — the little bitch is dead! Now Edward and those other Cullens will suffer the agony I've felt since they murdered my James. Though I wanted to kill her, everyone in that little podunk town will witness his pain and soon the news will spread among the vampires."

Her right hand flashed up into view and in it she gripped a silver lighter. "I know you smell the gasoline. I've had cans and cans of it stored here and in the other buildings for months. I don't need those newborns anymore, and I don't need you." She sneered in my face.

My mind was reeling out of control. My chaotic thoughts ricocheted through my head. Everything she had ever told me had been a lie! I had only ever loved her, and she had used me to get to a piece of shit human!

Her teeth were at my throat as she flipped open the top of the lighter and spun the striker to light it. As the spark from the flint ignited into a small yellow flame, her teeth ripped through my throat. The pain … there was nothing but searing agony exploding through my brain and my body. I screamed and screamed but I heard no sound except Victoria's high-pitched laughter.

I couldn't make any sense of what I was seeing as I watched, completely helpless, as she threw the flaming lighter onto a headless body as it twitched and convulsed and dropped to the floor.
I heard her vicious snarl as the flames came racing toward me.
Chapter 37, I Weep

Bella's POV

Well, *that* was totally embarrassing. Jasper had suggested that Esme and Rosalie take me hunting and what did I do? I clawed Esme and bit Rosalie.

I tried to apologize again as we were on our way back to the house.

"Rose, I'm really sorry I bit you. I didn't mean to. Well, I *did* mean to, but I didn't!" I dropped my head and stared down at my hands, watching my fingers knot themselves together. I felt like such an ass.

Rosalie appeared in front of me, her hands propped on her hips, and she blew out a gusty breath in exasperation. "Bella, I already said it's okay. It was my fault. I shouldn't have gotten so close to you after you caught that mountain lion." She pushed her right sleeve up. "Look. You can hardly see the bite at all. It's up at the crease of my elbow."

"But, I …"

Esme put her arm around my shoulders. "Bella, after you caught the fox, and I got a little too close, we should have realized you needed just a bit more space. I know you didn't mean to scratch me on the leg. Please don't worry about it. It's healed already. There are hardly any marks at all." She squeezed my shoulders and touched her head to mine. "You did a fine job hunting — you've become so graceful. Though I believe we'll have to throw those clothes out."
I would have to throw away my clothes. I had blood everywhere again. Mud was caked on me, and there were red, yellow, and white hairs all over me. I looked like I’d been rolling on them. Well, I guess I sort of did roll on that mountain lion.

After Jasper had thrown me to the ground and had me on my knees, I was already messy. In addition to all that dirt and mud, the cougar had been pretty pissed off about being attacked by something smaller than him. My clothes were sure ripped up. I should be grateful I still had clothes on.

My hair was a total mess. Mud, leaves, and pine needles were stuck in it even after I tried to comb through it with my fingers.

I thought it had gotten a bit longer, too. It was a lot thicker than it had been.

Rosalie had suggested that next time I go hunting I should probably put it in a ponytail or braid it or something. That would help keep it out of the way and maybe it wouldn't get so mud and blood encrusted.

Ew.

When I was hunting, I made sure I only caught males, too. It was late spring, and I thought that maybe the animals might have kittens or pups or cubs or whatever their babies were called.

Carnivores did taste better than herbivores.

Despite feeling bad about biting Rosalie and scratching Esme, I started to wonder where Jasper was. He said he wouldn't be far away, and I was feeling that pressure in my chest again. It only happened when I wasn't near him, so I hoped he would show up soon.

I blinked away those scattered thoughts and looked up at Rosalie and Esme. "I am really sorry. I don't know what happened. I was so happy when I caught the fox because he was pretty quick, and then I saw you, Esme, and it was like I was insta-pissed, and I … oops." I slapped my hand over my mouth and felt my eyes open wide. It was so hard not to swear in front of Esme. Filthy language just poured out of my mouth. It was so embarrassing.

One of Rosalie's lovely eyebrows arched upward and a tiny smile appeared. "At least you didn't lick your fingers first."

And I had thought cussing like a sailor was embarrassing. Leave it to Rosalie to bring that up! I was surprised Emmett hadn't.

What if I did have venom on my fingers when I scratched Esme? She would be scarred for life! I groaned loudly, hid my face in my hands, and wished the earth would open up and swallow me.

Esme chuckled and hugged me close, not seeming to mind the blood and loose hairs. "Oh, Bella. Don't be embarrassed. You're doing just fine. You know Emmett has quite colorful language. We've been working on that for years." She smiled at me and gave me another gentle squeeze. "I had taken Rosalie and Emmett hunting when they were newborns. You seem to need a bit more space than either of them did. If I had been paying close enough attention, I would have seen that. And you move so quickly." She urged me to keep walking. "The scratches are hardly noticeable. We'll be back at the house soon so you can clean up."

I whined again and wished Jasper was there. "Where's Jasper?" I couldn't help asking. Since I had begun thinking about him, the pressure in my chest was turning into an ache, and I was anxious to see him. Well, part of my mind was always thinking about him, but since he had come to the front of my mind, I was becoming more anxious.
Rosalie grabbed my right hand and patted it lightly. "He's around somewhere. I'm sure he isn't far away. Maybe he and Emmett are wrestling again." She rolled her eyes. "They can't seem to keep their hands off each other."

"Yeah, why is that? Even in school, the boys couldn't keep their hands off each other. They were always punching, smacking, and wrestling around." I shook my head in consternation. I had always thought it was strange that boys did that. Girls didn't always have to have their hands all over each other, though Esme was sort of touchy-feely. Alice had been, too. Rosalie wasn't so bad.

Then that reminded me about biting her. I suppose I had been a little too toothy-bitey. "Rose, I really am sorry I bit you. I knew you weren't going to take the cougar away from me, but I just couldn't help it. It's like my mind was suddenly crammed with thoughts that it was mine, and you were going to steal it from me."

Rosalie released another breathy sigh. "Bella! I already said it wasn't your fault. Everybody should know not to get too close to a newborn when they're feeding."

"Yeah. Apparently I need people to be at least half a football field away from me," I grumbled. Stopping again, I looked up at Rosalie and Esme. "But I didn't mind Jasper being near me when I was hunting the first time."

"You sure didn't!" Rosalie laughed loudly, the sound ringing through the air.

I covered my face with both hands, embarrassed again. I was grateful Esme hadn't been there the first time I went hunting. I saw Jasper after I finished that elk and ... wow. He was just so fucking hot without a shirt on! And his hair was all golden and tousled ...

*Come to think of it, his hair was nearly the same color as the mountain lion.*

How could anyone think Edward was like a mountain lion? Who started that crap? Jasper was just like a lion. Leonine was an excellent word for him. Emmett had the huge muscles. Pretty much, Emmett was just friggin' huge, but Jasper was just like a big cat. He was majestic and ... and regal, and sleek and smooth, and the muscles rippled under his skin when he moved. Any time he moved. He wasn't all big and bulky like Emmett, and he wasn't a scrawny teenager like Edward — he was fucking perfect.

His honey gold hair blended beautifully with his skin, making him look practically golden all over. Of course, his hair was blond, and he had blond hair on his arms and there was a little hair on his chest and down his belly to his …

*Ahem.*

Not that I've seen all his skin. I wondered if he had scars all over? I meant everywhere. And the scars were just so fucking sexy! They were like tooth tattoos. What was that people said about tattoos? They were like a scrapbook of your life etched into your skin. Only on a vampire they didn't fade.

James' bite on my wrist certainly marked a significant time in my life. It was when I should have realized that Edward was never going to change me, but I was so stupidly infatuated with him, I had thought he was concerned with me. I didn't realize then my blood was more important to him that I was. If Jasper, Emmett, Alice, and Carlisle hadn't been right there, he probably would have drained me.

Of course, if I looked at the scar another way, it marked the time when Jasper had first told me I was worth it. Worth all the trouble they were going through. Even then, I had mostly believed him
because Jasper hadn't ever tried to bullshit me. Unlike some people.

How could anyone be afraid of Jasper's scars? When I was human I had lots of scars. Not as many as Jasper, of course, but I had a lot of them. I was so clumsy then.

Everyone said how graceful I was since I turned into a vampire, but I couldn't possibly be as graceful as Jasper. He moved like water flowing over a rock. Beautiful.

After I caught that elk and finished draining it, and Jasper started stalking toward me … oh, my God, I could have just melted right there. His eyes! His eyes were so black, and I'd never seen anything more exquisitely gorgeous than him.

How had I never noticed how beautiful he was before?

I'll blame Edward for dazzling me. The fucker wouldn't be able to dazzle me anymore. I'd kick his ass. Though I already did that. A couple times. But, I had to admit, the main reason I was able to bite him so many times and rip his arm off was because Carlisle had hold of him. Of course, my pouncing on him may have surprised him a little.

Anyway, then I jumped on Jasper. Touching his skin and kissing him sent this blazing hot spark right to my… What had Angela said? Lady parts? That was such an Angela-type description. I missed Angela. She had always been so nice to me. I wondered if her father was going to officiate at my funeral?

Well, anyhow … Thank God Esme hadn't been there when I was hunting the elk!

How mortifying would that have been? Or what if Carlisle had been there? Was it possible for a vampire to roll up into a tiny, little ball and sink into the dirt? I was really glad I didn't turn beet red anymore when I was embarrassed. Though if it could happen, guess who would be the lucky vamp, right?

Esme quietly cleared her throat bringing me out of my rambling thoughts, and urged me to move again. I peeked through my fingers to watch where I was going. I didn't need to start tripping over things. Even a vampire had to watch where they were walking.

Releasing her hold around my shoulders, Esme grasped my left hand. "Was Jasper close to you when you first caught the elk?"

"Uh, no," I said, smiling sheepishly at her. "He stayed behind me a ways. I was focusing so hard on the elk I didn't really notice him until after I drained it."

"I'm not sure exactly how you might have reacted, Bella, but I think if he had been closer to you when you first caught the elk, you might have been a bit more aggressive toward him." She smiled at me. "It's probably because he's your mate, too. I recall that when I was a newborn, Carlisle and Edward didn't get too close to me until I was finished. They stayed back forty or fifty feet, gradually getting closer as I got older. It would appear that you need a little more space than that."

"Evidently." Rosalie grinned, raising an eyebrow at me again. "Try not to worry about it, Bella. Even Emmett and I don't hunt right next to each other. None of us get too close to another when we're hunting. We may be one big happy family, but we hunt separately." She laughed again. "And when Emmett is after a bear, you really don't want to get anywhere near him. He usually likes to wrestle them first."

Thinking about Emmett wrestling a bear made me laugh. "He hasn't gotten over that first bear kicking his butt yet?"
"Not quite. Maybe in another hundred years or so." Rosalie chuckled.

"Well, I don't know. It is Emmett," Esme said with a fond smile for her most boisterous son.

We all had to laugh at that. Emmett was kind of cute when he would start getting excited thinking about chasing down bears. Since I was a vampire, maybe I would get the chance to see him catch one. I thought that would be fun. I was sure it would be loud and, well, disgusting.

"Speaking of Emmett, where is he? And where is Jasper?" I started looking more intently around us, hoping to spot them through the trees. My hand went to my chest because the ache was getting stronger. I couldn't even smell him. I could smell Esme's scent of fresh baked herb bread and Rosalie's roses. I thought it was ironic that Rosalie smelled liked roses. Not the new breed of roses that had hardly any smell, but the old fashioned roses. The new roses had all those pretty colors, but they just didn't smell as good as the older breeds. Was breed a word you used with plants?

I couldn't smell Jasper anywhere. He smelled so absolutely delicious, I could just lick him. There was sun-warmed leather, pipe tobacco, and some cinnamon. He was right — our scents must be blending because I thought the cinnamon was stronger than it had been. Before, I thought the pipe tobacco was the more dominant scent. So utterly masculine!

Where the hell was he?

How could I have ever thought that Edward smelled so good? Honey, lilac, and sunshine? What the fuck? All those things smell good, but too sweet. Jasper smelled like a man.

It was at that moment Jasper and Emmett dropped down out of the trees about twenty feet in front of us, and I could only stop and stare at him. Every time I'd been away from him from more than a few minutes, it was almost like seeing him for the first time.

He was so beautiful a little "oh" of appreciation slipped right out of my mouth.

He ran his hand through his hair to get it out of his face and my eyes were drawn to the movement of the muscles in his arm and shoulder. I was struck dumb by his beauty. "Beautiful" wasn't a word that was normally used for a man, but he was so much more than merely handsome — he was strikingly beautiful. He was stunning. He was glorious. He was a god.

He's fuckin' hot!

Then there were his shoulders that were nice and wide and strong.

His long body flowed smoothly down into his slim hips and … and then there were the legs that just went on and on and …

That reminded me of something Jessica would have said. Yup, he was one fine-looking piece of man meat.

Whew.

I was almost drooling.

I finally noticed that his clothes appeared to be a little more torn up and dirty than they had been a couple hours before. What the hell had they been doing?

He was staring at me like I was staring at him, and the corners of his lips began to turn upward. He reached toward me, and I saw there was a slight tremor in his hand.
Rosalie jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow. "Earth to Bella."

"Er, what?" I dropped Esme's hand and leapt toward my Jasper. I couldn't wait to get my hands on him again, touch his smooth skin, and run my fingers over those sexy scars. Every part of him felt so good. Well, all the parts I had touched so far.

As my body collided with his, he grunted and wrapped his arms around me, completely enclosing me. I shoved my face into his chest and took a deep breath, drawing in his spicy, savory, delicious scent, along with the tangy scent of the pines and the woodsy scent of the earth. I could detect the cool, crisp apple of Emmett's scent on him along with my own cinnamon, and my whole body started to relax against him. Instantly, the anxiety I had been feeling just drained away, and I felt so much better.

His nose was in my hair, and his lips were on my neck. I loved it when he did that — I nearly shivered. He was breathing me in like I was inhaling his scent. We both sighed in relief and pleasure at being back together. I knew he was glad to see me because I could feel it.

His lips made their way to my ear, and then he whispered, "I missed you," so quietly I knew none of the others could hear him.

It sure would be nice to have a little privacy now and then, but I didn't mind so much if they heard him say he missed me. I missed him, too, and we weren't even apart for that long!

"I missed you, too," I whispered back to him as his hand slid up my back to my neck. "Did you see that I caught a fox and a mountain lion? That fox was really quick, but I got him, but that wasn't enough — I was still thirsty. Then I smelled something else, and Rose said it was a male mountain lion, so I went after him, too." In my excitement at remembering tackling the cougar, I stepped back away from Jasper. I couldn't seem to control my hands. They almost had a life of their own, flashing back and forth. "I followed him until I was up on a rock above him. I leapt off the rock and nailed him!" I slammed my right fist into my left palm. "Boy, was he pissed off, but I got him!"

Jasper grabbed my hands to hold them still, and he was smiling at me. The pride he felt drifted over me.

"I saw that, Darlin'. You did a good job remembering to snap his neck right away." He stepped closer to me and held my hands to his chest. "You were beautiful snarling and leaping off that boulder." His rich tawny eyes started to darken as he took another step toward me.

Emmett snorted in annoyance and poked him in the shoulder. Jasper's eyes narrowed, and he turned slightly to glare at Emmett.

Finally, I looked at Emmett and saw his clothes were in pretty bad shape, too. He hadn't been that dirty when Esme, Rosalie, and I had headed out to hunt.

As Emmett raised an eyebrow at Jasper, he welcomed Rosalie into his arms and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Becoming suspicious, my eyes flicked back and forth between Jasper and Emmett. I couldn't figure out what they were up to. "Okay, what's up, you guys? What's going on?"

Even Rosalie was looking curiously at them both. "Yes, what are you two up to?"

Emmett gave Rosalie a squeeze and turned in the direction of the house. "Belly-boo, I'll let Jazz fill you in. Me and Rose are goin' to head back to the house and clean up. We'll meet ya at the truck in a little while, right, Jazz?" Emmett gave Jasper a stern look and turned away, pulling his mate into his
"Well," Esme began, clearing her throat, "I think I'll just head back to the house and get cleaned up, too." She reached over and patted Jasper's arm. "Thank you again for the little nap, Jasper. That was truly relaxing."

"You're welcome, Esme. Thank you for going with Bella to hunt. I do appreciate it. Did she scratch you very badly?"

"Ohhhh, crap," I groaned as I covered my face in embarrassment again. "Esme, I am sorry!"

"Bella, it's nothing. Really. Look here," Esme said as she tugged up her right pants leg. "See? The scratches are nearly invisible." She let go of the khaki material and smoothed it into place. "I'm actually puzzled how you managed to scratch me and not rip my pants."

At my second embarrassed groan, Esme came and rubbed my arm, trying to reassure me. "Bella, it's fine. Barely even noticeable." She gave my arm a little squeeze. "I'll go get myself cleaned up. I'd like to see your truck, too. We'll see you both in a little while." She smiled at Jasper and me then turned away, running as gracefully as a deer through the forest.

I dropped my head and hid my face in Jasper's chest. "I can't do anything without marking everybody up."

Jasper's arms went around me, and his big hands slid slowly up and down my back. He kissed the top of my head. "There's only Carlisle left. Maybe you can get a bite in before we leave."

"Ohhh, Jasper!" I whined that time. "That's not funny! I didn't mean to bite them. Well, I did want to jump on Alice at the time, but I didn't mean to attack Esme and Rose."

"Darlin', that really wasn't your fault. I saw you catch the fox, and Esme was a little too close to you. She got away from ya."

"God! She was at least thirty feet away from me. I don't even really remember running after her. I had hold of the fox, and then I was snarling at her."

"Let's start walkin' back." Jasper nudged me to follow Esme's path and put his left arm around my shoulders. "I guess you noticed that when we're huntin' we kind of set aside our thinkin' brain and run on those instincts again?"

I nodded and turned my eyes up toward his face as I slid my right arm around his waist. "Yeah, I did kinda notice that." I sighed. "Did you see me bite Rosalie?"

A frown flickered across his face, and he bent to kiss my forehead. "No, I missed that."

"But I thought you were watching us?"

"I was." He frowned again and looked off into the trees ahead of us. "Emmett and I were up in the trees so our scents wouldn't scare off anything you might run across. But when you jumped off the boulder and landed on that cougar, I got a little … excited and started down the tree to get to you."

"Excited?" I reached over with my left hand and tugged at his ripped T-shirt. It would have to be thrown out, too. It didn't help that I was the one that put the first holes in it. "Were you afraid I would get hurt?"
"Uh, no. Excited as in 'turned on'. I was trying not to project it toward you, but I guess I didn't keep
it from Emmett too well. He tackled me and knocked me right out of the fuckin' tree, beatin' my ass
all the way to the ground."

I really wasn't following him. Watching me hunt turned him on?

Oh!

Like with the elk.

Gulp.

Only after I captured that cougar, I felt a lot more powerful and elated than I had after I caught the
elk. I mean, I actually caught a lion! How cool was that? If I had seen Jasper after that I probably
would have ripped all his clothes off and …

Oh, my gosh!

It's not that I didn't want to be, uh, intimate with him.

Okay, I was being a jerk. In my head, I could call a spade a spade and just admit that I wanted to
screw his brains out. But when I actually thought about it, I was so nervous, and then I started to get
a little afraid because I never did it before, and I didn't know how. He had over a hundred years of
experience. I was pretty damn sure he'd had more than Alice as a partner.

Ya think?

As bad as I wanted him, I didn't want him to think I was a complete dud. What if I did something
wrong? What if I hurt him? What if I was no good, and it sucked, and he tried to be polite and tell me
everything was fine and …

He yanked me into his chest and stared into my eyes. "Bella, stop feelin' like that. I can tell that
you're afraid and feelin' worthless and inadequate." His hands cupped both sides of my face, and he
kissed me, his lips pressing firmly against mine. "Bella, you are my mate, and I want you so bad I
can hardly stand it. You never have to worry about not being good enough for me. Remember? You
said that you deserve the best, right?" When I nodded at him, he kissed me again. "We are the best
for each other. We may have been born over 140 years apart, but I was made for you. You were
made for me."

The fingers of his right hand drifted down my throat, and he gathered my tangled hair together,
pulling it away from my neck. He inhaled sharply, and his lips were on my throat. "The blood on
you … I want you so fuckin' bad."

At his words, I swear it felt like my heart pulsed in my chest.

His right hand slid down my back to my butt while his left tightened around my neck. His tongue
was gliding wetly from the hollow of my throat up to my ear, and he whispered, almost growling, "I
love you, and I want you."

His hand firmly gripped my ass, and he started to drag me up his long body. Through our clothes I
could feel how aroused he was, and he was really aroused. He felt, well, huge to me, and my
nervousness came flooding back with a little spark of fear. All I could think at the moment was, "I'm
gonna suck! I'm going to totally suck at this. What if it hurts? I know it's going to hurt because he's
fuckin' huge, and I'm going to ruin it, and it'll suck, and …"
Jasper let out a deep groan, his whole body shuddering, and he practically dropped me back onto my feet. His hands were gripping my upper arms, his eyes were squeezed shut, and he tilted his head back. "I'm sorry, Bella, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lose control like that. I just want you so bad I can't …" He shook his head as if he were trying to fling his thoughts away, and he crushed me into his chest, his right hand at the back of my head and his mouth at my ear. "I knew if I was near you while you were huntin', I wouldn't be able to control myself. That's why I wanted Esme and Rose to go with you, but I couldn't stay away from you. I had to be able to see you. I told Emmett to watch me. I thought if he was right next to me, I'd be able to resist, but I couldn't. I was so … captivated by you, by your grace and your … ferocity, Emmett actually caught me and beat the hell out of me before I even hit the ground. He was still pissed off at me anyway. He's still pissed off now."

I could tell he was getting worked up because his accent was more pronounced — I could listen to him talk all day and all night.

_I love his accent!_

I pulled back from him and reached up to place my hand on his cheek. "That explains why your clothes are really messed up. But Jasper …"

He took hold of my hand and kissed my palm. "I know you're nervous, but you don't need to be afraid of me." His shining black eyes were gradually lightening, and he licked then kissed my palm again. "I will have you, Darlin'. You will be mine, but not here. Not surrounded by Cullens."

I could feel my eyes opening wide in surprise, and my apprehension skipped up to the next level. "Er, J-Jasper, I, uh, thought I was yours."

"Completely mine."

His mouth crashed onto mine, his tongue slipping between my lips. His large hands gripped my head and held me to him.

Tentatively, my tongue met his, tasting him, drinking him in, and my allegedly marble-like body suddenly turned into a Bella-shaped bag of mush. I started to go limp, and his hands caught me and held me up, pressing me against his firm body.

He pulled his lips away, and I gasped. "Oh! I love the way you taste." In the midst of my spinning thoughts I realized my eyes were closed and they snapped open to see Jasper smirking at me, one eyebrow raised above his gleaming, golden eyes. The pattern of gold in his irises looked like a starburst. Like his hair, there wasn't just one shade of gold — there was bright honey, rich amber, tawny yellow, and even maize and a bit of marigold. They were so deep and warm compared to Edward’s hard topaz. In fact, there was no comparison. Jasper was perfect. His eye lashes were long and such a deep brown they were nearly black and …

"Bella."

His tone of voice jerked my attention away from his gorgeous eyes and back to him. "Uh, what?"

"You have no reason to be afraid."

I blinked at him a few times. "But, Jasper, I'm not afraid of you. I …"

His fingers grazed lightly over my jaw to my chin. "I will claim you as mine completely, but I won't force you. I'll wait a little while longer. We'll be at my place soon."

Wait a little while longer? How long was a "little while"? It wasn't like I didn't want him. I wanted
him so bad, I could hardly think straight. Not that my brain didn't take off in a dozen different directions, anyway, but then part of me began to worry about it and …

Stop!

Gulping nervously, I peered up at him. "Uh, don't we have to smell that sample the wolves brought?"

Jasper grinned at me. "Changin' the subject, Darlin'? Yes, we'll smell it. Emmett has it. He's probably out of the shower by now, waiting for us." He kissed the end of my nose. "Do you want to run?"

"Yes!" Running as a vampire was so cool. I loved it! The speed and the air whipping past you was so much better than riding a motorcycle.

Of course, thinking about riding motorcycles made me think of Jacob. I really missed him and wished I could see him just one more time to tell him good bye and tell him that I was happy, but I knew I couldn't.

Jasper tugged at my right hand, bringing it to his lips. "Whatever it is makin' you sad, Darlin', I know you won't forget it, but remember I'm always here for you."

"Thank you, Jasper." I turned in the direction of the house and pulled on his hand. We started off together, running through the trees. "Running as a vampire is so cool, and I was thinking that it was so much better than riding a motorcycle. That reminded me of Jacob. He rebuilt a couple of little motorcycles I found, and he taught me how to ride."

His hand tightened on mine. "You know you can't ever see him again."

A gloomy sigh escaped me. "I know. He'll be able to sorta say goodbye to me tomorrow at my memorial, but I can't say goodbye to him. At least he has the rest of the pack. They'll help him, and one day he might imprint on somebody, and he'll forget about me. But then there's Charlie."

"Charlie doesn't have a pack," I choked out. "I wonder if Renee will show up? She has Phil, but Charlie doesn't have anyone but me, and I'm gone."

Before I had time to register his movement, Jasper had lifted me up in his arms and my head was tucked under his chin. "I am sorry about that, Darlin'. I know you'll miss him. I know he loved you, and he'll miss you, but he does have friends. Didn't he go fishin' with a couple of them?"

"Yes, he went fishing with Billy Black and Harry Clearwater most of the time."

Sniffing, even though I didn't need to since my nose didn't exactly run, I clutched at Jasper's torn and dirty Forks High T-shirt. I noticed the red and yellow hairs from my kills had transferred from me to him, and then I noticed the dried blood still on my hands. Aggravated with myself and my inability to rein in my disorderly thoughts, I pushed them to one of the back corners of my head. I nodded slowly to Jasper. "I cried into it, wishing the tears would fall. "Or maybe they phased and he had the heart attack. I can't remember exactly what happened."

Leaving Charlie behind and alone overwhelmed me because it made me think of how lost and alone I felt when Edward just threw me to the side. But how much worse would it be to lose a child or your parent? So, I had lost a shitty boyfriend, and I had acted like it was the end of the world. I had been such a selfish, self-absorbed … fucking asshole crybaby. That certainly didn't compare to losing
a child or a parent.

Thick, dark grief crashed through me like waves in a storm on First Beach, and I wailed just like an infant. I tried to curl myself into a ball to stop it all from pounding into me, but it just kept coming.

Jasper's strong arms held me snugly to his chest, and I felt him kiss the top of my head, but it didn't stop the throbbing ache from hammering through my un-beating heart. If our hearts didn't beat, how could they hurt so badly?

I cried for Charlie and Renee who lost their only child, and I cried for Seth and Leah who didn't have their father anymore. Then I cried for Billy Black, and for Jacob who was just a little kid when he lost his mother so long ago.

I reached up, groping for something to grab hold of and got a handful of Jasper's hair. I pressed my face against his, sobbing right into his ear. Then the thought flashed through my head that Jasper had once had a family, and he didn't have them anymore.

My body shook and I cried for Jasper's family that was left behind when Maria ripped him away. They never knew what happened to their son and brother. They probably had a funeral with no body to bury, no one to say goodbye to, just like Charlie.

Nearly choking, I sobbed even more loudly when I thought of Jasper not being able to even remember the family or the friends he had when he was a boy in Texas. I wept for him, and it felt as if my heart would crack right down the middle when I realized they never got to see what a wonderful, loving, gentle man he had become, and what an awful, horrible shame that truly was.

At last, the ache of the tears that wouldn't come started to ease, and I began to feel the warm comfort of Jasper's love flowing over me as his hand stroked my hair from my head, over my shoulders and down my back.

I still had a death grip on his shirt and his hair, and I made my fingers let go. That's when I finally heard his deep, quiet voice whispering to me.

"I've got you. I'm here. I'm right here."

That's what he had said to me, over and over again, when I was on fire and changing into a vampire, and I had clung desperately to the sound of his voice. I had reached for it — longed to hear it. I thought his voice had been the only thing that had kept me from disappearing into those flames.

He had shared that agony with me when he didn't have to. He had been through it with his own transformation but he had stayed with me. During the worst pain I had ever experienced in my life, he had been right there. He hadn't left me. He hadn't run away. He stayed.

My heart filled with so much love for him, I thought it would burst with joy. I gasped out, "Jasper, I love you so much."

He sucked in a breath and squeezed me to his chest. "And I love you, Bella."

We sat like that for several minutes, breathing in each other's scents, feeling each other's love until it occurred to me we weren't actually moving. I blinked a few times and looked around. I was curled up on Jasper's lap, and he was sitting on the ground at the edge of the yard, slightly rocking back and forth. I wondered how long we had been sitting there.

"How long have we been sitting here like this?" I asked as I pulled my face away from his. I peeked under his chin and could see the back of the house and the garage but I didn't see anyone else
"About a half hour," he said softly, and he kissed my forehead.

Stunned, I couldn't think of a thing to say. I didn't think I had ever cried that much in my whole life, and Jasper just let me, and he let me blubber right in his ear and yank on a handful of his hair the whole time. With his power, he could have made me stop if he wanted to, but he had just held me in his arms and let me cry all over him.

My heart swelled with love for him, and I threw my arms around his neck. "I love you so much, Jasper. It must have been awful for you feeling all that, and it must have hurt when I was pulling your hair and crying right in your ear."

His arms slid around my back, and he kissed the side of my neck. "You needed it. I'll do whatever I can to give you what you need, Bella."

"I love you." I released my hold around his neck and leaned back to look into his beautiful eyes. "I love you." I kissed his lips. "I love you so much."

"I love you, Bella."

His eyes studied mine, and I knew he loved me. I sighed, leaned into his broad chest and just breathed in his calming, soothing, and wonderful scent.

"Jasper, maybe it's a good thing that vampires don't remember a lot of their human lives. A lot of the things I remember are so sad. Like remembering Charlie and that he's going to be alone now."

"What else do you remember?" His hands glided over my back, massaging and kneading the muscles as they traveled down. "What good things?"

"I remember he liked to watch sports all the time — he loved the Sea Hawks and the Mariners. He liked medium rare steaks, and his 'Vitamin R' beer, and Harry Clearwater's fish fry and his wife Sue's potato salad. He'd say, 'Sue Clearwater's potato salad is the best in the whole state,'" I said, trying to mimic Charlie's gruff voice. "Though he liked my lasagna. I'd have to say he would eat anything I made. Then he would kinda grunt and that would mean he liked it." I sniffed again, sighed sadly, and rubbed my face against Jasper's chest. "When Harry died, he was at the Reservation a lot helping Sue."

"Jasper's fingers moved lightly over my cheek. "Don't you think Sue Clearwater and Billy Black will remember him?"

Sitting up straight, I smiled at Jasper's beautiful face. "Yes. I think they will remember him and help him. Lots of people at La Push will want to help him because he's always been ready to help them."

"Then he really isn't completely alone." He smoothed my hair back from my face and gave me a little smile. "He'll be okay, Bella. He has people with him."

Since I thought I was all cried out, at least for the time being, I sighed. "I think maybe you're right. He does have people with him. Like I have you." I kissed his cheek and started to climb out of his lap. "What time is it? Weren't we supposed to look at the truck? And I think I really need a bath."

In one sinuous move, Jasper rose from the ground, holding my hand and smiling at me. "It's about three o'clock, and we can go look at the truck. But I think we should smell that sample the wolves brought us before you take a bath."
I pulled at his hand, heading for the garage. "Why can't I have a bath first? I must look awful."

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. "You're always beautiful to me." He kissed my knuckles again. "If you recognize that scent, you could get upset, and that would end up ruining another set of clothes and your bath." He raised his eyebrows at me.

Snorting at him, I shook his arm. "You may be right about that, too, smart ass."

"That I am." Jasper grinned and pointed toward the house. "Here comes Emmett now."

Emmett must have seen us smiling at each other because his own grin just about split his face as he ran up to us. "Doin' okay, Bells?"

"Yeah, I'm doing okay." I smiled up at Jasper again.

"Got the sample of that scent with ya, Em?" Jasper asked him. "We should probably smell it before we go look at the truck. I don't need my Darlin' tearin' it up."

"Hey!" I shoved him away from me and stepped closer to Emmett. Jeez, he was huge.

Emmett cocked an eyebrow at me as he reached into the back pocket of his jeans. "C'mon, Bells. You know he's right. You get a little upset and you bite people, and rip up trees, and destroy doors, and shit. We don't have time to go buy another truck. This one's perfect, even if I do say so myself 'cause nobody else has even peeked at it." He wrinkled his nose at Jasper then waved the Ziploc bag in front of him. "Rose and I smelled it and didn't recognize the guy."

I suddenly became a little nervous, and my thoughts started to race around in my head. What if it was the vampire that bit me, and I did recognize the smell? How would I react? Would I scream or cry or run off into the woods? Would I jump through the wall of the garage and pulverize the truck like I did the sliding glass door on the patio?

Oh gosh, my hands had begun to shake. What if Jasper knew who he was? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing? What would he do? Well, I thought he would probably kill him. Could I stand it if Jasper left to go look for him?

What if Jasper didn't know who it was? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing? I had no fucking idea, but the vamp had been running all over Forks. Would Jasper go after him?

My hands went to the sides of my face. I was staring at the leaves in the little clear plastic bag as Jasper took it from Emmett. Would I smell it and be terrified? What if it was the vamp that bit me? Had he been running all over Forks looking for me? I mean, he'd been to my house and the high school, and he'd even been by the police station. What if he was looking for me? What did he want? He hadn't been near Esme's house. Was he staying away because there were so many vampires' scents around? What the fuck did he want?

"Bella."

At the sound of his voice, my eyes snapped to Jasper's, and my hands, that had somehow gripped handfuls of my hair without my even noticing, dropped from my head and grabbed the hem of my shirt. "Huh?"

He reached toward me with his left hand and cupped my jaw, his thumb brushing over my cheek. I could feel him trying to calm me down and encourage me. "It'll be all right, Darlin'. I'll smell it then you can smell it, okay?"
I nodded my head at him with swift, jerky motions, and then my hands, all by themselves, tore
through the hem of my shirt. "Oh, shit. I just ripped my damn shirt."

Luckily, Emmett kept his mouth shut, but he was grinning at me again.

"It's okay. We were goin' to have to throw that one away anyhow. All that blood would never come
out." He drew his fingers along my jaw to my chin. He gave me a little smile and another dose of
encouragement then he opened the bag. As he sniffed it, his eyes were cautiously watching me.
"There's wolf scent on and inside the bag."

The expression on his face didn't change at all as he sampled it again and then held the bag toward
me. I was almost afraid to smell it because the wolf scent would be there, too, but he warned me so I
was prepared. I leaned forward and took a little sniff at the bag. I sniffed it again, taking in a deeper
breath, trying to make sure I got it all. I could smell Carlisle and Edward on the plastic bag, along
with Emmett and a trace of Esme. There was some of the wolf smell, too. I thought it was Sam Uley.
That made me shudder and tense up a little, but it was no big deal.

This time.

Like Jasper had said, since I had smelled them already I would remember. And he did warn me.

The leaves that were in the bag were shiny, dark green ovals, but I didn't know what kind they were.
They had an almost mint-like aroma. There was a bit of the wolfy smell inside, too. Then I identified
the other scent.

I straightened and looked up at Jasper and Emmett.

"Oregano."

Emmett stared blankly at me. "What?"

"It smells like oregano. You know, it's an herb you put in tomato sauce to make spaghetti sauce?
Oregano." I had to think for a minute. Crossing my arms, I tapped my chin with my finger. "I smell
oregano and something else — some other kind of herb I think. I don't know. I don't recognize it as
being a vampire."

Jasper hadn't moved, and he still had that same cautious look on his face. "Did you recognize it,
Jasper?"

"No, I didn't, Darlin'."

I was relieved, but Emmett huffed, crossed his arms, and stared at me, a frown on his face. I thought
he might have been disappointed? Frustrated?

"What?" I asked, flinging my arms out.

"That was so totally anticlimactic. I thought for sure after you smelled the wolf stink and the vampire
you'd be spinnin' around here like the Tasmanian Devil or somethin', tearin' shit up."

God! He was such a jerk sometimes.

I rolled my eyes at him and propped my hands on my hips. "Jasper told me the wolf smell would be
on the bag, so I was ready. I was a little nervous that I might recognize the vampire scent, but I
didn't. Or, I don't. Whatever." I huffed back at him then reached for Jasper's hand.
He shoved the Ziploc in his back pocket, grasped my hand, and a smile formed on his lips. I felt pride and love coming from him. It filled me up from my toes to the top of my head, and I squeezed his hand, sending my love back to him.

"C'mon. Aren't we going to look at the truck?" I tugged at Jasper's hand and pulled him toward the garage. "I probably won't Hulk-smash it now."
Chapter 38, I Ride

Jasper's POV

"Okay, why is she chasing him this time?" Rosalie stood next to me, one hip jutting out, and her arms crossed over a fresh, pale green plaid button down. It was a nice color on her. The sleeves were rolled up above her elbows, and even with my vampiric eyesight, I could hardly see Bella's latest bite mark on her arm.

"Emmett said she stunk."

She turned toward me, frowning slightly. "So what happened?"

I gestured toward the Adirondack chairs on the patio, and at Rosalie's nod, we headed toward them. I turned two of them to face the yard and dropped onto one. Rosalie settled onto the chair on my left. Bella might be chasing Emmett for a while, so we might as well sit back and watch the show.

Sighing, I adjusted the chairback into a more upright position and crossed my legs, propping my ankle on my knee. "After I opened the door, she was looking around the back seat of the truck. Emmett leaned over her, took a big, loud sniff and said, 'Ya know, Bells, ya stink.' She was quiet for a second then she growled. He laughed and ran out of the garage. She was right behind him. I yelled at 'em not to leave the yard."

It was Rosalie's turn to sigh. "I think Emmett likes it when she chases him, though he won't like it much if she catches him." She drummed her nails on the arm of the chair. "Jazz, he's been so happy and excited. Except when you were acting like a mother fucking bastard out in the forest."
"I was being a bastard. I went a little further than I initially intended …"

"A little?"

I closed my eyes and pushed down the guilt that sizzled hotly in my chest. Thank God, I hadn't hurt Bella. Her love was the only thing that stopped me from losing complete control of myself. She had forgiven me for being a total dick, and some good had come out of it.

She was a newborn, and though they were typically angry and had short fuses, Bella was still harboring the anger she felt at all of us for leaving her and the resentment she felt toward Edward for trying to control every facet of her human life. All of that heaped on top of the fact that she remembered so much of her human life, and had the newborn control issues — it all made for a very volatile Bella.

But we had gotten through it without damaging each other, and I thought we had a better understanding of each other. She needed to try harder to listen to me. I had to make her listen when it was required, and I couldn't coddle her.

We both understood that we needed each other.

Turning to face Rosalie, I gave her a steady look. "She's still pissed at all of us for leaving her, and she can't control it. She needs to be controlled since she can't do it herself. She nearly exposed herself to the wolves, and that's partially my fault because instead of knocking her out when I should have, I tried to let her handle it herself. She can't yet."

The sheet of plastic covering the missing patio door crackled as Carlisle moved it aside. "Mind if I join you?"

"Please." I turned to give Carlisle a nod as he made his way across the patio to retrieve another chair, placing it on my right.

He chuckled as he sat down and rested his hands on the wide arms. "Bella and Emmett certainly seem to enjoy each other's company."

Across the yard, Emmett had circled around and jumped thirty feet up into a tree. He turned on the thick branch and watched Bella come to a skidding halt below him. She was shaking her fists at him and hissing. He was grinning at her. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I was sure there were a few "dammit Emmets" thrown in. She crouched and then sprang up, catching hold of the limb Emmett had just vacated. He jumped to another tree at the edge of the yard. Bella scrambled up to stand on the branch and they were off again, bounding from limb to limb around the perimeter of the yard.

"Yeah, Emmett's having fun." Rosalie crossed her arms over her chest and said, grumbling. "But you didn't have to be such a prick about it, Jasper."

"Yes, I did."

"Your teeth at her throat was a bit much."

Obviously, she wasn't aware of what I had nearly done to Bella. I was grateful for that small mercy. "Rosalie …"

Carlisle held his hands up to get our attention. "Please excuse me, Jasper. Rosalie, you must recall that we had to restrain Emmett on several occasions after he woke up, and it took all of us to do it. I expected there to be more of such incidents because he is so very physical — quite a bit more so than
the average male. I believe your presence, and the fact that you're his mate, helped to keep him in check." Carlisle paused, lowering his voice. "When Edward was a newborn, I had to restrain him quite often until we moved farther away from humans. His being able to read their thoughts, and mine, added to his confusion. I realized quickly that when we were away from humans he calmed down. Thankfully, his range didn't extend as far as it does now. It was a difficult time."

He placed his hand on my arm, and I felt his support and encouragement as he leaned forward to look more directly at Rosalie. "Jasper's method is a preferred way to control newborns without causing them excessive physical harm. I'd seen it work repeatedly when I was with the Volturi, and I might have had to resort to that with Emmett if he had not responded so well to you." Carlisle nervously cleared his throat. "The other method is quite a bit more violent. It's ripping limbs from their bodies. Usually a leg so they can't escape."

His admission to having knowledge about that surprised me. It shouldn't have. He had spent several decades with the Volturi. I suspected their preferred method was the same as mine had been — removing legs. Teeth at the throat was reserved for favorites when I had been with Maria. It hadn't been used very often.

Rosalie closed her eyes tightly and wrapped her arms around herself. "It seems so … cruel. Like torture."

I blinked slowly, studying Rosalie, sampling the emotions she was projecting. Fear and rage were the most dominant, but disgust and pity were close behind. I knew she was remembering what had led to her being changed into a vampire. "Rose," I said softly. "Newborns are so much stronger than mature vampires extreme methods to control them need to be employed. I cannot allow Bella to run wild until she is able to control herself. At the very least, it could cause problems for her and for all of us. I … I had been too lenient with her. It nearly cost us. It won't happen again."

She nodded and opened her eyes to look at me. "I do realize that, but … it upsets me to see women treated that way. When I saw you force Bella to her knees … I thought …"

"I explained to her what I was doin'. She was pissed. We worked it out."

Bella's peals of laughter rang through the trees and the yard, and it made us all smile. Somehow, Emmett had worked his special good ol' boy magic on her again, changing her angry snarls to jubilant hoots.

Her happy laughter warmed my heart, and I couldn't resist shouting at them, "One of you is going to fall and die, and I'm not cleaning it up!"

Emmett guffawed loudly as Bella whooped, and they both burst into another round of cackling laughter as they leaped into the tree tops.

Rosalie tilted her head and raised her eyebrows as she regarded me.

"Another quote from the Firefly TV show." I grinned at her. "What?" I asked as she rolled her eyes. "It was perfect."

I heard windows open upstairs. Esme and Alice were in Edward's room on the third floor, and they were leaning against the frame, watching Emmett swing from limb to limb like an ape, with Bella close behind him.

Carlisle chuckled like a proud papa at the antics of his children. "He seems to have turned her mood around."
I smiled and shook my head at both of them. They needed to expend some of that energy they both had. As long as they got it out of their systems and didn't try to get rowdy in the truck the next day.

Feeling the gentle pressure of Carlisle's hand on my arm, I shifted my eyes to his.

"I heard you mention that Bella is still quite angry about our leaving her."

I nodded at him, inviting him to continue.

"Even though we were unaware of what Edward had actually said to her, Esme and I truly regret the harm we have done to her. Do you think that is why she has been so violent?"

I gazed at him, considering his question. "That's part of it, Carlisle. But all the newborns I ever had anything to do with were fearful, and Christ knows they had plenty to be afraid of, but they were also violent, aggressive, and usually furious. Even the females. That was on top of their initial confusion. There wasn't much that worked on them except more violence and using my empathic ability on them, but they needed to learn quickly to obey me. A few responded to my orders within the first week or so without my having to continue to hurt them. It was a tone of voice they responded to. It seems to work on Bella." I sighed. "But I can't rely on that." I rubbed my hand over my face. "We all learned quickly we had to fight to survive, and we had to obey Maria. Those who let their fear take over, instead of their rage, didn't last long."

"Though Rosalie was quite angry at me when she awoke," Carlisle smiled apologetically at her, "Emmett didn't seem so much angry as confused at first. He was quite smitten with Rosalie and had a tremendous amount of energy. As I'm sure you've observed, he's quite delighted with the strength and speed." Carlisle looked out across the lawn. Bella and Emmett were climbing up a spruce, circling the trunk in a spiral pattern. "So Bella doesn't seem unusually angry to you?"

"No. I expected it. For weeks before the crash, she was very annoyed at Alice and resentful of and frustrated with Edward. She's still angry at his manipulations. She's fought against me quite a bit when I've tried to tell her what to do. We've come to an understanding about that. What I didn't expect was for her to remember so much of her human life. Leaving behind her family and friends upsets her. I also didn't expect to be her mate."

Edward, Esme, and Alice had been enjoying watching Bella and Emmett swinging through the trees, though Edward had broadcast a twinge of guilt at Carlisle's mention of his lies to us when he left Bella. At my mention of being her mate, a bolt of jealousy rushed from him. I glanced up at him and sent him a shot of my annoyance and a strong feeling of warning. He backed off. I had been enjoying not having to deal with him, and didn't think I had any patience left for him.

Bella let out a piercing shriek that sent a shiver of alarm rippling up my back. When I spotted her, she was hanging upside down, Emmett's fist around her right ankle, and she was laughing her ass off. Emmett was also hanging upside down, his legs hooked over a limb. He had her suspended about fifty feet off the ground.

Intellectually, I knew that if she broke loose, or if Emmett dropped her, she wouldn't be injured. However, seeing my beautiful mate hanging by her ankle, upside down, fifty feet up in the air … well, that does something to a man. As I started up out of the Adirondack chair, the limb broke.

I flew across the yard toward them, my heart clenching as I watched them both drop. They crashed through every branch until they finally reached the limbless part of the trunk, and Bella corrected her fall. She looked as though she was going to land on her feet, but Emmett's bulk was directly above her.
She hit the ground, squatting down to absorb the force of the impact, but Emmett landed right on top of her, driving them both into the ground.

I grabbed and flung away the limbs that fell on top of them, and when I reached Emmett, I slung his sorry ass almost to the garage. I seized hold of Bella's shoulders, yanked her up out of the ground and crushed her to my chest. She sucked in a huge breath and then was practically squealing with laughter.

He must have knocked the wind out of her when he landed on her, but she seemed fine.

She threw her arms around my shoulders. "Jasper! Did you see that? We fell, but we didn't die!"

"Jesus H. Christ," I said, gasping into her hair. I was so fucking relieved.

Behind me, I heard Carlisle's calm voice, with a touch of humor, say, "Perhaps it's time for the kids to come in."

-oOoOo-

I was sprawled across my couch, my left leg propped on the arm and the other hanging off the edge of the cushion, listening to Bella in her bathroom. Every once in a while she would sing softly along with the songs on Rosalie's iPod. Experiencing her contentedness and hearing her voice was nearly as soothing as feeling her touch. I was amused when she began to sing along with Jefferson Starship's *Miracles* and choked on the line, "I had a taste of the real world … when I went down on you, girl."

Fantasizing about tasting every inch of my beautiful mate sent a shiver of sensuous pleasure through me, though I was careful to keep a lock on those feelings. Keeping to my own internal promise to wait until we were away from Forks was challenging but it was the more prudent choice. I didn't want any interruptions when I finally had my Bella in my arms — when I finally claimed my mate and made her completely mine.

I let out a long, slow breath, trying to calm myself.

That was one advantage to having the Captain with us. If Emmett decided to try and play big, obnoxious, pain in the ass brother again while I was otherwise occupied, Peter would jerk a knot in that ass.

Okay, that was *one* advantage to having Peter around Bella. I was having a hard time trying to come up with another.

Finally! Another advantage was, if needed, he'd be able to help me surround her if she got too worked up. He, and Charlotte, knew how to quickly subdue a newborn. Though I didn't think I'd like it much if he threw her to the ground and jumped on top of her.

*Moving away from* those *thoughts* …

I had certainly planted the seed in Bella's mind that when we reached our new home I wouldn't be deterred by any more disruptions. I wanted her, and I wanted to claim her … properly. As difficult as it was, I would wait for her, but I might be chewing through acres of timber by then.

I knew she wanted me, but she had been gradually becoming more nervous when that topic arose. Luckily, I knew several ways to ease that nervousness that didn't involve my influencing her emotions.
Bella had taken a long shower before filling the tub. Her loud exclamations of "ew" and "gross" told me she wasn’t happy about all the blood and mud that must have been swirling down the drain. Maybe the next time she was all bloody after a hunt, I'd have the honor and privilege of washing it off her.

*I could hardly fuckin' wait.*

I'd had a shower in Rosalie's bathroom after I'd gathered Bella's destroyed clothes and threw them out. I hadn't thought Edward would be after them — it wasn't *her* blood, and *my* scent happened to be all over them.

On second thought … if Edward had the urge to smell *me*, he would be able to hang out in my study after I was gone. I hadn't felt a repeat of his *attraction*, but I hadn't been paying any attention to him either.

I'd folded two loads of clothes, using Bella's bed to stack them on. The third load was in the dryer. I'd cleaned and polished my boots and packed my clothes, the laptop, and a few books in the one duffel bag, leaving it by the bookshelves in Bella's room. I’d tossed my cowboy hat on top of it. I only had a tan one because Alice hadn't ever liked them. I had a few others at my house. *Our* house.

The newly clean duffel bag for Bella's clothes was lying on her bed next to her piles of clothes. Rosalie had bought more than I had realized. At the rate Bella was destroying them, she was going to need them.

Hopefully, the clothes I had ordered online would be delivered soon, and I hoped Peter picked them up quickly. I didn't have many left and had put on my last dark green T-shirt after my shower.

While folding clothes, I had hardly paused at all in admiration when I had come to Bella's underwear and bras. Thoughts of peeling them off her barely had a chance to even register as Rosalie flitted in and out of the bathroom attending to Bella.

I had been pleasantly surprised to see Bella's royal blue Calvin and Hobbes shirt in the pile of clean clothes. She had torn the sleeves off, but someone had trimmed the torn edges and hemmed them. Perhaps Rosalie — her scent was all over the T-shirt. I wondered if Bella would mind wearing a sleeveless T-shirt? I'd never seen her wear one.

Since she was *still* in the tub, I was *still* lounging across the couch in my study, waiting for the third load of clothes to finish drying so I could fold them. I was thinking over ways to help Bella practice touching things gently. There were quite a few towels. It would be good practice for Bella to fold them, I thought.

Hearing the dryer chime, I started out of my study and met Esme in the hall with the full clothes basket. "Esme, you didn't have to do that. I was on my way down to get them."

"It's no trouble at all." Esme smiled as she turned into Bella's room and sat the basket on the bed. "I don't mind."

Through the bathroom door, we heard Bella calling to Rosalie. "Rose! I'm finished!"

Esme darted to the door and knocked lightly. "Bella? Rosalie is in her room, but I can help you if you'd like."

"Sure, Esme. Even though I don't get pruny anymore, I think I've soaked long enough."

Esme smiled at the closed door. "I'll be right in." She turned toward me and pointed toward the
doorless doorway. "Scoot. Bella would probably like to pick out her own clothes, and since I haven’t replaced the door to her room yet …"

*Scoot?*

I blinked at her. "I wanted Bella to try to fold the towels and …"

Esme pointed more emphatically at the doorway while she placed her other hand on her hip. She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, ma’am." I knew when I was being given an order. I tipped an imaginary hat toward her and scooted out of Bella's room, vowing to resist peeking at my lovely mate dressed in only a towel when she came out of the bathroom, but only because I didn't want to suffer the wrath of Esme. It wouldn't be soon enough, but I would have my mate in *my* room and there would be less Cullens around.

*Soon, I promised myself.*

-oOoOo-

Bella and I had been in my study for several hours. She was stretched out across the couch, her feet propped up on the arm. She had decided to wear the sleeveless Calvin and Hobbes shirt and her navy blue Converse. I liked blue on her. Well, I liked any color on her.

I was sitting on the floor in front of the center of the couch, my head resting on the cushion by her hip. I was very nearly in Heaven as Bella's fingers ran lightly across my forehead and through my hair. I couldn’t remember anyone ever doing anything quite like that before and it was wonderful.

Her embarrassment had been nearly non-existent when Esme had placed her underwear in the duffel. I had wondered how embarrassed she would have been if I'd done it? Or if she knew I was the one who had folded them?

After packing her clothes and the IDs I had gotten for her, I had steered her into my study, offering to brush her hair until it dried. I thought it would be a good idea to get out of the room with the bed in it, though I did have a lovely memory involving the floor in my study.

Attempting to keep myself calm, I had forced my mind away from *those* thoughts as Bella sat quietly on the couch. I brushed through her shining hair, enjoying her relaxed calm and surrounded by her scent. When her hair was dry, I had moved to sit on the floor and she flopped back onto the couch. It didn’t take her long to start running her fingers through my hair.

Rosalie had checked in soon after sunset, saying she and Emmett were going hunting and would be back about dawn. I suspected hunting wasn't the only thing on their minds. Diverting my mind from their activities, and shoving away that little twinge of envy, I made a mental sweep of the house.

Esme had retired to her office soon after helping Bella get dressed. She was going over her lists and plans for repairs to the house, humming softly to herself. After a while, she had called to Carlisle in his study to discuss materials. Alice was in her room, surprisingly quiet, and I could sense Edward up in his. Bella's memorial was only a few hours away, and I could feel Edward's growing dread. At least he hadn't run off, as much as he had wanted to. Fear of being on his own when he knew the Volturi would eventually send someone to check on Bella's status had been a great motivator for his compliance to attend Bella's memorial and his graduation. That, and we all knew the kings' best tracker, Demetri, had been close enough to both Edward and Alice to get a "taste" of their mental signatures. He would be able to find them anywhere. It was a closely guarded secret what his actual
range might be, but it had to be close — within ten or twenty yards. It might even have been closer. It was said that once he had met you, he would be able to find you anywhere on the globe. No matter where you might try to hide. I thought it was a damn good thing he hadn't been able to get a read on Bella because of her shield, and that Rosalie, Emmett, and I had never met him.

Unexpectedly, Bella said softly, "I didn't mean to rip the towels."

Dragging my thoughts away from the Volturi, I smiled at Bella. "You only tore two of the six. That's pretty good, Darlin'." I inhaled her spicy scent and smiled. "You got in a hurry, and that's when you ripped them. We'll take them with us. Can always use more rags."

"For cleaning?"

"That, or for mechanic work or whatever."

"Mechanic?" Her curiosity drifted lightly through her serenity.

"We'll have to do our own oil changes and mechanical repairs, though Rose doesn't mind doing it. Hell, she likes it. It's sunny where we're going most of the time so we won't be driving by any of those quick-lube places. There are a couple ATVs, too. They've been sitting for a while. They'll need to be worked on."

"ATVs?"

"They're like motorcycles only they have four wheels." I smiled again. With her strength, she wouldn't be able to drive one for a while yet; she'd crush the handlebars, but she would like riding them. Having her sitting right behind me, her arms around my waist and her thighs gripping mine, would be a bonus.

It would be best to steer my thoughts away from that.

"I think I've seen those." She tugged lightly at my hair and was silent again, her curiosity floating around her sense of peace.

"It's so nice sitting here with you like this. Very peaceful," she said a half hour later.

"It is nice. It's what I hope the ride in the truck will be like."

"Do you have a plan for that? What if I smell a human? What if a human gets really close to the truck when we stop for gas? Maybe I should hold my breath the whole time. How long will it take to get there? How many times will we have to get gas?" Anxiety slipped in through the tranquility with her rapid-fire questions.

I reached up and squeezed her hand to reassure her. "It'll be okay. Don't get excited. It'll take eighteen to twenty hours to get there. We'll be sittin' in the back seat, Darlin', and you'll have to listen to me and not block me. I'll keep you calm with my own vampy voodoo." She nudged my head when I used her words for vampire gifts. "When we go through towns and before we stop for gas, you can hold your breath, and we'll pretend to be asleep in case any humans happen to get close and look in. We'll have to take a couple pillows and a blanket to make it look good."

She sighed as her unease melted away and she turned on the couch, a single finger tracing over my head. "Emmett's idea about using a toolbox as a trunk to hold our stuff is a good one, but did he have to buy the biggest, shiniest diamond plate one he could find?"

I had to chuckle at that. One of the black plastic toolboxes for the truck bed would have been fine,
but Emmett hadn't thought so. He had gone all out. Well, nobody would be breaking into it. "You know Em — go big or go home. What did you think of the truck? I didn't get to ask you since you decided to try and kick his ass again."

"If he wasn't always being a jerk," she grumbled, "I wouldn't want to kick his ass." She sighed again, but with humor that time. "The truck was very … black and shiny. Even the windows. But it doesn't have personality like my truck did. Sometimes I miss that truck."

With my peripheral vision I saw her prop her head on her right hand and she started playing with my hair with her left. "Ya know, I have some money. I have a bank account, and I have some cash in a sock under the mattress in my old room."

She was thinking about little things that would be left behind. Maybe to distract herself from the big things. "Your father will take care of your bank account. We can't do anything with that. He may have looked at it already. The money in your room — we can't take a chance on goin' there to get it, Darlin'. I expect the wolves will be patrolling around the house for the foreseeable future, and none of us have a reason to go there. The wolves will probably patrol until they catch that vampire or until they don't smell him for a long time." I reached up to take hold of her hand and kissed her palm. I couldn't resist touching her, though I had tried to rein it in. That, and my own impatience to leave Forks. The closer we came to the time to get on the road, the more eager and excited I became. It was like a constant thrum in the pit of my belly. I had to maintain a tight hold on it so I wouldn't affect Bella.

Quickly shifting mental gears, I thought about the scent of the strange vampire. Bella hadn't recognized it. No one had. Had he been looking for her? There was really no way to tell. He had been places where both Bella and Edward had been. I should have tracked him myself, but I hadn't wanted to leave Bella to do it. No telling what kind of trouble she'd get into if I wasn't with her. Was the vampire only curious about a human that had vampire scent all around her? Or had he been watching the vampires that were hanging around the human? I wasn't going to worry about it at the moment. Bella was no longer human, didn't smell like her human self, and she would be leaving Forks in a few hours. Edward would be the one left behind. Could the vampire have been watching Edward? Why hadn't he trailed Edward's scent to the house? Well, if I didn't have my empathic power, I wouldn't just walk up to such a large group of vampires without studying them for a while. Even with my gift, I'd still give them a once over before charging in.

"I guess so," Bella said dejectedly, returning to the topic of money. "But I feel bad. Rosalie bought me all those clothes. I had no idea she had picked up so many. I never saw how many there were until they were all out on the bed. She's been bringing clothes into the bathroom for me."

I brought her hand to my cheek. "Please don't worry about money, Darlin'. You're my mate, and I'll take care of you."

"But, Jasper …"

"Bella." I turned to look in her worried eyes. "I don't think you'll have to worry about money again. I had my own money before I joined Alice or the Cullens. With Alice's help, that's grown quite a bit. She's helped all of us with that with her visions, and we've all learned a few things over the years. Even if the bottom fell completely out of the world's economy, we're vampires. We don't really need houses, cars, and electricity. They're just nice things to have."

She smiled faintly at me. "You're right about that. But I feel bad that I'm tearing stuff up, and I'm not contributing in any way."

I shifted to my knees and grasped her beautiful face between my hands. "Every moment that you
exist, you fill me with love, Bella. My life is better simply because you're in it. It is so much better because you love me."

"Oh, Jasper." She sat up in a blur and threw her arms around my neck. "I do love you." Her love danced and swirled around me, embracing me as tightly as her arms.

I straightened and held her close, letting my love drift over her. When she took a deep breath, her nose buried in my hair, I knew she had dismissed her short-lived melancholy mood. "While you're a newborn, there isn't really much you can do. But if you want, you can go to school later. Or you could take up some kind of hobby. Charlotte makes stuff and sells it online. You could do almost anything you want, Bella."

She sighed again. "I just have to be patient. I guess I graduated from high school. Technically. I'd like to have that diploma. I don't care about the ceremony. But maybe I'd like to go to school again. I don't know what I'd like to do. When I was a kid, I thought I might be a librarian. Or maybe a teacher like Renee. Everybody needs to have some kind of job. But now I don't know what I'd do, since I don't have to worry about making a living." She pulled back and smiled at me.

"No, you don't." I smiled back at her.

"But maybe I'd like to do something. I just don't know what." She frowned slightly. "What does Charlotte make?"

"Earrings and shit. Otherwise, I don't know."

"Wow. I bet they're beautiful." She frowned again and looked over toward the door. "You know, Jasper, I should go speak to Alice and say goodbye to her. I am sorry for scratching her so badly."

Fortunately, keeping up with her rapid change of topics wasn't too hard. Or maybe I was getting used to it. "If you want to, Darlin'. I'll wait right here for you."

"Yeah. I guess you probably shouldn't go with me. I might end up biting her." She tilted her head down and blinked up at me, embarrassed.

"You'll be fine, Darlin'." I kissed her forehead. "I'll be right here."

-oOoOo- 

At last, after tossing our bags in that glittering diamond plate toolbox in the bed of the truck, and many hugs from Esme and Carlisle, I pulled a sad Bella away from them to receive my own hugs from Esme. I gave her a kiss on the cheek, shook Carlisle's hand and gave a little nod to Alice who, dressed in a dark charcoal grey, high-necked jacket, was watching us from her bedroom window.

When Bella had gone to speak to her, they had been speaking very quietly, and I couldn't hear what they talked about, but their emotions had shifted from anxious and unsure, to a timid happiness, to a bright hopefulness. It made me hopeful to think that they would one day be friends again, though I was positive Alice would have to find another victim for her makeovers and pajama parties.

Edward, also dressed in dark funeral attire, had been standing beside Alice at her window. I ignored him. He was oozing reluctance and despair. I was sure his misery was due to having to leave shortly for Bella's memorial.

Emmett had pulled the truck out into the driveway so it would be easier to pack. It was as far from the house as he could get it so when Carlisle, Esme, Edward, and Alice left in Carlisle's Mercedes, they would have plenty of room to get around us.
Like Bella had said, it was very black and shiny, except for the grey rocker panels. The windows were so dark, I didn't think that was legal in any state, but I liked it. It was a 2000 GMC Sierra extended cab. It had four doors — the rear doors opening backwards — and it had four-wheel drive. It was what I had asked for. I could have done without the chrome brush bar on the front and the chrome wheels, but when you were in a hurry to buy an older vehicle, you took what you could get. I really couldn't complain. Emmett had found a near perfect truck, and when Rosalie had determined that it was mechanically sound, I was very pleased. I even liked the grey interior. It would only be getting fifteen to eighteen miles per gallon which meant we would have to stop four or five times for gas during our one thousand mile trip, but we would get through it. I'd already told Bella what my plan was to make our trip as uneventful as possible. She understood that with her strength, if she got upset about something, she'd be able to rip through the steel of the body like it was tissue paper; so she knew that I would be using my gift on her and keeping her calm. I sincerely hoped there would be no surprises.

I climbed into the back seat of the truck. There wasn't a lot of room for me, especially since Emmett had pushed the driver's seat all the way back, but I would be sitting sideways along the bench seat. After I adjusted the pillows against the door behind the driver's seat, Emmett lifted Bella up and sat her on the seat so she wouldn't grab any handles and break them off. She drew up her legs and sat Indian-style with her hands clasped together in her lap. Emmett gave her a big grin, a thumbs up, and shut the door.

She sat quietly as Esme and Carlisle said goodbye to Rosalie and Emmett then went quickly into the garage. Edward and Alice exited the back of the house and entered the garage from the side door so that Bella wouldn't get a direct look at them. That seemed a little excessive to me, but Bella had suggested it just to make sure. I thought she also didn't want to see them dressed in clothes meant for her funeral.

"Darlin', c'mere." I raised my right hand to her, brushing my fingers over her arm. I liked that sleeveless shirt. I was able to touch more of her skin.

She blinked forlornly and leaned into me, resting her head on my chest. "I'm sorry you don't fit real well in the back seat."

I gathered her hair and laid it along her back. "It's okay, Bella. It's not like I'll be uncomfortable, and we won't be in the truck forever."

"I know. You just look kinda cramped." She snuggled against me. "How long are we waiting after Esme and Carlisle leave?"

"About ten minutes, to let them get far enough away. Then we'll go." I gave her a squeeze and kissed the top of her head. Being a vampire, she would have to get used to moving and leaving things behind. I knew she was sad and trying not to think about what today was to people in Forks. What it was to her.

Me? I could feel Bella's grief and held her close to comfort her. I knew she was trying not to dwell on leaving her family, friends, and her home. But I couldn't help feeling elated. I had found my mate in Forks, and I was ready to leave so that I could have her to myself. I would soon have my mate in a house that didn't belong to someone else. It would be our first home together. The house itself really didn't matter. I hadn't ever actually lived in it, though I had passed through a few times.

Anywhere that Bella was would be my home. She was my home. I had to admit, that being in Esme and Carlisle's house, with my ex-wife and Bella's ex-boyfriend had left me feeling a subtle tension that I had been unaware of. The closer we got to actually leaving, the lighter I felt.
Carlisle's Mercedes pulled slowly away and Bella sighed. Rosalie dropped a few more bags in the toolbox, shut the two lids securely, and made her way to the front of the truck.

"Em, pull the latch so I can look at the engine one more time."

Exactly ten minutes after Carlisle had pulled out of the garage, Rosalie shut the hood of the truck, wiped her hands on a piece of towel Bella had ripped, and tossed it in the bed of the truck. She climbed into the passenger seat and pulled down the visor to look at herself while she fluffed her hair, then she attached her seatbelt.

She turned to Emmett. "Put your seatbelt on, honey. We don't need the police pulling us over for that."

Emmett groaned and connected his seatbelt. "Can we go now?" he whined.

Rosalie smiled brightly at him and flipped up the visor. "Yes, dear."

"Oh, thank God! I thought we'd never get outta here."

She held her breath when I told her to as we passed Port Angeles and had to slow down due to traffic. When we left the one-oh-one to get on the one-oh-four almost to Seattle, Bella sat up, bracing her hands against my chest and was watching out the window. I continued to stroke her hair and send her feelings of comfort and placidity to help keep her calm.

Emmett cleared his throat, and I glanced up at him. Even in the rearview mirror I could clearly see the sparkle of mischief in his eyes. My guess was he had been quiet too long and couldn't stand it anymore. I braced myself for whatever he was going to do.

"So, Belly-boo," he said smiling. "You gonna tell us why you licked your fingers when you first woke up?"

To be honest, I had wondered about that myself. After the initial arousal, of course.

Rosalie set her magazine in her lap and turned to look at Bella, curiosity showing in her eyes.

Embarrassed, Bella groaned and slapped her hand over her eyes.

"Tell us quick before you have to hold your breath again."

She looked down and began picking at her fingers. "I was hoping you'd forget about that," she mumbled.

"Bells, we don't really forget anything. Now 'fess up. I've been dyin' to ask ya." Emmett grinned even wider.
Bella glanced up at me and back to her fingers. "Don't you have to call Alice with the address?"

Before I could answer her, Emmett barked out, "Don't try changin' the subject. Just tell us."

She sighed and thumped her hands on her thigh. "Okay. Well, I kinda thought maybe I was turning into a vampire. I remembered that someone had told me about burning pain, and I felt like I was on fire, of course." Her hands raised and began jerking through the air. "Well, when my heart stopped, and it didn't seem like I was dead since I was thinking, I thought maybe I was a vampire. Then I was confused because I didn't remember if I was bitten. But then I realized I could smell everything. Then I was hearing everything. Like even cars out on the highway. When I was at the house before, I couldn't hear them." She thumped her thigh a couple more times. "I think I even heard the walls creaking. Well, anyway, some of the scents seemed familiar to me, right? Familiar, but somehow stronger. Then Alice made a noise, only I didn't know it was Alice. As soon as she made that noise, and it sounded so loud, it's like I knew which scent was hers, and I was pissed off."

Bella's eyes flicked to mine, to Emmett's in the rearview mirror, then back to her hands on her thigh. "Well, then I sat up, saw Alice, then saw Edward, and I identified their scents, and I was pissed off again. Then Jasper tried to calm me down, and I felt it. I was a little annoyed. Then I smelled him, and I recognized him. I mean, I recognized him as Jasper, and I knew he had stayed with me." She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. "Um, then I saw all the other vampires, and I didn't really see them as Alice and Edward, and everybody. I just saw you all as vampires — you all looked so different. I was surrounded. Even if I was a vampire, I knew I couldn't fight off six other ones. I had to do something to distract everyone so I could get away. I saw the windows and thought I could jump through them."

"Bells, that doesn't explain why you licked your fingers," Emmett said accusingly as he raised his eyebrows.

She huffed and covered her face, embarrassed.

I caressed her arm and shoulder. "You don't have to tell us if you don't want to, Darlin'."

"Yes, she does!" Emmett said loudly.

"Yes, I do," she said, dropping her hands from her face. "I… I wanted to scar them."

"You wanted to scare them?" Rosalie asked.

"No. Scar them." She shrugged her shoulders and her fingers went back to knotting themselves together. "I remembered that venom left scars, and I figured I was a vampire, maybe, so I licked my fingers to put venom on them. Then I noticed the males were staring at my fingers, especially Edward and Jasper, even though I didn't remember Edward was Edward quite yet." She sighed. "The males were a lot bigger than me, so if I could distract them …" She shrugged her shoulders again. "It seemed to work."

"Yeah!" Emmett laughed. "I know you had Jasper distracted!"

"Yes, it did work very well, didn't it, Emmett?" Rosalie said scathingly as she glared at him. "We all know how easily men can be distracted."

As I recalled, and I recalled Bella licking her fingers very well, both Emmett and Carlisle had been enticed enough by Bella's display to become quite uncomfortable. I hadn't seen them, but it had been obvious enough that Esme and Rosalie had become annoyed.

Bella had a brief flash of embarrassment, but frowned at the back of Emmett's head. Then her eyes
dropped to her fingers again. "Well, then Edward said, 'Bella, love,' and it was like a nuclear bomb went off in my head." Her hands started flashing back and forth in front of her. "Suddenly, I realized Alice and Edward had done something to me, but I couldn't remember what. The sound of Edward's voice just grated on my goddamn nerves, and Alice was too close to my Jasper, and he just smelled so fucking good."

Her hands had closed into fists and were shaking. Her eyes were darkening and her speech was coming faster and faster. I was becoming concerned.

"So I had to get the little female away from Jasper because he was mine, and I had to make the red-haired vamp leave me the fuck alone, so I attacked them, but I didn't jump too well or I'd have ripped the little female's goddamn head off! I jumped on the male and clawed him and shoved him away from me, but when I turned to get away from him, Jasper was there, and I touched him and instantly … like out of nowhere … I had to bite him because he was mine and …"

I caught her hands in my right as my left went to cup her face. "Bella."

She stopped talking, but she was still shaking and wasn't looking at me. I deepened my voice as I said, "Bella" more sharply.

Her black eyes flicked to mine. "What?"

"Take it easy, Darlin'. Everything is fine. They're not here."

"Right. Right. I know." She blinked a few times and her eyes began to lighten. She shook her head, closing her eyes, and sighed again. "Um, sorry. I didn't mean to get excited like that. It just sorta happened."

"I know, Darlin'. It'll be okay. We'll beat Emmett's ass later." I smiled at her.

"Oh, good." She narrowed her eyes and smiled evilly at Emmett.

"Lookie here, Bellzy-bub, you know you can't beat my ass in the truck. OW!"

Rosalie started laughing. "Bella, you're brilliant! First, you're like a MacGyver ninja, poisoning the only other weapons you have besides your teeth, then later you discover that pinching vampires works about as well as a bite!"

"Jeez, Babe," Emmett complained to Rosalie, rubbing his side. "You didn't have to pinch me so hard!"

"Sure, I did." She batteled her eyelashes at him. "Don't get Bella all excited when she's in the truck."

"I didn't know she …"

"Hey!" Bella exclaimed, staring out the window behind my head. "Look at all the smoke over there in Seattle!"

I pulled Bella into my chest, catching her arms between us, and turned slightly to look out the window. There was a hell of a lot of black smoke rolling up into the cloudy sky. We weren't close enough to make out what might be on fire.

"Damn," Emmett said in wonder. "Maybe a gas line explosion or somethin'?"

"Should I turn on the radio?" Rosalie asked. "Maybe we'll catch some news about it. That fire looks
huge. More than a few buildings, I'd say."

"No," I said. "We won't be getting close enough to be affected by traffic. It looks to be on the north side. We probably won't even smell it when we get over to I-90."

"Would we be able to smell it?" Bella asked.

"If the wind was blowing right, we would." I kissed Bella's cheek. "Doin' okay?" I knew she had calmed down, but it was better to ask, and it gave me an excuse to kiss her again.

She nodded and smiled at me. "Remember, we have to kick Emmett's ass later." Then her eyes grew wide. "Holy shit! Look! Something just exploded over there!"

Of course I looked. "Now that looks like a gas line fire. Ball of flame in the sky, and see the column of fire?"

Bella nodded quickly, staring out the window.

"When those flames catch other stuff on fire, the flames will spread out. The column of fire is the natural gas leaking from the line. They'll have to get that gas shut off, if they haven't already."

"How do you know what those explosions and fire look like?" Bella was staring into my eyes.

"Back in my misspent youth," I said, raising an eyebrow at her. "I set a few fires to cover up vampire attacks. They weren't as big as that one, though. There weren't pipelines like that back then." I ran my hand down over her hair. "Did you know Texas is the nation's largest producer and consumer of natural gas?"

"Um, no." She blinked at me and cocked her head, puzzled and apprehensive.

"I've studied them a little. It's good information to have," I told her. "In case I ever need it."

"I see," Bella mumbled as she blinked at me again. "I guess I better never attack a little town or you'll blow it up."

"I would." If Bella were to ever run rampant in any town, attacking and killing humans, I would burn the whole place to the ground if needed to cover it up and protect her. I wouldn't care how much collateral damage there would be.

I ran my hand over her silky hair again. "Speakin’ of towns, you're goin' to have to hold your breath again, Darlin'. How 'bout we take a little nap for a while, and I give Alice a call?"

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Chapter End Notes

"One of you is going to fall and die, and I'm not cleaning it up!" Captain Malcolm Reynolds to River Tam and Kaylee Frye on the Firefly TV show "War Stories."

"I had a taste of the real world … when I went down on you, girl." Jefferson Starship, "Miracles" from the album Red Octopus.
I Meet

Chapter Notes

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I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and A Different Forest (ADF) feed a tree!

Beta services provided by HollettLA and SecretlySeverus of Project Team Beta.

A/N: Thanks to creative consultant Bonzi. For places and what not, I used Google maps and poetic license. About 5690 words. Uh, I re-wrote some of this. Chapter 40 is near 'bout ready. Um, I haven't sent chapter 41 to the betas yet — still fussing with it.

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Trouble Is by DTS Guru on FFn

A Case of You by Mrs.Monster on FFN (recently completed!)

Chapter 39, I Meet

Jasper's POV

"Dubois, Wyoming?" Emmett had asked when I'd hung up the phone after speaking with Alice just long enough to give her the address. "What the hell is in Dubois, Wyoming?"

"Nothin'. That's why I bought property there and had a house built."

The place was isolated — had to give it that. As the crow flew, the house was about nineteen miles northwest of Dubois. Driving along the road, it was about twenty-seven miles. And most of it was a hard twenty-seven miles until you got out onto Route 287. Dubois was the closest town and that was where the PO box was. Jackson was about thirty-five miles west. You had to run through the Tetons to get there.

The tree cover wasn't quite as thick as in Washington — conditions were a lot drier — but there was water nearby to draw in the animals, and the house was on property that was actually part of the Shoshone National Forest, which butted up against the Teton National Forest.

There was a road, of sorts, near the house; it had been there for years. Though that hadn't made much difference back in the '70s when I bought the land and wanted a house built up the mountain. Getting materials in had been expensive and a trial. I had been pleased the power company had run lines out in that direction to connect to. The estimate for running wires up the mountain from the road had been astronomical. Peter suggested we give the crew a week off and he would dig trenches for the lines. He must have needed something to do at the time. That had worked out well. Peter had finished in three days. Phone lines? There weren't any. But we had satellite. I hoped Peter
remembered to call and turn it on.

Peter'd had a great time overseeing it all, even though he couldn't show up at the job site most of the time because of the sunshine. Every couple of weeks he'd watch them from the trees during the day, and inspect in person after the sun went down. He had left them notes and would give the foreman a call about once a week.

That was probably why the costs of building it had mysteriously gone over budget about five thousand dollars, and it had taken an extra three months. After they had charged me an arm and a leg to deliver the materials.

Fuckers.

"Em, watch for Route 513 and make a left. Then we have about thirteen miles to go."

Bella was eagerly watching out the windows, though there wasn't much to look at — mountains, some trees, scrub land, a few creeks. There were hardly any humans at all in the area, which made it even better for us.

Even through the darkened windows, we could see very well. The sky was clear and there was a quarter moon to throw some light. There had been a few accidents and some road construction along the way that slowed down traffic, but we would make it to the house in about another hour; about one in the morning. Emmett and Rosalie had managed to shave about three hours off the projected time.

Back when the house was built, I hadn't been able to do it myself. I had been grateful Peter and Charlotte were there and were able to keep an eye on things. In fact, it had been Charlotte who had brought the property to my attention all those years ago. They had handled everything until I had to come down from Canada, sign the papers, and hand over the check.

They'd been to the house more than I had and had made a few improvements over the years. There had been an old barn they had fixed, and there was a large shed down the hill by the road they had repaired, too. Since the house was about thirty years old, it would probably need a new roof soon. I should have had a steel roof put on it.

We had been lucky that the most exciting thing that happened along our trip was the fire in Seattle. Well, Emmett upsetting Bella when he had asked about why she licked her fingers after she woke up had been almost too exciting. But after Rosalie employed her mad ninja-like pinching skills, Emmett decided — wisely — not to ask Bella any more questions.

It had even worked out that the cloud cover waited until about sunset to thin so Emmett and Rosalie didn't have to put on gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and hats.

As we had crossed through Idaho and entered Montana along I-90, Bella had begun to get a little bored. I couldn't blame her, but I was thankful we could be bored.

I had offered to brush her hair again, and she said she wanted it braided because whenever she moved she was leaning on it and tangling it.

"I can braid it."

She gaped at me. "You can braid hair?"

"I do have many talents, Darlin'." I could not stop the smirk at seeing the startled and then self-conscious look on Bella's face. Braiding hair really wasn't any different than braiding strips of leather
to make a rope, or braiding a horse's mane, and Rosalie offered one of those elastic hair bands. She
happened to have a few in her purse.

Emmett couldn't keep quiet. "Hear tell he's got those magic fingers, Bells," he said, wiggling his
fingers in the air.

When Rosalie raised her right hand and started making a pinching motion with her thumb and index
finger, Emmett shut right up. But he had accomplished his goal of embarrassing Bella.

I had thoroughly enjoyed brushing Bella's hair and combing my fingers through its silky length,
releasing more of her scent into the air. The downside was I had been unprepared for the effect
seeing her exposed neck would have on me. I was mesmerized by the wispy, dark brown curls at the
edge of her hairline and couldn't resist kissing her soft skin.

After the third lingering kiss, Bella's pleased sigh, and Rosalie's second disgustingly loud throat
clearing, I got the hint.

As we approached Missoula, Montana, traffic increased, and it had been time for the newborn to take
another nap. I had to admit I was relieved that Bella had been so cooperative. I had expected her to
put up at least a token resistance against my keeping her still and quiet, but she snuggled into my
arms, draped her leg over mine, and sighed.

Several minutes later, out of the blue, she had whispered breathily, "I know why vampires like to
bite."

Rosalie turned slightly to look over the seat at us. "Why do you think vampires like to bite?"

"It's because we don't chew our food — we drink it," she answered softly. "I remember I liked biting
into a slice of pizza or a burger. I liked those chewy granola bars, too. You had to bite them hard.
There were times I really enjoyed celery sticks and carrots."

Glancing up into the mirror, Emmett had eyed her suspiciously. "You enjoyed rabbit food?"

She tried to burrow farther into my arms. "Well, yeah. They were crunchy. You really had to chew
them." She sighed again. "Biting into those crunchy Fritos was half the fun of eating them."

I slid my hand down over her head and back. "You've got a good theory there, Darlin'." There hadn't
been any corn chips or pizza when I was human, and I couldn't specifically remember eating food,
though some foods I did remember. But since becoming a vampire, I could certainly recall enjoying
the feeling of tearing through the skin and muscle of a human's neck. It had been very satisfying, and
sometimes it had been quite erotic. Well, it had been erotic most of the time. My lips on their skin;
their hot blood flowing down my throat; my arms holding them tightly to me.

As stimulating and sensual as that had been, there hadn't been anything as seductive and arousing as
Bella in my arms and my teeth sinking into her shoulder, forcing my venom into her, and …

And I had to remind myself to move away from those thoughts. Quickly. Bella had been doing very
well on our long drive, but I hadn't been. As much as I would have preferred to have her completely
on top of me, with the way my thoughts kept wandering, I knew it was a good thing she hadn't been.
Her body in such close contact with mine was … so very pleasant.

Are we there yet?

Reinforcing the serenity I wanted her to feel, and trying to drift into it myself, I rubbed her back and
kissed her head, sending her my love as we moved farther away from Missoula along I-90.
Bella was quiet for a time and then she spoke again. "Jasper?"

"Yes, Darlin'?"

"Who are the oldest vampires you know?" Her faint breath tickled the skin of my neck.

"Personally or generally?"

"Personally."

"The Denalis are some of the oldest vampires I know personally. The three sisters, Tanya, Irina, and Kate, are all about 1000 years old. Carmen and Eleazer are both about 300 years. Then there's Carlisle, who is over 340 years old. There are a couple others who are a few decades older than me."

She shifted against my side. "You don't know any more than that?"

"Most of the vampires I ever came in contact with I killed. Others, I don't know how old they may have been."

"Oh." Her fingers slid over my chest. "What about the Volturi?"

"You're one up on me there, Darlin'. I never met any of them. But it's said the three brothers are over 3000 years old."

She drew lazy circles with her finger over my chest. She never even opened her eyes. "They're the oldest ones you know about?"

"Them, some of their guard, and the vampires known as the Romanian Coven — Stefan and Vladimír. There's also Amun of what's called the Egyptian Coven. If there are other vampires who are older, they've kept themselves well hidden or we'd have heard about them, I think."

"So it's possible there are older vampires than Aro?"

"Yes, it's certainly possible. I just haven't heard about them. Why?"

Bella had spread her fingers over the center of my chest and sighed. "I'd hate to think forever is only three or four thousand years."

_Only_ three or four thousand years? My mate's thoughts certainly ran along interesting lines. But she had a point. I didn't think four thousand years with Bella would be near enough.

We had all sat quietly, absorbed in our own thoughts about forever as we passed by Butte, Montana and took the exit to get on route 359.

-oOoOo-

When Emmett turned off the highway and onto route 513, I hugged Bella to my chest and kissed her forehead. "We're almost there, and you've done so well, Darlin'."

"The secret to a quiet road trip is keeping Emmett quiet." She poked him in the shoulder with her fist.

"Hell! The _secret_ is making the newborn take lots of naps." Emmett laughed. "This road sucks, Jazz."

"Don't worry. It gets worse. It might only be a little over thirteen miles from here, but they're some of those country miles."
Rosalie chuckled and Emmett glanced toward the heavens.

"Country miles?" Bella asked. She was starting to get nervous. She was fingering her long braid and her eyes were darting back and forth, trying to take everything in.

"Yeah, Bells. Country miles." Emmett grinned. "A mile might be a mile, but somehow those country miles seem longer." Emmett put both hands on the wheel as he steered around potholes in the asphalt.

"Oh, yeah. Like some of the roads in La Push. Some of them were like washboards. There were a few that were just mud holes." She let go of her hair and her fingers flew to her mouth so she could nibble on them.

I took hold of her hands. "Bella, it's okay. I know you're nervous."

She smiled apologetically at me. "A little. They're new vampires. I never met them before." Her eyes kept darting back and forth. "What if they don't like me? They have red eyes, right? At least my eyes will match theirs, but what if they don't like me anyway?" Once again, her speech was picking up speed. "I should have asked before … what do they look like? I'm sure they're both beautiful but … Oh, gosh. They eat people. They don't get takeout and bring it back to the house, do they? Oh, shit. Do they smell like humans after they go hunting? What if they smell like humans after they hunt?"

I let go of her hands and wrapped my arms around her, tucking her face into my neck. "Shhhhh, Darlin'. Don't worry." I slowly stroked her back. "They won't hunt anywhere near the house, and they won't bring anything back." Fortunately, there weren't any humans near the house. I pulled her onto my lap but held her head against mine. "They won't smell like humans after they hunt. They're very … neat."

"Unlike me. I get blood all over me when I hunt," she mumbled into my hair.

"You'll get better at it." Letting my love flow over her, I kissed her neck. "Don't worry about them likin' you."

"What's not to like?" Emmett asked. "You got a filthy mouth, you bite everybody, and you go from sweet little giggling girl to raging, fire-breathing demon from hell in about a nanosecond. OW! Rose, quit pinchin' me!"

Growling, Bella snorted. "Shut it, Emmett! I do not giggle, and I do not bite everybody."

I noticed she didn't deny having a filthy mouth or being a raging, fire-breathing demon from hell. Well, she hadn't bitten or clawed Carlisle, but he was the only one. I wondered how he had managed that?

"Yeah, ya missed bitin' Carlisle." Emmett flinched and pointed his finger at Rosalie. "Don't pinch!"

"Quit picking on her, Emmett. There's plenty of time for that after we get to the house and get out of the truck." Rosalie glared at him then schooled her features into a pleasant smile as she turned toward us, draping her arm over the seat back. "Bella, Peter and Charlotte are both blond. Their hair is lighter than mine and Jasper's. Peter is about Jasper's height and his hair is a little longer. Charlotte is about your height, and she's really cute. Her hair is about as long as mine."

"Oh, great!" Bella groaned against my neck. "Me and Em are gonna be surrounded by blonds!"

"That's cuz we're the special ones, Belly-babe. Us brunettes gotta stick together."
Emmett was *special*, all right. I could see he was starting to get more excited, and we didn't need that shit. There were just a few miles left to go, and I didn't want Bella getting too agitated. I touched the back of his head and sent him a little cocktail of serenity and caution. "Emmett, you calm down."

I brought my left hand back to Bella's head and held her still. "Everything will be fine, Darlin'. You don't have anything to worry about, even if there are more blonds than brunettes." I hadn't actually thought about that before. "I love your hair, and I love you." I kissed her head. "Up ahead there's a spot that Peter should have marked. Do you think you want us to open the windows so you can smell it?"

"Um, I don't know," she said worriedly. "Will you hold me down?"

I had to smile at her. "Of course I will. Emmett, where the pavement ends, there's a road that goes to the right, but just go straight on the dirt road. Slow down there and open the windows. Peter should have marked that area."

It was about a minute later the nicely sedate Emmett opened the front windows, and Bella started sniffing. Then she stiffened in my arms and took in a deep breath, her nose reaching forward to get closer to the window.

I could smell Peter's scent and was surprised at how glad I was to smell it again. I hadn't seen him in years. But I was curious about what Bella was thinking. "Darlin'?"

She closed her eyes and sighed. "How did he mark it?"

"I'm sure he spit all over everything around here," Rosalie said disdainfully.

Bella smiled. "Oh, that spitting thing again." She sniffed again. "He smells *really* good."

I wasn't *real* sure, but I didn't think I liked that.

"The air here is very dry." Bella parted her lips and took in another deep breath, tasting the air.

I was *sure* I didn't like *that*. "What does he smell like to you, Darlin'?" I asked lightly.

Perhaps there was some change in my tone of voice. Rosalie turned slowly to look over her shoulder at me, raising one eyebrow. Fortunately, Emmett couldn't spare a glance because the road was getting worse, and he had to drive more carefully.

The fool spared a moment to smirk at me in the rearview and hit a damn pothole, jarring all of us, though I didn't mind Bella bouncing on me. I scowled at him. I didn't need the suspension torn up in the new truck I hadn't even driven yet.

"He smells good." Bella sighed again. "He smells like pineapple upside-down cake in Grandma Swan's kitchen."

I blinked at her. That was … unusual. I'd always thought he smelled like pound cake. Rosalie's look of bewilderment had to mirror my own.

Emmett recovered enough to speak first. "I thought he smelled like pound cake and mint. Whatever. So he smells like pineapple upside-down cake in Grandma Swan's kitchen? Specifically *her* kitchen?"

"Mint! That's it!" Bella jerked upright, sliding off my lap and planting her hand in the middle of my stomach. "I thought there was something else. It's mint. His scent reminded me of going to Grandma
Swan's house. I really don't remember much because I was so little, and she died a long time ago, but I remember smelling and seeing a warm pineapple upside-down cake on the table when Charlie and I would go in the kitchen. There was a little round table — just big enough for four people. The tablecloth was white with a red cherry print. Renee and I never used tablecloths." She sighed sadly.

I grasped Bella's hands, bringing them to my lips. "How do you remember all that, Darlin'?" I hated to admit it, but I was relieved his scent reminded her of something so commonplace and homey. The correlation to her father and grandmother wasn't a bad thing at all. In fact, the connotations of father, grandmother, and domesticity were damn good things; infinitely better than "sexy" or "mouthwatering."

Okay, maybe I was just a little jealous, and she hadn't even met him yet. I took a deep breath, drawing in her warm, cozy, spicy, sexy scent, and I smiled at her.

"I don't know. I smelled his scent, along with the dry dirt, and some kind of pines and whatever. A picture of that cake sitting on the table popped into my head. It was kinda blurry, but I recognized it. It was after Charlie and Renee got divorced, but it's a nice memory. Only I can't remember what Grandma looked like." She frowned sadly. "I made one of those cakes for Charlie. He liked it."

I was amazed again at how much she remembered of her human life. "Don't be sad, Bella." I hugged her. "Keep that as a happy memory."

"Yeah, Bells," Emmett chimed in. "That's a good one. Sort of like comfort food for your mind, right?"

"Bella, I can remember helping my mother make a pineapple upside-down cake," Rosalie said softly. She blinked quickly and smiled. "It must have been for one of Daddy's dinner parties. I was young and couldn't cook on the stove yet, so my mother would melt the butter and brown sugar together then pour it in the cake pan. I would put the pineapple slices and the half cherries in the pan and push them around in the syrup until they fit just right. Then she would pour in the batter." Rosalie blinked rapidly again, as if she were forcing back tears. "That is a good memory, Bella."

"Awww, Rose." Bella crooned and reached for her. Rosalie took hold of her hand. "That is a nice memory to have."

It reminded me that Bella's warm scent had called up the memory of my mother's special occasion spice cake. I had not recalled it until I had been exposed to Bella's scent as a vampire. It was intriguing how scents and fragrances could trigger memories. Though Rosalie had met both Peter and Charlotte before, she had never mentioned that recollection. Perhaps it had been due to Bella bringing up that particular type of cake and the associations connected to it.

Not that I wanted to ruin their moment, but I didn't want a bunch of crying women on my hands either. "We've got about three miles to go. Just over that ridge right there is the house." I pointed to the mountain at our right. It would have been so much quicker to run, but there wasn't any place to hide the truck. We had to drive around the mountain anyway.

"Thank God," Emmett whined. "Missing these potholes ain't easy, and these doglegs and curves and shit are getting on my nerves."

"We're in the mountains, Em. Elevation about 8200 feet. One more tight curve to the right, then look for a shed on the right. It's near a telephone pole. Drive through the field. Look for an old fence post with a yellow 'Posted' sign on it. That's the driveway."

Everyone sat quietly, bouncing around as Emmett became more impatient to get there. He actually
crowed when he spotted the shed, and he started across the field, driving out and around some small pines that Charlotte must have planted. Oddly, it was smoother than the road, but not by much.

Spotting the fence post with the faded yellow sign, he stopped. "I don't see any driveway, Jazz."

"Driveway's on the right. Drive through the brush. It switches back and forth as we go up. Part of it used to be old logging trails. It's steep, but the truck will make it without four-wheel drive. We'll go through some trees, then there's a level clearing. Follow the driveway to the right."

"Damn! Drivin' in and outta here all the time would suck!"

"That's why it's a good place, even though it's sunny all the time. Humans don't want to deal with it."

Bella shivered and tried to crawl back into my lap. "We're almost there," she whispered.

"Yes, we are. Just a little farther." I could feel her apprehension and tried to keep my own anticipation from her.

"I'm a little nervous, Jasper." Her hands fluttered over my chest. "Maybe I should have taken the braid out of my hair."

"Your hair is fine, Darlin', and I know you're a little nervous." She was more than a little nervous. I called up the contentedness and peace she had felt when Esme, Rose, Bella, and I had taken our nap together in the forest in Forks and let it flow down over her.

"Thank you." She clutched my shirt in her hands and curled up more tightly in my lap. "Maybe I should have worn a different shirt. Something with sleeves. Do you think they'll like me? Do you think they know we're here?"

"I think they'll like you and the shirt, and I'm sure they know we're here. They probably heard Emmett hoot down there on the road." I tightened my hold on her. "I'll get out first and help you out, all right?"

She nodded her head. Her hands had released my shirt and were covering her face as Emmett turned the truck out of the trees and drove through the grassy clearing. I noticed someone had cut the grass.

"We're here!" Emmett sang out as he put the truck in park and turned off the headlights. He had pulled past the house into the gravel parking area just beyond and pointed the truck toward the north side of the house.

It was a regular two-story colonial type with a porch across the front that wrapped around the north side and joined the deck on the back. It was rectangular with a two-car attached garage on the south side. On the side we were facing, there was a stone chimney for the fireplace in the family room in the rear half. The right front half was what the plans had called the living room, but when it was built, instead of closing them off from each other, I had the builders leave it open to the family room. They had to add a little extra support along the center line of the house, and the workmen had complained about it, but I paid for it, so they did it. There was one window to the far right, near the corner, and light shone softly through it onto the porch. Upstairs in about the middle of the wall was another window. That was the master bedroom. It would be Bella's room. Our room. Charlotte had turned the lights on for us. In fact, it appeared as though there might be a light on in every room of the house.

Emmett threw open the driver's door, hopped out and stretched, groaning just like a human would, raising his arms straight up before dropping them and yanking his T-shirt down. After Rosalie had climbed out of the passenger side and gently shut the door, Emmett reached for the handle of the rear
"Door and opened it slowly.

"Blue and grey, Jasper?" Rosalie asked as she examined the house, settling the strap of her purse over her shoulder.

"I like grey and blue." I thought the light from the moon gave it all a soft look, even the side porch that was in shadow. I hoped Bella would like it.

I also hoped Emmett had opened the door slowly so he wouldn't startle her. She didn't need to be startled. She was hiding her face in my chest and had a tight hold on my shirt again.

I tugged the pillows from behind me and dropped them on the floorboards behind the passenger seat. "Let go of my shirt, Darlin', so I can get out of the truck." I stroked her upper arm and sent my love to drift over her, as I started to lift her off my lap. She let go of my shirt and covered her face again. At least she hadn't put any holes in my shirt. Maybe I would get to keep it for a while.

She was trembling and curled up in a ball on the seat.

"It'll be okay. There's nothing to be afraid of, Darlin'." I climbed out and extended my hands toward her.

She peeked through her fingers, then reached for me. I caught her hands and helped her out, then she grabbed me, throwing her arms around my waist, still quivering.

"It's … it's a nice house, Jasper. I like the grey siding and the blue shutters. The bay windows on the front are nice, too."

"Thank you, Darlin'. I always liked bay windows. One is the living room, the other is the dining room, but we use it as a library."

She was attached to me as tight as a barnacle. I backed away from the truck, closing the doors, and turned toward the house, holding Bella to me. I hadn't seen it in a long time, but it looked pretty good. Not only had Peter and Charlotte cut the grass, they had even trimmed around the edges.

Emmett went to stand by Rosalie, putting his arm around her shoulders. Even though I knew how excited he was, I was glad he was being quiet and waiting patiently.

We heard the front door opening, and I could see Peter stepping through with Charlotte right behind him. Typical cautious vampire behavior. He was coming out of the house first, in front of his mate, to meet the unknown vampire, even though he knew she was a female.

I was very pleased to see them both. Of course they hadn't changed at all since the last time I'd seen them.

Bella squeaked, and in a flash she was behind me, pressed up against my back with her arms clamped over my stomach. She was trembling so hard, she was vibrating. I put my hands on hers and gave them a little squeeze.

"It'll be okay, Bella. Peter and Charlotte are movin' real slow. They're almost to the porch rail on the side here. See?"

She shook her head.

I stifled my sigh. Meeting the new, human-drinking vampires was difficult for her. I had to keep in mind that the only red-eyed vampires she had ever met before had tried to kill her. They had almost
succeeded. "Can we go a little closer?"

She shook her head again.

I was unsure what to do. All vampires were wary when meeting another for the first time, but I hadn't expected Bella to be quite so anxious. I looked up at Charlotte and Peter and gave them a nod. Charlotte gave me a little smile. She was excited and eager to meet Bella, but she knew not to make any sudden moves or run up to a newborn.

Peter stood quietly, his left arm around his mate. He leaned forward and placed his right hand on the porch rail. He was studying me, like I was studying him. Or perhaps he was trying to get a look at Bella. I could sense his pleasure and his curiosity. It seemed he was eager to meet Bella, too, but his feelings were more subdued than Charlotte's. He had been with me longer and had learned to tone them down. At times, I had wondered if he had figured out how to mask them from me, substituting one for another.

Many had said that we resembled each other, though his hair was longer, and I began to wonder if Bella would find him attractive. He was built about like I was, and he was even dressed like me; blue jeans and brown boots and belt, though his T-shirt was navy blue instead of dark green. He didn't have quite as many scars as I did.

Peter nodded at me and said quietly, "Major."

When he spoke, Bella gasped and shuddered, and I felt that pressure in the air around me like I had when I had carried her into the middle of the wolf scent back in Forks. Everyone's emotions were instantly cut off from me except for Bella's. She had thrown out her shield.

Both Peter and Charlotte raised their eyebrows and small smiles began to appear, but they remained silent.

"Bella," I said firmly and she twitched. "You put your shield up?"

She nodded against my back.

"They're not going to attack you."

"I know," she whispered. "I would like to meet them, but I'm afraid."

"I know, Darlin'," I said softly. "It'll be okay. You know I'm right here."

"Um, I know." I could feel her determination building and her trembling stopped. She shuffled to the right, wrapping the fingers of her right hand around my arm at my elbow. Her left hand stayed on my left side. She sidled a bit farther, sliding her left hand across my back, as if she were holding on — afraid she might fall. Then those fingers were also wrapped around my arm.

Finally, she was beside me, but her head was bowed and pressed into my ribs. She inhaled deeply, and I knew she was struggling to control her anxiety and fear. I tried to reassure her by sending her a little courage. She swallowed noisily, looked up and gasped.

If I hadn't been looking at him, I would have missed the flicker of emotion across Peter's face. I couldn't tell what it was because of Bella's shield, but something had passed very quickly through his eyes.

Abruptly, Bella's emotions were cut off from me and when I glanced down, her eyes were wide and staring toward Peter and Charlotte. "Darlin'?" She didn't respond or even blink. Was she blocking
me or was she in shock? I spoke softly to her. "Bella, that's Charlotte and her mate, Peter."

I glanced over to them. Their posture showed that they were relaxed, but still eager. "Char, Peter, this is my mate, Bella."

Charlotte's smile spread gently. "It's a real pleasure to meet ya, Bella. I've been lookin' forward to it."

Peter's small smile grew into a wide grin, showing his even, white teeth. "Bella? She looks more like a Bubba."

I had expected that kind of shit out of him, but the asshole could have waited. And the dumb fuck knew better than to show his teeth to a nervous newborn.

Bella sucked in a breath and her hands tightened on my arm. Tightened enough that it was starting to hurt. "Bella, that's gettin' a little tight."

"Sc-sc-scars!" She let go of my arm, and her hands flew to the sides of her head.

As I turned toward her, she hit me with a blast of alarm and fear so strong it was like being punched in the head. I dropped to my knees in the gravel and fell forward, but managed to throw my hands out to catch myself. Groaning, I tried to block her strong emotions and force them back. In a blur, Bella spun 180 degrees and was sprinting away.

As I lurched to my feet, I heard Emmett say, "Well, there she goes. Don't worry about it, Char. She does that all the time. He'll catch her. Hey! Let's unpack the truck."
Chapter 40, I Greet

Jasper's POV

It only took me three minutes to catch her, but a panicked newborn can run pretty goddamn far in three minutes. She had run nearly due north, and fortunately, the terrain, and the little creeks here and there, did slow her down, but not by much. She'd gone about four miles.

She had made it to a grassy area and was starting up the next ridge when I tackled her, bringing her arms into her chest and forcing her legs up so I could roll her into ball. We rolled about fifty feet — there weren't any trees to run into that time, and I didn't dare throw out an arm or a leg to try to stop us. I was afraid she'd get loose.

We were in an area that was bare; essentially a sloping, grassy field that leveled out below us. I was glad we would have a few more hours until dawn. I wanted to be inside or at least under cover when the sun rose.

Only three minutes to catch her, but it took me two hours to calm her down enough to get her to speak in complete sentences, stop shaking, and start walking back toward the house. I'd needed that time to calm down myself. I hadn't even spoken to Peter yet, and I wanted to choke him.

"They're going to be so mad at me, Jasper! I didn't even say hi. I just blurted out 'scars' and ran like the biggest, rudest, most ignorant, chickenshit asshole in the state!"

"Bella. Bella, listen to me." I kept my hands on her, but loosened my grip as I kissed her forehead — more to calm myself than her. "You had a fairly normal reaction to them. They're not goin' to think that. Like me, they're used to vampires bein' … disconcerted by their scars."

She snorted loudly in disgust. "I was a little more than disconcerted. 'Petrified' was more like it." She groaned in frustration. "I guess I should have realized they would have scars like you, but I never
really thought about it. But you have more than they do, and your scars don't bother me. *Your* scars are … um."

She snapped her mouth shut, which, of course, made me curious about what she thought of *my* scars. I steered her in the direction of the house, keeping my arm around her as I urged her to start moving. I had neglected to tell her they were scarred from their time in the Southern Vampire Wars. I shouldn't have assumed she would know. "I should have told you they had scars like me."

"Oh!" She came to a sudden stop, her hands flying up to cover her face.

"What is it?"

"I *am* the biggest asshole in the state!" She grabbed my hand and pulled. "I'm so sorry! They're *your* friends, and you haven't even said hello to them yet because of me! We should run back."

I planted my feet firmly on the dry ground, causing her to jerk to a stop and rebound into me. "Bella, it's okay. And you're not the biggest asshole in the state. Peter is. Already, I have to beat his ass."

"Why? Because he called me Bubba? Pfffft!" She flung her hands out then grabbed mine again and tugged even harder. "That's not any worse than what Emmett calls me all the time. Bellzy-bub? Hellcat? Demon? Though I really don't mind all that because I've been kind of a bitch. And I don't mind the Bellzy-babes and Bellzy-boos. I think he even called me 'Belly-welly' one time, but that must have been when I was human. Hell, he even called me asshole. So, as far as nicknames go, Bubba isn't so bad, considering I do *look* like a Bubba with the big ol' pigtail and the sleeveless shirt and all. All I need is a straw hat and the work boots. Add a corn cob pipe and some …"

"Bella."

"What?" She stopped yanking on my arm and looked up at me.

My breath caught in my throat at her beauty. The way the moonlight fell across her face and her bare arms caused her skin to give off a pale, shimmery glow. She was so beautiful all I could do was stare at her. I had thought previously that her skin glowed faintly in the dark, but I hadn't seen her in the moonlight before. As much as I didn't want to be out in direct sun, suddenly, I wanted to see what effect full sunlight would have on my stunning mate.

As she looked up at me, her eyes grew wider. "You look … you look silvery in the moonlight, Jasper. Your hair is golden with silver highlights and …"

We had to snap out of it. As she reached up toward my face, I caught her hand, kissed her palm and trailed my lips down to her wrist, then brought it to my chest. "We should head back, Darlin'."

"Oh, okay. Why?"

*Why, indeed?*

I had to give it a moment of thought.

"We need to have you see the house so you're comfortable in it. You may not realize it, but you'll be tense unless you know where all the windows and doors are." It was my turn to tug at her hand. "You need to meet Charlotte and Peter so you get used to them, and I need to *speak* with him."

"Speak with him? Just because he called me Bubba?"

"Not just that. The dumb fuck knows better than to show his teeth at a newborn he's never met
before. Unless he wants to piss them off." I still couldn't believe he did that.

"Or make them run for the state line." Bella was staring down at the ground as we made our way through the tall grass. "I never even noticed his teeth. All I saw was scars and blond hair." She was embarrassed and began scuffing her toes through the grass.

"Whether you consciously realize it or not, Darlin', you saw his teeth. Teeth and scars mean danger. Do you remember when Emmett and Rosalie first came up to us in the woods? Emmett is always grinnin', showing all his damn teeth, but he didn't then."

"Yes. I remember that. But I really didn't recognize them right at first, then it clicked in my head." She took in a deep breath and blew it out. She peered up at me. "You're not really going to kick his ass are you?"

I sighed and looked at her from the corner of my eye. "Not yet."

"Okay. That's good." She gave me a little nod. "You haven't seen him in years and maybe you shouldn't beat on him yet. Save it for something to do tomorrow." She frowned then slapped her palm to her forehead. "Dammit! It's your house and you haven't even been in it yet! We should run."

I was starting to think that she just wanted to run again.

And off she went, her long braid bouncing across her back.

-oOoOo-

"I can do this. I can," Bella whispered, apparently trying to convince herself. We were standing in the center of the front porch in front of the door.

"Ready?" I asked her.

Her hands were clenched in tight fists at her sides, and her eyes were closed. She pulled in a deep breath. "Yes."

I reached forward and slowly opened the door, pushing it to let it swing back to the right. I stepped inside, drawing her into the small foyer with me. "The front half of the house is the living room, foyer, powder room, and library. This wall directly to our right is a powder room. Beyond that is the library." I pointed to a doorway ahead of us and a little to the right. "That doorway leads to the kitchen and laundry room. From there is a door into the garage." She nodded at me. I pointed at the stairs ahead of us and a little to the left. "These stairs turn to the right and lead up to four bedrooms." I pulled her farther into the foyer and closed the door.

We could hear quiet buzzing coming from the kitchen. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I could imagine they were talking about Bella.

"I hear them." Her hands tightened on mine. "There's a door under the stairs?" She had a death grip on my hand.

"That leads to an unfinished partial basement. The water heater and furnace are down there. They couldn't build a full basement because of the rock in this area. So it's more of a tall crawl space. Drilling a well wasn't too bad, but finding a spot for the septic tank was a pain in the ass."

"Partial? It's only under half the house?" She peered up at me. "Septic tank?"

"It's code. Houses have to have wells and septic tanks. It's not really a partial basement. It goes under
the whole house, but it's only about six feet tall. I didn't want the main floor of the house any higher off the ground."

At her puzzled look, I had to smile. "Honestly, I just didn't want more than four steps up to the front porch. That seemed like the right amount of steps to me. Apparently, the builders thought that was odd, too."

"It's your house." She gave me a timid smile and looked past me.

"To the left is a little coat closet and beyond that is the living room. It's open to the family room at the back of the house. The family room is open to the kitchen."

"It's all light beige."

"Beige is easy."

"It needs some red or something," Bella huddled up against my right side, clenching handfuls of my shirt.

"That's what I told him," Peter's deep voice said from the back of the house. He was in the kitchen.

Bella trembled for a moment, and I could feel her determination well up again as she took another deep breath. She tilted her face up to mine. "I smell him everywhere," she whispered. "Maybe Charlotte, too." Then she got a puzzled look on her face. "And pipe tobacco?"

"They've been here a couple days, Darlin'," I hugged her to me. "And Peter might even have a corn cob pipe around here if you want to try it." I grinned at her. "Do you want to look upstairs or do you want to meet them? Emmett's so excited, I think he might explode."

Emmett snorted loudly from the family room. "I'm only excited because I got my Xbox hooked up, and Rose said I couldn't play until you got back. Besides, they brought you presents, Bellzy-bub."

Peter laughed. "Bellzy-bub?"

"Yeah!" Emmett's guffaw rang out. "She's the demon devil spawn from Hell. She bites. See? Look at my leg." There was a pause as Emmett must have lifted his pant leg. "Up here on my arm, too. She even bit Rose. She tore up everybody but Carlisle. Ha! You shoulda seen what she did to Edward!" There was another pause then he continued in a loud whisper, "You hafta watch out for her elbows. I think she broke a couple of my ribs. And," he said in a sing-song voice. "If you see her lickin' her fingers, you better fuckin' run."

"Lick her fingers?" Peter asked at the same time Rosalie yelled sharply, "Emmett!"

Bella lifted her hands slowly from my shirt. She closed her eyes, struggling to control herself. She lost that battle. Her temper flared, and she was through the living room and standing in the center of the family room, trembling and glaring at Emmett. She was fast when she was pissed off, but I was right behind her ready to tackle her again.

Her fists on her hips, she was scowling at Emmett who looked completely unconcerned, lounging in the navy blue recliner. He didn't even flinch. His huge, sock-covered feet were crossed at the ankles, and his hands were clasped behind his head. He leaned his head back to look at Peter and Charlotte sitting on stools at the left side of the cooktop island in the kitchen. Rosalie sat across from them on her own stool, giving Emmett the stink eye. Between them on the island were a few Toys-R-Us bags.
Emmett grinned and winked. "See, Pete? I told ya I could get her in here."

"That you did." Peter's bright red eyes raked over me then moved to Bella's stiff form. He nodded at her. "Bella."

A tiny "eep" escaped Bella's mouth, and she backed into me. In a flash, she was behind me, her left hand on my left hip, her right fingers gripping my right arm just above my elbow. She was peeking around my arm.

"You have a kitchen. With appliances. Th-they're beige," she stammered. "Why do you even have a kitchen?"

"It came with the house." I reached over with my left hand and covered her fingers on my arm. She was afraid, but she was controlling it. There was some curiosity, too. When the fear in her whirling emotions started to gain speed, I could feel her work to rein it in. She was doing remarkably well. Though I thought if Peter or Charlotte even blinked she would probably bolt through the sliding glass door behind Emmett. On second thought, that might be too close to where Peter was in the kitchen. She'd probably crash through the window to our left at the outside corner of the room.

Her fear and anxiety skipped around her curiosity. When a spark of appreciation filtered through the mix she hissed, "He's so fucking pretty."

I stiffened at her words, my hand tightening over hers. Yeah, he was good-looking — for a guy — but did she have to say so? Did she have to say whatever popped into her head? Of course, she did. Except when I wanted her to. My eyes shifted to Peter. His only discernible reaction was the slightest twitch of his left eyebrow.

Then I looked down at Bella. Her eyes were still wide, staring at Peter and Charlotte.

I squeezed her hand on my arm. "Bella."

"Huh?" She blinked several times and cleared her throat. "Um, nice to meet you, Charlotte and Peter." She cocked her head, and her eyebrows came together. "You know, Charlotte, you look a lot like the woman who played the receptionist on that TV show *WKRP in Cincinnati*. I can't remember her name."

I felt their surprise, but their only movement was the barest lifting of the corners of their mouths. Then I guess Charlotte couldn't stand it anymore and she had to speak.

"Thank you, sugar! Her name is Loni Anderson. She's so pretty! You know she used to date Burt Reynolds. Oh, and it's real nice to meet ya, Bella." Charlotte's smile broadened. "Peter's been to the post office, and a couple boxes came for you and Jasper. They're upstairs in your room. He'll be goin' back to the post office again this evenin'." She reached for the bags on the counter. "We brought you a few things to help you practice your hand control. Would ya like to see 'em?"

Bella's hands tightened their grip. "Who knows I'm here?" she asked worriedly. She pressed more firmly up against my back. "How could somebody send something? You just told Alice the address yesterday."

I pushed aside my twinge of jealousy. "It's all right, Darlin'. I ordered us some clothes, and the boxes should be addressed to me." I squeezed her hand to reassure her. "You're doin' really well, but do you want me to help you?"

"Uh, no. I'm good." Her fear alleviated, her curiosity surged. "What's in the bags?"
That was all the encouragement Charlotte needed. She stood from her stool, moving slowly, and reached for the closest bag. "Well, Jasper had told us before how you like to read, but I know how hard it is to turn the pages without ripping them when you're a newborn, so we picked up a few of these little books for toddlers. There's not much to read, but the pages are cardboard. Some of them are real thick paper." She lifted a dozen of the books from the bag and set them at the edge of the island closest to us. "We also brought some comics out of newspapers — Peter said you would like them, and newspaper is good to practice on. It doesn't matter if you rip it." She lifted a three-inch stack of comics out of the handled paper bag, then folded it and set it on the counter beyond the cooktop. She reached for the next. "Rosalie, why don't ya help me empty these bags? Thanks, sweetie." Charlotte walked unhurriedly around the island to the right side to stand next to Rosalie, and they started pulling brightly colored containers out of the bags.

Bella leaned forward to watch them more closely, but I was observing Peter. He was as still as the proverbial statue, but his eyes followed Bella's every movement, no matter how slight, as if he were studying her.

The only emotions I was getting from him were curiosity, amusement, and some wariness. He seemed pleased as Bella stretched farther to peer at what he and Charlotte had brought.

His wariness and caution were understandable. Bella was an unknown vampire near his mate. Peter had assisted me with hundreds of newborns, and he had been good at it. Like me, he had learned quickly to watch them carefully. Newborns were notoriously unpredictable and explosive, and they could be sneaky bastards. More than a few times, one of us had prevented an attack on the other from a newborn that had been playing 'possum and had suddenly snarled and leapt. I was usually quicker at stopping them, but that was because they would broadcast a blast of rage or insane glee an instant before they would attack. That didn't always stop them from getting a bite in.

Bella moved slightly from behind me and leaned even farther, watching Charlotte and Rosalie emptying the bags, folding them and setting them on the counter with the first bag. I thought she might even come all the way out from behind me and go over to them, but then I noticed the pupils of Peter's eyes widen. Significantly.

My jealousy spiked, and I had to force it down again. Why the hell was I jealous? He was a male, and Bella was a beautiful female. I might have been a little biased, but even for a vampire, she was striking. Of course, he would be interested. Of course, he would think she was attractive. Hell! She was more than attractive — she was the most stunningly beautiful woman I had ever seen. You'd have to be blind not to see it. That jealousy I was feeling had to be caused by his being the first new male she'd been near since she had awakened as a vampire. I needed to rein that shit in.

I had been jealous of Edward even after Bella let us know, in no uncertain terms, what she thought of him. I hadn't been jealous of Carlisle being near her, and I wasn't jealous of Emmett being with her. But they were both mated males. Edward had been the unmated male.

But she hadn't said Emmett and Carlisle were "so fucking pretty."

The green-eyed monster unsheathed his claws and twisted in my gut, but I stopped the growl before it could even get started. I reminded myself again Peter was a mated male.

*Get ahold of yourself!*

I gave myself a mental slap across the face. I had to get a grip. I had to control myself. She was a new vampire — a new female vampire that Peter hadn't seen before. He really wasn't studying her more than Charlotte had been. Peter would get used to her, she would get used to him, and everything would be fine. She wasn't even paying any attention to him. She was focused on the
damn toys spread across the island and the glass cook top.

Stepping out from behind me, but not letting go of my arm, Bella looked up at Charlotte and Rosalie. "Lincoln Logs, Duplos, and Tinker toys? What the fuck?"

Emmett chuckled as he hauled himself out of the recliner to stand next to me. "Told ya she had a potty mouth."

She glared at Emmett and turned back to Charlotte. "Um, thank you, but toys?"

"Well," Charlotte began, "I suggested we could plant a garden or two, but Peter thought flowers and seedlings would be too delicate for you to handle just yet, but we brought some things for that, too. The place needs some color."

"Bella should like that." Emmett nodded and grinned again, a twinkle in his eye. "She likes gettin' all down and dirty, and her face shoved in the dirt."

"Emmett, shut up." I warned him. Bella's eyes narrowed with her irritation, though she was trying to control it.

Rosalie batted her eyes at Emmett as she raised her hand, touching her forefinger to her thumb, then she smiled sweetly at him. Emmett pouted and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Puzzled, Charlotte looked from Rosalie to Emmett but she continued on. "Peter thought these toys would work. He thought you could put them together, maybe starting with the Lincoln Logs. They're not that hard to get apart. But if you crush them, it's okay. Then you could move on to the Duplos. I picked out the Tinker Toys. We have some playing cards, too. Oh! I picked out this little loom here." Charlotte held up another box. "You can make pot holders. We don't need 'em of course, but weaving the cotton loops will be good practice."

"You know, I think I had one of those when I was little. Renee went through a weaving phase for a while." Bella cocked her head and studied the box.

Charlotte smiled, feeling pleased. "Oh, good! Peter said when you get good at the Duplos, then we could get you some Legos since they're smaller and you have to grab hold of them a little harder to put them together and take them apart." Charlotte smiled brightly. "It was fun lookin' through the toy store. I've never been in one."

"We probably should have bought Lincoln Logs for Emmett when he was a newborn." Rosalie smiled.

"They wouldn't have held up," Emmett said, eyeing the containers. "They might be for babies, but I don't think our baby will be able to handle 'em. You know what she does to trees."

Bella's breathing picked up, and she turned toward Emmett. I placed a hand on her arm to help keep her calm.

"I'm fine," she said through her clenched teeth.

"Well, you know how you are, Bells," Emmett said, extending his hands, palms up. "One second you're fine, then the next — blam!" His hands flew out. "Ya blow right up."

Her eyes narrowed farther, and her eyebrows lowered. I tightened my grip on her arm and turned toward Emmett to tell him to shut the hell up, and that's when Peter decided to finally move. He hadn't even blinked the entire time Charlotte and Rosalie were pulling the toys out of the bags, but as
soon as Emmett started running his mouth, Peter leaned forward and slid his hand across the countertop.

Bella flinched away from him, squeaked again, and she was behind me, trembling, her arms wrapped around my waist.

Annoyed, I growled at Emmett. "You need to shut the fuck up. And Peter, what the hell was that?"

He shifted slightly on his stool, raising his chin. "I never would have thought that a mate of Jasper's would be such a timid, little, squeaky sissy."

I couldn't believe he had said that. Bella was anything but a sissy. She had been one of the bravest humans I had ever met, and was a fierce vampire. With some training, she would be formidable. Was he intentionally trying to set her off?

Thinking about it later, I guessed it had been a little too much for her. One asshole at a time was enough for anybody.

Especially a newborn.

Especially when that asshole was Peter Whitlock.

Bella growled and her anger exploded in a heated rush. I grunted as it slammed into me, and I staggered as I twisted around to grab her, but she was just too damn fast. And where I had thought she would go after Emmett, she fooled me. She launched herself at Peter. I hadn't thought she would do that.

His eyes widened and his grin spread across his face as he started to stand up, pushing the stool away. I lunged forward, catching her ankle as she reached out and got a hand on Peter's throat. His hands came up, and he grabbed her waist. There was enough momentum behind her leap that he fell back as she hit him, landing on the floor between the kitchen island and the sink, crushing the wooden stool he had been sitting on into splinters underneath him.

I grabbed her other ankle and tried to pull her off him, but she managed to clamp her left hand on his shoulder and hauled herself up Peter's body, dragging me with her.

"I am not a sissy!" She snarled in his grinning face. "I saw shit as a human that you never could have imagined when you were human. I survived a vampire attack!"

"That's true," he said quietly, as he took his hands from her waist and raised them like he was surrendering to her. "I could never have imagined any of this shit when I was human." He winked at her. "Then I met Jasper." A smirk spread across his face, and he slowly blinked his darkening red eyes. "It's nice to finally meet ya, Bubba."

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Chapter 41, I Bet

Jasper's POV

I hit them both with a heavy blast of exhaustion with a side order of knock-it-the-hell-off. With a grunt, Bella collapsed over Peter's body, her hand still gripping his neck. His hands dropped, falling to her back like he was embracing her.

I didn't have words to describe how pissed off I was at the position my mate was in — sprawled across Peter's long body with his hands on her. Touching her.

I pried her fingers from his throat, lifted her off of him, and slung her over my left shoulder, noticing she had drooled on him, leaving a large damp spot on the left side of his chest. She created more venom when she was pissed off than any vampire I'd ever come across. Holding her legs down against my body with my left arm, I reached for Peter's throat and growled. "Emmett, open the fuckin' door."

"Uh, sure, Jazz." Emmett scurried around behind the recliner to open the sliding glass door that led to the deck.

As I hoisted a limp Peter from the floor by his neck, Charlotte gasped.

"You're not goin' to hurt him are ya, Jasper?" Her hands were at her mouth and fear shown in her
bright red eyes.

Even Rosalie looked shocked.

"No, I'm not gonna hurt him. I'm goin' to take him out back and fuck 'im up." I dragged him out onto the deck and dropped him when I saw Charlotte had set out a couple of those canvas folding chaise lounges.

I lowered the back of the closest one and gently set Bella on its navy blue cover, pulling her long braid from behind her back. Kneeling next to her, I brought her braid to my nose, inhaling the scent of her hair and kissing it. I laid the thick braid over her chest and leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "I love you, Bella. I don't know why Peter was tryin' to piss you off, but I don't blame you for goin' after him. I'm gonna find out why he did that shit, then I think I'm gonna kick his ass." I kissed her soft lips, and then I grasped her hands and kissed her fingers before placing them together on her stomach.

"Whatcha doin', Jazz?" Emmett asked as he stepped out onto the deck. Rosalie and Charlotte were right behind him, looking worried.

"I want you to watch Bella. I'm goin' to keep her down while Peter and I have a little talk. If she starts to get up ... well, try to keep her here."

I turned back to Peter lying spread-eagled on the deck. I hadn't seen him in a long time, and I had been glad to see him, but I didn't need him trying to set Bella off. She did that well enough on her own. Grabbing his shoulders, I snatched him from the deck boards and threw him over the rail out to the yard where he landed in heap. Between the deck and the trees, there was only about twenty-five feet of what could be loosely referred to as lawn, but there was enough room to have a nice chat.

As I went down the four steps to the yard, I heard Charlotte whisper to Rosalie. "He's so sweet with her, and you can tell she's Jasper's — she's a fiery little thing."

Emmett snorted loudly. "You ain't seen nothin' yet. He stopped her pretty quick this time. Wait 'til she really gets goin'."

"Aren't you worried about what he's going to do to Peter?" Rosalie asked.

"Oh, no." She waved her hand as if to dismiss the idea. "The last time Jasper came to Texas, they took off into the woods, and I didn't see 'em for two days. But I heard them." She sighed heavily. "We got a new pond on the property out of their fun. We stocked it with fish. The fishin' is good."

I remembered that last visit to Texas. That had been a good one. Peter and I beat the hell out of each other. Primarily by wrestling and plowing each other into the ground. The damn crater we'd created was half full of water before dawn the following day. Neither one of us had realized there was a spring there.

My Bella was a fiery little thing, and a surge of pride in my mate grew from the center of my chest as I stalked toward Peter. Making sure I still had a firm mental hold over Bella, I pulled my influence back from Peter and pushed him over onto his back with the toe of my boot. I stepped back away from him. He might not have ever beaten me in a fight, but I respected his abilities. He could inflict serious damage.

"Get up."

He inhaled deeply, tasting the air around him to determine who was near, then his eyes flew open and snapped to mine. He didn't bat an eye. He just stared at me warily. Slowly he brought his
hands up to his chest and felt the spot on his grass-stained navy T-shirt where Bella had drooled on him.

I propped my hands on my hips. "Get up," I said again. From the corner of my eye I could see the sky beginning to lighten. The sun would be up soon.

"Jasper, I …"

I growled at him. "I said, get up." He was lucky I'd given him a third chance to comply, and he knew it.

His hands slid slowly from his chest and flattened on the ground as he began to push himself up. In an instant, he was on his feet, his hands open and held away from his sides, and his knees slightly flexed. His eyes flicked toward the deck and back to me.

"Jasper …"

I punched him square on the jaw, sending him flying toward the trees. He slammed into an eight-inch wide oak, making it quiver all the way up to the top, and he dropped to his feet.

Grabbing his jaw, he said, "That's your only free one. Now, are you gonna listen to me or are you gonna keep tryin' to beat my ass?"

"Try to beat your ass?" I hissed as I walked stiffly toward him. "I could have had you in pieces, you stupid fuck."

Peter raised both hands in front of me like he was trying to slow me down. I could smell Bella's venom on him and that sent a hot flash of annoyance through me. Sharp needles of jealousy began jabbing at me, sending my anger even higher, and I stomped right up to him until his hands were on my chest.

"I know that," he said in a quiet voice. "Since you didn't rip me apart, I was hopin' you might want to hear what I have to say."

"What the fuck could you possibly say to justify showin' your goddamn teeth to a newborn you've never met before and sayin' stupid shit to piss her off?" I pushed against his hands. "We weren't here five goddamn minutes, and you're already callin' her Bubba and grinnin' at her. It's not bad enough she was afraid of your scars — your dumb ass had to show her your teeth." I grabbed his wrists, and his eyes widened minutely in surprise. "It took me two fuckin' hours to calm her down enough to speak and get her to come back to the house. And then what do you do?" I flung his hands down and held mine rigidly at my sides. "You fuckin' moved and startled her, after not movin' for how long. Then you talk more shit and show your teeth again." My hands tightened into fists. I wanted to choke him so bad I could almost feel my fingers around his neck.

He brought his hands back up in front of me, but to his credit, he didn't even blink while I was hissing in his face. If he had, I probably would have attacked. I was feeling extremely protective of my mate and having her scent on him wasn't helping with the jealousy. There was a tiny voice in the back of my head repeating over and over, "She's mine. She's mine," and it was getting louder. My breath was coming faster, and I pushed harder against his hands.

"Jasper," Peter whispered, trying to use a soothing tone. "You know how the newborns would react to seein' our scars. You know how all vampires react. I knew she would be afraid of me and Charlotte."

Snarling, I pushed even harder against his hands. "So what the fuck were you doing?"
He still didn't move, but his darkening eyes were like a red flag being flapped in front of me.

"We're all gonna be here together for a while," he continued in a breathy whisper, "and if you want us to help you with her, she can't be afraid of us. The sooner she gets over it, the better. That's why we both wore T-shirts — so she would see the scars right off. She didn't try to attack us like the other newborns used to, so I showed her my teeth. She still didn't attack — she ran. She can't keep doin' that shit." He finally blinked. "She can't keep runnin'." With the slightest pressure, he pushed against my chest. "Bella's gonna be fine with Charlotte, but she's still afraid of me. She needs to get over it, and pissin' her off will make her get over it quicker."

It was aggravating as hell, but he was making a little bit of sense. Becoming angry had helped Bella get over her fear, and she had run — a lot — when she was afraid or confused.

Bella had been jealous and pretty damn angry when she first got a good look at Rosalie and tried to attack her, but then she recognized her. I wondered why Bella hadn't growled at Charlotte? Because she knew Charlotte was a mated female?

Bella hadn't tried to attack Esme, but she had certainly gone after Alice — the only unmated female. A few times.

Rambling thoughts aside, I was still angry, aggravated, and irritated, and my jealousy was still making quick, deep stabs at me. I struggled to push it down as I eased back away from him.

He started to smile. "Me and Bubba are gonna get along just fine." Then he cocked his head to the side and grinned, showing those goddamn pearly whites. "I love a woman that thinks I'm so fucking pretty."

He couldn't leave it the fuck alone. My anger and jealousy exploded into fury, and it was as if a dark, smoky veil dropped over my eyes. I grabbed his right wrist and forced his arm out, but before I could get my right hand up to his throat, he head butted me and landed a solid left on the side of my face. "I got ten on Jazz," Emmett said, laughing.

"I'll take that," Rosalie said in a mildly interested voice. "The head butt was nice."

I could feel the cracks from Peter's blow spreading across my face. As I fell to my left from the force of his blow, I brought my right knee up and nailed him in his left side just below his ribs, knocking the wind out of him. It didn't have the same effect on a vampire as it did on a human, but as he snapped forward, bending at the waist, I seized the back of his neck and slammed him to the ground. I dropped, aiming to straddle his legs and my fingers reaching for his neck. He spun in place, threw his arms up and out, blocking mine, then his hands were around my throat.

He planted his right foot on the ground and shoved, rolling us until he was on top of me. I punched him on his jaw again, his head snapping to his right, but he didn't let go of my throat.

He snarled and leaned back, drawing me up off the ground. All I needed was for him to lean back a little farther. I slammed my fists into both sides of his rib cage, hearing the muffled crunch as his ribs broke beneath my hands. His eyes squeezed shut, he hissed loudly and jerked back away from me, pulling me with him. He was on his knees and having his ribs crushed had to hurt like hell, but he still wouldn't let go of my throat. I couldn't get my teeth to his throat, but I gained enough of an angle that I got my left foot on the ground and stood up, bringing him with me.

The sound of wood cracking and splintering to my right sent a pang of dread through me. From the corner of my eye I caught a flash of pale ivory and royal blue just before Bella sank her teeth into the
left side of Peter's exposed throat and clamped her arms around his rib cage.

Peter hissed again as all three of us fell, Bella clinging to his back, and we thudded heavily to the ground just at the edge of the trees.

He wasn't going to move with Bella growling at him and her teeth in his throat, but the stupid dick could have let go of my throat. I clutched at his wrists and tried to pull his hands loose, but he wouldn't release me.

"The little bitch has my mate!"

Charlotte's high-pitched snarl came from the direction of the house. I couldn't fault her for coming to the aid of her mate, but she wasn't going to touch mine.

I struggled to my knees, with Peter's hands still compressed around my throat. It caused Peter and Bella to roll onto their backs in the process and I straddled them, placing my body between them and Charlotte.

I could turn my head just enough to see her coming at us, targeting Bella. Emmett and Rosalie were right behind her, but they weren't going to catch her before she reached us. Peter's grip was so tight I couldn't even shout at her to stop. I tried to hit her with a blast of exhaustion like I'd used on Bella and Peter earlier, but it didn't work. Then she slammed into Bella's shield. I hadn't even realized Bella had put it up.

It's a wonder Charlotte's arms didn't break. She bounced back, stunned, right into Emmett's chest. His arms snapped closed around her, capturing her arms against her sides, and he dragged her away, kicking and snarling.

I tried a dose of lethargy on Bella and Peter, but it had no effect. She was shielding her mind from me, and Peter was benefiting from it.

Emmett was halfway back to the deck — that had a large section of rail missing — when he spun and dropped, pinning Charlotte to the ground underneath him, facing the house so she wouldn't be able to see us. His voice was a loud buzzing as he spoke into her ear.

Knowing Emmett was more than capable of handling Charlotte for the time being, Rosalie walked tentatively toward Bella, Peter, and me, reaching out with her right hand. She smiled with satisfaction when her fingers touched Bella's shield about four feet away from us.

"Emmett will calm down Charlotte. He made her stop snarling already." She studied us for a moment. "I guess you can't knock Bella and Peter out? I guess you can't talk either. What the hell?" She threw her hands up in the air then she crossed her arms over her chest and walked slowly around us, to my left, until she was standing off the point of my left shoulder. She frowned and put her hands on her hips, studying us. "What we've got here is a failure to communicate."

Quotes from movies aside, she was right about that. None of us could talk.

I was sure we made quite the picture. I was on my hands and knees, my legs on either side of Peter's, and my hands were braced on the ground just past their shoulders. His hands were still around my throat. Bella had come from the side but had somehow managed to slip in between his shoulder and head to sink her teeth into him. Most of her was underneath him. Her arms were just under his, clamped securely around him, her fingers digging into his chest. Her legs were wrapped around his waist, and she had locked her feet together. Their heads were pointed away from the house so they couldn't see Emmett and Charlotte.
Peter's eyes were completely black and had narrowed as he glared at me. My rage had dissipated somewhat when Bella had come charging in, but I was still pissed off at Peter. I bared my teeth at him as I grabbed his left wrist and started to squeeze. I could have broken through it, but I didn't want to do that right in front of Bella's face. When he tried to hiss at me, Bella growled louder, the sound muffled against his throat. She had gotten him good on the side of his neck, and she was drooling all over him.

Then it struck me what the scar from that bite would look like. My jealousy came roaring back, and I pulled my right fist back to punch that motherfucker right in the head.

She's mine!

"Jasper, stop!" Rosalie exclaimed. "Please don't punch him right now." She knelt down, bringing her face down to my level, her hands on Bella's shield. "Everybody needs to calm down. Please! He's not hurting her, and all three of you are being jerks!"

I stopped. I couldn't crush Peter's head with Bella attached to his neck like that. I knew she wasn't claiming him, and it wasn't exactly his fault that she bit him in that particular spot. Had she been trying to subdue him like I'd done to her? No, she'd been too furious. She might have been trying to take his head off. She just didn't know how to do it. Yet.

Emmett! He was supposed to be watching her, and she had gotten past him. I felt the rumble in my chest from a growl that couldn't get past Peter's hands on my throat.

Then it pissed me off all over again thinking how much venom she was getting into him, directly into his jugular, and if I could have inhaled I would have been roaring.

"You mean they're being assholes!" Emmett grumbled loudly. "And Charlotte, you quit it. You're not gettin' up 'til you chill out. You aren't hurtin' my Belly-boo."

From beneath Emmett, Charlotte blew out a disgusted breath. "All right! I give! I can't reach her anyway, Emmett." She continued griping. "You're just mad because you lost the bet."

"Well, I didn't know my best little bud was goin' to screw it up or I'd have put the ten on her!"

Rosalie jumped to her feet, shaking her fists and shrieking in her frustration. "Emmett and Charlotte! You two stop screwing around over there! I don't know what the hell is going on but Jasper looks like he's about to tear Peter apart and Bella might get hurt!"

That shocked me back to myself. I would never hurt Bella. Peter, I would fuck up until he was nothing but a big pile of fucking sparkly dust, and then I might dump him in the closest creek, but I would never harm my mate.

Unclenching my fist and closing my eyes, I reached for Bella's beautiful face. I ran my fingertips across her forehead and down to her cheek, needing to touch her, needing to feel the reassurance I received every time my skin came in contact with hers.

When she stopped growling, I slowly opened my eyes to look into her dull black ones. I couldn't speak but I was thinking at her as forcefully as I could, pleading with her to take her teeth from his throat.

Please stop biting him. Please.

As she looked into mine, the burning rage in her eyes cooled, and concern and love began to show in the liquid depths. She yanked her teeth from his neck and instantly her lips were at his ear.
She hissed at him. "Let go of my mate or I will Fuck. You. Up." Her left hand moved in a blur down his chest to just above her own leg gripping his waist, and she pinched him.

He jerked away from her hand, let go of my neck, and sucked in a gasping breath.

In a move that was almost too fast for even my eyes to follow, Bella was out from under Peter, and she shoved me away. I thudded against her shield and dropped to the ground on my ass. She was on her knees, bent over him, her right hand on the ground, the left on his chest clenching a handful of his T-shirt. Her teeth were at his throat, barely touching his skin.

Rosalie, Emmett, and Charlotte had us surrounded, even though they couldn't reach us because of Bella's shield.

Emmett started laughing. "Who's the bitch now?"

"Peter is," I said as I crawled over to them. A pained expression was plastered over Peter's face. No doubt because of the broken ribs, the pinch, and Bella's venom spreading through him. She was still angry but she wasn't growling.

"Darlin', you can let go of him now. He's not goin' to move. I think he's in too much pain," I said softly as I bent to her.

She took her teeth from his throat and slowly sat back on her heels, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Goddamn right he's not going to move." She stuck the index finger of her right hand in her mouth, pulling it out with a pop and dripping with venom. She touched the tip to Peter's left temple. "If he moves …" she said threateningly.

Emmett barked out another laugh. "I told ya to watch out for her lickin' her fingers!"

Peter's eyes flew open as his grimace of pain shifted to shock. He stared hard at Bella. His eyes flicked to me then back to Bella, and a glint of mischief appeared in the dull black. "Put a bullet to me. Bullet to the brain pan. Squish," he whispered.

After a second of astonishment, Emmett roared with laughter, his one hand holding his stomach as he slapped a bewildered Charlotte on the back, knocking her to her knees.

Rosalie crossed her arms over her chest, a disgusted look on her face. "Is that another quote from that TV show?"

Bella's face was beaming as she looked up at Emmett. "No. It's from the Firefly movie Serenity!" Her eyes dropped to Peter and she studied him again, her eyebrows lowering. "What the fuck were you doing to my Jasper?"

Taking a moment to clear his throat, Peter said in a raspy voice, "We were just havin' a little talk, Bubba."

Her eyes narrowed, and she growled. "Do you two always talk by punching the shit out of each other? How was he supposed to talk with your hands around his neck?"

I reached over and placed my hand over Bella's that was fisted in his shirt. "The discussion got a little heated. We got a little rough."

"A little rough? What the hell do you do when you're mad?"

Peter's right hand twitched and Bella's teeth were back at his throat before I was able to slap his hand
As his eyes widened, I growled at him. "She's pretty damn quick when she's mad, Peter. Quit fuckin' around. She might rip somethin' off ya. Though I can't say I wouldn't enjoy watchin' that."

Rosalie was chuckling as she helped Charlotte climb back to her feet.

Emmett was still snickering to himself. "Sorry about that, Char. Me, Bells, and Jasper love that show. Best part is she remembers it from when she was human. And we get to watch it again with Pete!"

Emmett grinned at her. "And Pete, sorry I forgot to mention the pinching."

Glaring at him, Peter coughed very lightly. "Yeah, you forgot that one." His eyes turned to me. "Major, obviously you taught her this one?" he asked, his eyes flicking from Bella at his throat and back to me.

"Do you know another way to make a newborn listen without rippin' their arms off?"

"I learned that one really well," Bella said with some embarrassment as she released her hold. She sat back on her legs folded beneath her, leaving her hand on Peter's chest. "I can feel him when he uses the Jazzy-Whammy on me, and I can block him with my shield, but he was touching me so I couldn't stop him from doing the teeth on the throat thing. I was being kind of a jerk." Then she frowned and looked up at Emmett. "You owe me the ten, Emmy-doll. I'd say I won this one."

"Ya sure did, Belly-babe. But I'll have to write you a check."

"A check? You don't have ten bucks?"

Rosalie grinned down at her, shaking her head. "Bella, he didn't mean just ten dollars, he meant ten thousand."

Bella's eyes grew wide, and her mouth dropped open. "Er, wh-what? Ten thousand? Ten thousand dollars?" Her jaw flapped a few times and she stammered, "Wh-what did you all used to mean when you were betting one dollar?"

I brushed my fingers over her cheek. "A hundred. If the humans happened to hear us betting, we couldn't let them know exactly how much." I let my fingers linger on her skin. "Keep bettin' on yourself, Darlin', and you'll have a nice little nest egg in no time. Are you goin' to put your shield down now?"

Charlotte hummed to herself thoughtfully. "Peter and I knew Edward couldn't hear you when you were human, and we noticed when you first got here that you were doin' somethin'. We could sort of see it when you put it up. Like a force field." Charlotte walked around to place herself closer to Peter's head. "We just didn't realize that you could block us physically. I kinda found out the hard way," she said as she brushed a few remaining pieces of grass from her jeans and light blue T-shirt. "I can see it now. It makes the air look a little hazy."

The sun was beginning to rise, and Bella's shield was easier to see in the daylight. The faint light was coming through the trees along with a light breeze. Bella leaned into my hand, over her shock for the moment at winning ten thousand dollars from Emmett. She closed her eyes and lifted her face, inhaling deeply. I felt a minute pressure change, and her shield was gone from around us.

"It smells good here." She smiled, and she slowly opened her eyes and looked at me.

Her love flowed around me, soft and warm, and I couldn't resist caressing her cheek and leaning toward her to get closer to her lips.
"Ahem," Peter said loudly. "Thanks, Bubba, I'm sure all you can smell is me and …"

He didn't get to finish his bullshit because Bella thumped him on his chest, making him wince.

"Ribs still healin' here," he said, groaning.

Bella glared at him. "Then shut up."

Emmett reached forward, checking to see if Bella's shield was still in place. Finding it gone, he leaned down to look Peter in the face, propping his hands on his knees. "Ya know, Pete, she said you smell like pineapple upside-down cake in Grandma Swan's kitchen."

Peter's surprise didn't last long. He grinned up at Bella and me. "That's cuz I taste so damn good, too," he said, waggling his eyebrows.

Another prickle of jealousy shot through me, and I drew my fist back to punch him, but Bella caught my wrist.

"At ease, Major." She widened her eyes at me as she stood up. "See? I'm nice and calm now — don't get started again." She tugged on my arm. "Don't you have to show me the rest of the house? And I need a bath."

I stepped over Peter, forcing another grunt out of him as I accidentally kicked him in the leg.

Bella quickly turned back to me, glaring at me for kicking Peter, then she looked down at him. "Uh, nice to meet you, too. I'm sure we'll be BFFs in no time. If Jasper doesn't kill you." Then she stopped and stared off into space, a slight frown creasing her forehead. "You know, you kinda taste like pineapple upside-down cake."

I couldn't take it anymore. My jealousy boiled over, and a growl ripped through my chest. Bella squeaked as I swept her up into my arms and dashed toward the house, chased by a chorus of laughter.

Bella gasped as I came to a sudden stop in front of the sliding glass door. I made sure to slide it open very gently. It would be difficult to get a replacement in our isolated location, but as soon as it was wide enough, I darted into the house, sped through the family room and living room, and made for the stairs. I jumped to the small landing, turned right and leapt to the top of the stairs. Foregoing the usual "tour," I made a sharp turn to my immediate left and in the next second was in the master bedroom at the end of the short hall, kicking the door shut behind me.

The room was just as I'd left it, though it had recently been cleaned and dusted. Our bags were on the floor under the window in the west wall at the front of the house. The two boxes that held the clothes I had ordered were on top of the armoire directly in front of me. I smelled Charlotte's minty floral and sent her a silent "thank you." I was relieved I didn't detect Peter's scent in my room — there was enough of it on Bella.

She squawked as I tossed her onto the king size bed and pounced on her, my body covering hers, my hands tightly gripping her upper arms, her hands trapped between our bodies. My dick was so hard it hurt, and I shifted over her until my right leg was between hers. I pressed my aching dick against her thigh and hip, and slid my right hand down her arm, over her waist, and slid it under her ass, forcing her body up to mine. It felt so good I gasped, but all I could smell was him, and I snarled.

Bella sucked in a breath and her hands were pushing against my chest. I could feel that my eyes were coal black, and hers grew even wider in shock as she stared up at me.
"Jasper, what …"

"You're mine." My lips crashed down over hers. A deep growl rumbled up through my chest as I tasted him on my mate. Jealousy coiled like a snake through my brain and constricted around my heart.

"Oh!" She gasped. "You're je…"

Before she had a chance to say anything else, I licked over her mouth and across her jaw, trying to get rid of his scent and cover her with my own. I licked, nipped, and sucked at her skin, traveling down her neck and pushing the neck of her T-shirt aside until I reached my first claiming bite. My tongue swept over the ridges my teeth had left in her skin, and I could still taste him on her, still smell him on her. I needed to get rid of his scent.

I thrust against her hip, groaning and growling, my lust filling my mind, my hands clutching at her arm and her ass, and she pushed against my chest with both hands.

"Stop," she said quietly in my ear.

I groaned as I forced my dick against her hip again. "Bella, you're mine. You're only mine." I licked across her neck until I reached the right side and nudged her head to her left so I could reach my claiming bite there.

As I licked over my mark, she pushed against my chest again.

"Jasper, you need to stop."

I licked her smooth skin up to her ear. I could still smell him. "You're mine." I growled again.

"I am, but you need to stop. There's no reason for you to be jealous."

"I smell him on you. I taste him on you. Mine! You're mine!" I snarled and clutched her more tightly to me.

Then I noticed I couldn't feel her emotions, and she wasn't kissing me back. I realized what I was doing and froze. I rolled away from her, throwing my right arm over my face. Guilt consumed me. I was a dick. I was a total fucking dick. I had carried her up to our room and attacked her. All I could think about was Peter's scent all over her, and her venom on him and inside him, and I was so fucking jealous it was eating me; it was gnawing at me from the inside out. I had to claim her, and …

And she was against my left side, her leg over mine, her arm across my chest, and her lips on my neck. Then she hit me with a blast of pure love that was so bright, so warm, and so all-encompassing, my mind was stunned into stillness and my rigid body melted against hers. Her left hand slid up my chest to the side of my face. She pressed my head to hers, and her lips were at my ear, murmuring her love to me.

"Jasper, I feel you. Stop that. I love you. You know how much I love you." She stroked my head and pressed her lips to my cheek. "We've been through this. Don't cut yourself down, please. Don't feel guilty. I love you."

She kissed me again, and I tried to pull my head away from her but she held me to her. Then she turned my head to face her.

"Look at me, Jasper," she said quietly but forcefully.
I finally opened my still-black eyes to look into her dark red ones. Remorse for what I had done to her flooded through me, and I could feel the venom welling up in my eyes. "Bella, I am not good enough …"

Her hand was covering my mouth. "If you even try to say that you're not good enough for me I will fuckin' crush you."

She could do it, too.

She sat up and propped the pillows against the barn wood headboard, then leaned back against them. She extended her arms toward me.

When I didn't move, she shook her hands at me in frustration. "Come here!"

As I rolled over and crept toward her, she spread her legs, grabbed me under my arms and pulled me to her, resting my head on her shoulder with my nose at her neck. "Put your arms around me."

That was the trouble with having a newborn mate — no matter how much bigger than her I was, she could still manhandle me.

When I couldn't bring myself to comply, she sat up, grabbed each of my arms and put them around her, grumbling. She wrapped her arms around me and leaned back against the pillows again.

"You're too big to sit on my lap, so this is the best I can do." She kissed my forehead and ran her fingers through my hair. "Just feel me, Jasper. Feel how much I love you. Feel how anxious I was when you weren't near me." She kissed me again. "Feel how much I need you, adore you, and want you with me." She kissed me between my eyebrows. "You've been projecting like crazy."

I tried to pull away from her. They would all feel my guilt and my shame, and they would know what I had done.

"Stop!" She hissed at me. "I feel you so much I can almost tell what you're thinking. None of them can feel you. My shield is up. It was up as soon as we were in the house. I think it's at like a medium setting now." Her fingers combed through my hair again. "In this room, it's just you and me. Only you and me. They can't feel this guilt and this shame you're feeling — that you don't need to feel. You didn't do anything."

"But Bella, I …"

"Dammit, Jasper!" Her hand was under my jaw, forcing my head up to look at her. "Don't you remember the discussions we've had about instincts and all that? How strong they are? How hard they are to control? This is all new to me, and God knows I've had a hard time! But this is new to you, too. Have you ever had a mate before?"

My eyes widened. "Bella, no. I've never felt about anyone the way I feel about you."

"Then pay attention. I was jealous of Alice. Did I need to be?"

"No! No, you didn't, but your instincts …"

"Did you hear what you just said?"

I sighed in exasperation. "But I'm over 140 years old, Bella. I've had over a century of practice at controlling …"
"Jasper! Don't be so hard on yourself! You've just discovered your mate. Then another male, who happens to be marginally attractive …"

A deep growl worked its way up through my chest as my lips curled back from my teeth.

Bella placed her hand gently over my mouth. "Shhh. You can't deny that Peter is, well, semi good-looking. Especially since he looks enough like you, you two could be brothers. And if you don't stop growling I'm going to pinch you." She took her hand from my mouth so she could point her finger at my nose.

I stopped growling.

"But all I see is you, Jasper." She kissed my nose. "So, another male, who I happened to attack because he was attacking my mate, sorta bled on me and got his scent all over me. And I just so happened to bite him in a spot where I could manage to get as much venom into him as possible. Which was kind of an accident because I meant to bite his head off."

I couldn't help smiling at the irritated look on her face.

"Well, it's not like it would kill him." She added. Then she smiled at me. "So your instincts were telling you to get your mate away from that male and … and claim … um, her." Bella pursed her lips and blew out a breath. "But despite your instincts, when I said stop, you listened to me. Why would your instincts be any less strong than mine?" She hugged me and kissed my neck. "Jasper, you're fine. Didn't you tell me that no one could love me as much as you do? Didn't you say that no one could teach me better than you?" She kissed then stroked my cheek, and her love flowed around me like a soft spring breeze. Just her touch soothed me. "And you know what? I think Peter was saying that shit on purpose to piss you off, and it worked. I can't figure out why he would he say that stuff."

"Because he's a dick." I sighed. "And he's always sayin' shit like that, just not usually to me." I looked intently into her eyes. "I'm sorry, Bella. I was so jealous — at the way he was looking at you, and his scent all over you. You … you taste like him." I closed my eyes. "You bit him and held on. Your venom is in him. That bite is going to look like … a mating bite." I knew how much she loved me, but why did I so desperately need to be reassured?

"Oh, Jasper!" Bella pulled my head up and kissed the corner of my mouth. "You know that's not what it is! I felt you let go of me, then I felt your anger. When I opened my eyes, he was on top of you, and his hands were around your throat!" Her arms wrapped around my neck. "I was so mad! All I could think about was I needed to get him off you!" She kissed my cheek and was whispering in my ear. "I thought taking his head off would make him stop, but I kinda missed. So I went with what I had." She pulled back to look into my eyes. "I thought I might crush his chest, but you already broke his ribs so … I mean, I could feel them scraping together and that was just nasty."

Feeling her love through every inch of her skin that was in contact with mine, the heaviness that was surrounding my heart lifted. Happiness filled me, and I suddenly had to laugh at the look of disgust on her face and the way she wrinkled her nose.

"If you didn't love me so much, I'd never make it." Clutching her to me, my hands spread over her back, and I kissed her. "When I'm weak, you're strong. I love you."

Her arms held me tightly. "You're always strong, Jasper. Always." She hummed her pleasure and kissed me again. "Did you notice that no one has interrupted us? We're in your territory. Your domain." She started to inhale deeply and stopped. "Um, I'd bet you'd calm down faster if I took a bath and got the Pete-stink off."
Chapter End Notes

"Put a bullet to me. Bullet to the brain pan. Squish." ~ River Tam to Simon Tam in the Firefly movie "Serenity."

"What we've got here is a failure to communicate." ~ The Captain (Strother Martin) [warden of the prison] to Luke (Paul Newman) in the movie Cool Hand Luke.

"If you didn't love me so much, I'd never make it. When I'm weak, you're strong." ~ "If I didn't Have You," by Thompson Square, from the album Just Feels Good.
Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by 4mejasper and shouvley of Project Team Beta. You can find them on FFN. They write, too! (Reading a couple of 4mejasper's right now.)

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and A Different Forest (ADF) feed a tree!

A/N: A little late, but not too much. Chapter 43 has been sent to the betas. I believe it's the one some of you have been waiting for. ;)

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Return To Hell by oh-hale-yeah on FFN.

The Arena by jascat on FFN. A WIP but so darn good. Ya gotta read it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 42, I Rock

Jasper's POV

Bella had insisted that I be nice and go catch up with Peter, with no hitting or strangling, while she took her bath. She had said it would be a good chance for her to get to know Charlotte better. With the too-innocent look on Rosalie's face, and the gleam in Charlotte's eyes, I was sure those three would be thick as thieves in no time. Not that I was worried about it.

Much.

I hadn't wanted to be away from her but there I was, sitting on the front porch with Peter and Emmett while Bella, Rosalie, and Charlotte were in the bathroom adjoining our bedroom upstairs. The intermittent soft giggles and titters were nice to hear. However, the sporadic cackles made me curious and a touch uneasy wondering what they were talking about. But they were feeling happy and pleased, and I was glad all three of them were getting along so well.

Peter had roared with laughter during Emmett's description of Bella's awakening, and the chaos that had ensued afterwards.

Emmett chuckled. "She was just like a fuckin' ninja."

"Sounds like a total cluster fuck. You all let a newborn kick your asses. Shouldn't have had all those vampires around her. Sets 'em off." Peter observed. He was at the north end of the porch where it wrapped around the side of the house. He tipped the wooden rocker back and had his hands clasped
over his belly. His right leg was propped up on the porch rail.

"I tried to tell them that." I sighed.

"Bit ya right off, did she?" Peter chuckled.

"Hell, yeah she did." Emmett laughed. "She wasn't awake a whole minute, and she was markin' him. She's bitten him three times already. And punched, kicked, and pinched him. Got him with her elbows, too. Pretty much, she's beaten the shit out of 'im."

"My kinda girl," Peter remarked. "'Bout time somebody kicked his ass."

Though true, I didn't dignify it with a comment.

Peter was as impressed as I was with her ingenuity. "Lickin' her fingers to leave scars? Where the hell did she come up with that? How was she even able to think? Most newborns can hardly remember their own names and can't find their own asses with both hands."

Still smelling Bella's venom on him, I was … annoyed, but controlling it. While Bella was upstairs and naked, I'd rather have Peter where I could watch him. It wasn't that I didn't trust Bella. I knew how much she loved me. And it wasn't that I couldn't trust Peter either. He and Charlotte were mated, and they were perfect for each other. I wasn't sure what the hell my problem was.

Did *all* male vampires feel this wariness and jealousy when their mates were around other males, or was it just me? When I had initially met Carlisle and Emmett, they had felt very brief moments of jealousy, but their alarm at the sight of my scars had been much stronger. They had been mated for quite a while when Alice and I had met them. Was it because Bella and I were newly mated? I had no answers to the questions that bounced and pinged around my brain.

I was sitting in another straight-backed wooden rocker near the bay window in front of the living room. "Maybe she learned that shit watchin' too many of those bad kung fu movies with Emmett."

"Hey!" Emmett sounded insulted. "Me and Belly-babe enjoyed watchin' those movies."

Peter shook his head in amazement. "Why the hell didn't *we* ever think of that?"

I rocked the chair a few times. "If somebody pissed us off, we just ripped 'em apart and burned 'em."

"Oh, yeah."

Emmett just stared at the both of us in disbelief, his mouth hanging open. He was sitting on the top step, leaning back against the post with his right arm propped on his bent knee. His left leg was stretched out across the steps. "Killed 'em?"

Peter nodded. "It was easy enough to get replacements for any of the newborns that didn't measure up." A sardonic smile grew across Peter's face as he studied Emmett. "Jasper and Maria always made more than we needed anyway. They'd thin out their own ranks in the pits. Then when we started trainin' 'em, we always had to cull the herd."

Emmett's mouth snapped shut, and he looked thoughtful for a moment. "You let them tear each other apart?"

It was my turn to nod. "We'd throw them in a pit and make them stay in there. Whoever survived …" I said, not needing to finish the sentence. I shrugged and clasped my hands behind my head.
The skin around Emmett's eyes tightened as he regarded both of us.

"Except for the pretty ones." Peter grinned and looked out over the front yard and gravel driveway toward the trees. He watched Emmett from the corner of his eye. "They wouldn't get thrown in the pits right away."

You could almost hear the gears turning in Emmett's head. I knew Peter was trying to rattle Emmett and see what sort of reaction he could get out of him.

Peter had never been impressed with how Carlisle had "raised" his newborns. He had always thought that vampires should learn how to fight and defend themselves. Especially the females since they were generally smaller than the males. I had agreed with him, which was why I had tried for decades to get Rosalie, Esme, and Alice outside to spar. The only one that had really been interested was Rosalie, and Emmett had always been up for a fight. Carlisle and Edward hadn't felt the need to increase their skills. Carlisle had received some training with the Volturi, and Edward had been arrogant, thinking his gift always gave him an advantage. I had demonstrated how wrong he was.

As much as I had hated the bitch, Maria had been a good example of a small female that could take care of herself. She only stood about five feet tall, but there wasn't a male around that could beat her. Admittedly, a lot of that was the fear most of her soldiers had for her. Peter and I weren't afraid of her because we knew we could beat her in a fight. I had trained him, and we both knew her fighting style very well.

Though the last time I had seen Maria, up in Canada, she had said she held no ill will toward me or Peter and Charlotte. I'd felt no deception from her, but none of us trusted her. She had always been a conniving bitch.

A multitude of emotions passed quickly across Emmett's face. Disbelief, disgust, anger, then finally acceptance. He had been aware of what kind of life I had led before joining the Cullens. It was altogether different hearing about it from someone else though. I hadn't ever supplied a lot of details. If any of them had ever asked, I answered the question and let their imaginations fill in the blanks. I doubted that whatever they imagined ever came close to what Peter, Charlotte, and I had experienced. None of them had brought it up in decades.

Then there had been Edward. I often used memories of my time with Maria as camouflage to cover other thoughts I wanted to keep from him, or to chase him off. I had no idea what he might have told the others when I hadn't been around. Of course he hadn't hesitated to try and use my past against me with Bella.

Charlotte had had it a little better than a lot of the other pretty females. But even if you lived in the penthouse in Hell, it was still Hell. Peter had protected her the best he could, without drawing too much attention to her. Had Maria ever suspected that Charlotte and Peter were mates, she would have ordered me to kill them both as quickly as possible. Peter had even managed to conceal it from me. I had known something was going on with him, but he had hidden it fairly well. I hadn't been too surprised when he had tried to protect Charlotte from me when her year was up. What had surprised me at the time was I had let them run, knowing what Maria would do to me. That had been when I learned Peter could mask his emotions. Not 100%, but well enough. Everything else going on around me had helped him keep it from me.

At last, Emmett worked through his tangle of thoughts and emotions, and a mischievous glint appeared in his light amber eyes. "So, you and Jazz were the pretty ones, huh?"

Peter barked out a laugh and dropped his hands to the arms of the rocker. "Yeah. Me and Jazz were the pretty ones. Weren't we, sugar?" he said, winking at me.
I shot him a quick glare as I suppressed a mild twinge of jealousy, remembering that Bella had said he was "so fucking pretty." Knowing Peter's penchant for trying to get a rise out of everyone, I let a smile appear for Emmett's benefit. "Maria always liked the blonds, and Peter and I were … close."

Emmett just chuckled softly and shook his head. "Got a little *Brokeback Mountain* goin' on here? We *are* in Wyoming."

"I wish I knew how to quit 'im," I said quietly, narrowing my eyes at Peter, playing along with their game. "But he keeps coming back."

"Only when you call me, baby." Peter laughed. "Only when you call me."

Snickering and staring up at the roof of the porch, Emmett sighed. "You guys are assholes."

"Speakin' of assholes," Peter began with a big smile, "tell me what Bubba did to our ol' pal Edweirdo."

"Ho-lee shit!" Emmett rolled his eyes dramatically, but his face nearly glowed with pride for his little sister. "You'd think, with as smart as he's supposed to be, gettin' clawed across the face would have been his first clue Bells wasn't impressed with him. She Tore. Him. *Up.* She was fuckin' awesome!" Emmett slapped his knee and proceeded to regale Peter with a vivid and colorful retelling of Bella taunting Edward and ripping his arm off at the river.

I was grateful he didn't mention the little meltdown I'd had at the time.

In the middle of the recitation, Bella squealed, and we heard all three of the women laughing loudly upstairs.

Hearing their mates' happy laughter, a tender look passed over both Emmett's and Peter's faces. I wondered if I had the same look on my face. Considering the swell of comforting warmth I felt in my chest, I suspected I did.

As Emmett became more animated with his story telling, his hands flashing back and forth with each excited sentence, I became decidedly more still. I'd been away from Bella long enough and the little twinge of jealousy I had felt earlier in my chest shifted and slowly became an insistent ache of longing. She wasn't even that far away from me. I was at the front of the house, and she was in our bathroom upstairs at the back of the house. I kept my hands still after moving them to rest on the arms of the rocker.

Peter laughed loudly when Emmett told him about Bella holding her finger gun at Edward's head and threatening to shoot the hostage. He then grunted, and oohed and ahhed at appropriate places as Emmett described Bella telling off Edward while her hands were around his throat. He sprinkled in a few "no shits" and "damns" for good measure.

When Emmett reached the part about Bella holding Edward down with her shield, Peter's admiration grew, but when Emmett told him about Edward saving Bella's blood and hiding it in his room, Peter's anger expanded into indignation and wrath, and a feeling of protectiveness emanated from him.

His darkening eyes turned to me. "He was dickin' over your mate, and you didn't *kill* the motherfucker?" he asked accusingly. "I can't believe you didn't kill the motherfucker."

My eyes flicked to his. "She wants him to live to remember what she showed him when she let him read her mind. Which was a good idea. You know how the fucker pisses and moans about everything. I think the bastard enjoys wallowing in his own misery. Lettin' him know what she
actually thought will be worse on him than tearin' him apart and killin' him outright." I pressed my
lips together in a frown. "I think she doesn't want his death on my hands. I don't give a shit about
that, but I think she does."

Peter widened his eyes at me in disbelief. He shook his head slowly in disgust and stared down at the
floor. "Sixty years ago …"

"Sixty years ago I didn't give a shit about anything. Things change. She wants him alive to suffer. I
said I wouldn't kill him for that."

"Funny how a supposedly unchanging vampire can change, huh?" Peter asked. Then a dark grin,
that would have frozen the heart of any human and many vampires, spread across Peter's face as his
eyes turned up toward mine. "Wouldn't kill him for that."

"Exactly," I said, looking him right in the eye. Peter understood me.

"And I never promised not to kill him," Emmett said quietly, a half smile forming on his face.

As one, we nodded. I was pleased that we were all in agreement. If Edward ever did anything to try
to harm my mate again, he wouldn't live long enough to torment himself and get out the first woeful,
"I'm nothing but a monster."

"So!" Emmett said brightly, clapping his hands together and breaking the serious mood. "How do
we help our little hellcat control her shield?" Then he rubbed his hands together and grinned. "I think
we should jump her when she's not lookin'."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Emmy-doll," Peter said, rolling his eyes in disdain. "You'll just spook her and
make her more twitchy doin' that shit."

I eyed Emmett with a scornful look. "How many more times do you want her to bite you?"

"Hey, I'm just sayin'." He raised his hands in a placating gesture. "She needs to work on it. Build up
that muscle or whatever it is." He dropped his hands to his lap. "She, like, forgets to use it or gets
distracted or somethin'. We don't even know if she really can kill somebody with her brain. If she
can, that'd be pretty fuckin' awesome. But, it could be pretty fuckin' dangerous, too."

"She didn't kill Ed-perv, so we'll assume she can't." Peter said reasonably.


My eyes turned to Peter. "You know we should try to never assume. My range and strength
increased as I gained practice. Even Edward's hearing range has increased since I've been with them.
He tried to keep it to himself, but he let little things slip now and then." I brought my hand up to my
chin. "His smugness was always a dead giveaway."

Emmett snorted. "Dead giveaway." He chuckled again and waved his hands through the air as if he
were shooshing away flies. "Okay, bad puns aside, we gotta work on that." His eyebrows drew
together and a thoughtful look crossed his face. "She squeezed Eddie-boy, but she didn't crush him.
But then she held him still while Jazz was upstairs searching his room. The farthest she got away
from him was maybe twenty feet when she was out on the patio, and the door was missing. I wonder
if she can hold somebody through a wall or something? Like, how far away can she be and still hold
'em? Can she hold somebody through a wall or something? Like, how far away can she be and still hold
'em? Can she hold somebody and at the same time keep them from touching her? She said her shield
was in layers like an onion." Emmett absently scratched the side of his head. "It seems to come up
automatically when she's scared, but when she's mad she forgets to use it. Or it takes her a second to
use it.
Obviously, Emmett had been giving Bella's shield quite a bit of thought. I, like the distracted fool I was, hadn't been giving it much thought at all yet. "We'll work on it."

-oOoOo-

At last, Bella called down to me, letting me know she was finally out of the tub. I was out of the rocking chair and up the stairs in about four seconds, zipping past Charlotte and Rosalie on the way. Unfortunately, I could still hear Peter's quiet laugh when Emmett hissed to him, "He is so whipped."

But when I got a look at Bella, the ache that was an increasingly tightening band around my heart loosened, and I didn't care how much Peter and Emmett might be laughing at me.

She was barefoot, in fresh blue jeans and was wearing a dark green T-shirt. The deep green enhanced the chestnut highlights in her hair that flowed like a sheet of satin down over her shoulders and contrasted captivatingly with her ivory skin. I stood in the doorway to our room and stared at her, drinking in her exquisite beauty and inhaling her enticing scent, complemented with the vanilla of the bubble bath she had used.

I was so happy to have my mate in my home. So pleased to have her in our home.

"What's the matter Jasper?" She was shifting from foot to foot near our bed and picking at her fingers.

I realized I had been standing there and staring at her for too long, and she was becoming nervous.

"Nothin', Darlin'. I like that color on you," I blurted out, stepping toward her.

"Well, um, I thought you might." She looked down at her hands. "I mean, this is your room and the quilt on the bed is mostly forest green and the curtains are the same color." She looked up and her hands fluttered quickly as she pointed at the bed and the window in the north wall behind her. "I, um, well … if you like the color then …" she gulped, and her eyes dropped to study the beige carpet.

I darted toward her and wrapped her in a hug. I loved that she was wearing the green shirt for me. "I do like the dark green. The beige and green in here reminds me of the forest. They're soothing colors to me." I caught her chin and lifted her face so that I could see into her eyes. "But I like any color on you, Bella. You wear whatever you want to wear. You don't have to dress to try and please me. You dress to please yourself."

She nodded quickly. "But I like the green, too." She stepped back away from me. "Now you can finish the tour of the house." She turned to her left, facing the bed and the front of the house. "Um, I like this furniture. Why did you get two armoires if you have two walk-in closets? Where did you get them?" She turned 180 degrees to face the short hallway that led to the master bathroom at the back of the house. There was a closet on either side of the hall.

She darted forward and stopped between the closet doorways, her long hair swirling around her back. She gestured at each closet. "I mean, you have these two big closets and there isn't anything in them but a couple cowboy hats and some baseball caps. And I like your bathroom, but I kind of wonder why you'd even put in a toilet since vampires don't pee." She frowned. "You know, Alice's bathroom was ridiculous. And pink. I could have fit two of my old bedrooms in her bathroom. Your bathroom is pretty big, but it's not monstrously huge! It's like your bedroom and bathroom take up about half of the upstairs and …"

During her rapid-fire questions and observations, I walked forward and grasped her hands. "Bella."

She stopped and looked up at me. "What?"
"Slow down a little bit. Give me a chance to answer your questions." I smiled at her. "This is our bedroom and bathroom. That's why Charlotte brought our bags up here. I told her and Peter that I would be bringing my newborn mate here." I started walking backward, drawing her along with me. "They don't take up half the upstairs — they take up about a third. Even though we don't pee, if I should ever sell the house, humans would expect there to be bathrooms. And kitchens, too." I winked at her. "I see Charlotte and Rosalie didn't unpack our bags?"

"Uh, they didn't know where to put the clothes and stuff, but my bubble bath and shampoo are in your, uh … the bathroom." She smiled shyly at me, pulling her hands from mine and began tugging at the ends of her hair.

I cupped her face and quickly kissed her lips. "Darlin', this is our bedroom in our house. I've never lived here before, though I have visited a few times. Peter and Charlotte have been here more than I have." I kissed her again. "If you don't like the colors, I'll change them. If this one isn't big enough, I'll add on to it. If you don't like this house, I'll build you another one. If you want to go someplace else, I'll do my best to get you there. I only brought you here because it's isolated, there's good hunting nearby, and it wasn't such a long ride to get here."

"Oh." Bella stared up at me with wide eyes. "I … uh, this house is plenty big enough. I like it." She seemed overwhelmed.

"Bella, you are my mate. Everything I have is yours. If there's something else you want, I'll try and get it for you. I love you."

She nodded quickly. "Okay. Um, okay." She blew out a gusty breath. "Nobody ever said they'd build me a whole house before. Okay." She blinked rapidly several times and then pointed toward our bags under the front window. "Er, maybe we should put our clothes away?"

I darted toward the front window, going between the foot of the bed and a darkly stained rocking chair next to an end table and lamp, and grabbed the two duffel bags. "Where do you want your clothes? In an armoire or in a closet?"

She blinked several times again, looking bewildered. "Oh, gosh. Honestly, Jasper, I never had a choice of where to put my clothes. I never had … I mean I only ever had a little dresser and a tiny closet at Renee's. I had the same thing at Charlie's and … and I …" Her hands went to the sides of her head.

I was in front of her. I dropped the bags and grasped her hands, pulling them to my lips. She was becoming confused again and it was my fault. I was throwing too much at her at once. "Bella, it's okay. It'll be all right. I'm right here," I said, speaking softly to her to help her calm her thoughts. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "It's okay. Everything I said was a lot to take in. I should have gone more slowly."

My problem was, I was so thrilled at finding my mate and having her in my territory, and away from the Cullens, I was a little excited. I rubbed her back with slow, gentle strokes and shared the contentedness I felt when I touched her.

"Right now," I began, "I'll put your things in the closet to the left. That way your clothes are close by when you take a bath. You can move them later if you want." I ran my hands up her back. "I'll put my clothes in the armoire by the door. We'll put the duffle bags in the other closet."

She nodded against my chest. "Okay. I'm sorry. I just got a little confused for a minute. I don't even know why."
I pulled back from her, holding her shoulders. "It's okay. I'll try not to do that to you anymore."

"But you didn't …"

"Bella, I'm just so happy to have you here, I got a little enthusiastic. I must have been projecting it." I squeezed her arms and then lifted her duffel from the floor. "Like I told you when you first woke up — we'll work on one thing at a time."

I moved at human speed to the closet that was designated as Bella's. I had a few baseball caps in there and tossed them into the other closet.

One thing I had learned from Alice about closets was I liked built-in shelves. I placed Bella's clothes on the shelves at the back wall of the closet and took the rest of her toiletries into the rectangular bathroom. The tub was on the right side of the bathroom, and there was a shower stall and toilet to the left, separated by their own door. I put my minimal toiletries in the drawers on the left of the double sink vanity and put Bella's remaining items in the drawers closest to the tub. I noticed Charlotte had brought three bottles of vanilla scented bubble bath and body wash, and a few different bottles of shampoo.

Bella watched quietly as I put things away. "Charlotte bought me a lot of stuff. She picked up four back brushes, a couple of those long loufahs, and a bunch of those nylon poufy things. That was really nice of her."

"Charlotte is a sweetheart. I only asked her to get a bottle of vanilla bubble bath." I smiled fondly. She was as much my sister as Rosalie, if not more so because we had been through so much together.

"Huh," Bella said, crossing her arms. "The way Char tells it, under threat of dismemberment, there was an unequivocal order given to procure vanilla bubble bath."

I froze and looked at Bella sheepishly from the corner of my eye. I finally said, "I never threatened to dismember anyone." Then I added, "For that."

"Uh huh." Bella studied me suspiciously.

To redirect the awkward direction the topic had turned to, I asked, "Do you want your things in a particular place? I'll put them wherever you want them." I said, turning toward her.

"No. Actually, you're doing great. Charlotte put most of the stuff she bought in the drawers and the cupboard on the right side. Closer to the tub, I guess." She shrugged. "And I don't have much stuff to clutter up the bathroom. I don't have make-up. Not like Alice did."

"You sure don't." I smiled appreciatively at her. Bella was so beautiful she didn't need any make-up as far as I was concerned. I never understood why Alice had always wanted so much. Esme and Rosalie had quite a bit, but not nearly as much as Alice. I had just chalked it up to "woman stuff."

I put Bella's duffel on the top shelf in the closet across from hers then went to put my clothes in the armoire by the bedroom door. "To answer some of your other questions — this furniture is all reclaimed wood and boards from old barns. I bought it over in Dubois." I closed the doors on the armoire when I finished and turned toward her. "Dubois has a lot of artists and craftsmen. It's been like that for years. Back in the day," I said smiling at her, "the place was full of hippies."

"Oh." She grinned up at me. "Back in the day just a few decades ago. Not back in your day."

I hugged her to me, chuckling. "Oh, Darlin'. Back in my day, I reckon there were buffalo grazin'
where the town would be one day." I kissed her forehead. "Let's see the rest of the upstairs. Though
there's not much to see." I pulled her into the hallway. "The front half of the house is our room, a
little bedroom I use as another library, and the guest room. Rose and Emmett are in that one." I
pointed at the bi-fold doors next to our bedroom door. "This is a linen closet. There's the hall bath
and then Peter and Charlotte's room. It's a little bigger than the other two."

"They're beige," Bella said matter-of-factly.

"Please. Beige and *cream*." I said, smiling and kissing her forehead. "Charlotte has a red comforter
on her bed. If Rosalie wants something besides a cream and tan quilt, she can go get it."

We walked forward a few feet until we were near the top of the stairs. "I bought armoires because I
like them. I don't remember, but they seem familiar to me. I must have had one when I was human.
Back then, not so many houses had closets."

Bella nodded and peered into the bathroom. "It has a window. It's beige. So Rose and Em will have
to share the hall bath with Peter and Charlotte?"

"*Every* room has at least one window. And, yes, they'll have to share."

"Wow. That's like slumming for them." Her eyes flew open and she slapped her hand over her
mouth. "Oh, shit. Don't tell them I said that." A flare of her embarrassment encircled us.

I chuckled as I drew her to my chest. "I won't. Please don't be embarrassed. This house is only about
a third of the size of Esme's house in Forks, but my tastes are simpler. The house in Forks is about
the biggest one they own. The others are more … modest. Except for the one in Alaska." I hugged
her. "Esme and Carlisle bought the Forks house for a song because it was practically falling down,
and she loves to remodel. That's why there're so many bathrooms. When I bought this place, I only
made a few changes to a standard floor plan. I could have just built a one-room cabin, but I knew
Peter and Charlotte would be using it now and then. I wanted them to be comfortable."

"I'm sorry. I must sound like a reverse snob or something." She ducked her head and leaned into me.
"I just … I just never had much of anything, and you all are so rich and have so much stuff and …"

"Bella, we've had a lot of years to accumulate … money and things. Alice's gift has certainly helped
with the money part of it. But even if she couldn't see the future, savings accounts, over 100 years or
so, would earn money." I ran my hands over her back. "After a few years, you start to see trends in
the stock market and the economy. You try to invest wisely and conservatively. The Reagan boom
years more than quadrupled my net worth. Having a little gold, silver, and platinum doesn't hurt
either." I kissed her head. "When you choose a name to start using, you'll be added to multiple
accounts and business holdings."

Bella's hand went to her forehead. "Oh," she said, dazed. "Maybe right at the moment we shouldn't
discuss money and stuff." She dragged her hand down her face and mumbled, "And I was worried
about the 1500 bucks I had in my sock."

"Hey ya'll!" Charlotte called from outside. "We're burnin' daylight. Thought you wanted to dig some
gardens, Bella."

"Yes, I do!" Bella said. "C'mon, Jasper! Digging flower beds will be more fun than playing with
Lincoln Logs." Her distress over money shoved to the side, she was eager to get outside. She leapt
down the stairs to the landing and turned to look up at me. "Isabella Marie Whitlock."

"What?" I asked. Apparently it was my turn to be confused.
"My name." She smiled up at me. "Isabella Marie Whitlock."

As my heart swelled with love for Bella, I heard Charlotte swing open the front door. "Bella! I've got some sunflower seeds. They'll be so pretty by that old barn."

Bella hooted, and she was gone.

-oOoOo-

While Charlotte had Bella digging up plots in front of and around the rest of the barn, she decided Peter, Emmett, and I could go find rocks big enough to use to border the new flowerbeds. In one of the stalls of the barn, there was an old pick-up truck bed that had been converted into a wagon that we could use to haul rocks with. Peter wasn't going to let us use his stake-side trailer.

Emmett whined about having to go find rocks and both Charlotte and Rosalie raised a hand, bringing their thumbs and forefingers together.

Emmett grumbled. "That goddamn pinchin'. One of these days, Bellzy-bub. Bang! Boom! Straight to the moon."

Bella paused in her digging long enough to stick her tongue out at him, and she resumed clawing into the ground. Unfortunately, she was on the shady side of the barn, and she had run too fast from the house to the barn at the opposite end of the clearing. I hadn't gotten a look at her in the sun.


Peter grabbed my arm. "We'd better make tracks before the women give us somethin' else stupid to do."

Charlotte spun around, her corn silk hair flying around her, anger flashing in her bright red eyes. "Peter Whitlock," she began with a growl, "You know damn well that if there isn't some kind of border around these flowersbeds you'll run over 'em with the mower. We need rocks bigger than a football. We need some flat ones, too, to make walkways and stuff. Now git!"

Emmett hauled our impromptu wagon out of the barn, and we proceeded to git.

We entered the forest and went up the mountain behind the barn, following one of the old logging trails. We cleared limbs and branches, and pulled up saplings that had grown in and over the trail.

Emmett was still fussing. "That barn's fifty feet long. Why the hell does it need flowerbeds down both sides?"

Flowerbeds around a barn seemed pointless to me, too, but Bella was enjoying the digging, even though Charlotte kept yelling at her to slow down. Picking out the rocks and gravel, without crushing them, would be good practice for her. And the women wanted it. I didn't have a problem with flowers anywhere they wanted to put them.

"Bella needs practice with her hands. Maybe Char'll let her plant the seeds, too," I answered him. "If she doesn't make sunflower butter out of them."

"She'll have fun chasing the deer and rabbits away, too. 'Course, she could just eat 'em." Peter said, smirking. "When's the last time she fed?"

"Wednesday. Her eyes are starting to darken already. She should hunt again tomorrow." I yanked up a few saplings and tossed them to the side.
Peter kicked a rock loose from the dirt. It was about the size of a soccer ball. He tossed it back toward Emmett who caught it easily and lobbed it into the wagon with a loud clang. "You takin' her?"

"Yes."

Peter nodded then pointed down toward the ground. "You're walkin' right by the nice ones. You gotta pick them rocks up."

Before I had a chance to say anything, Emmett snorted and his laugh rang out.

"He doesn't need to pick the rocks up," he crowed. "He needs to get his rocks off."

In one continuous move, I snagged a softball-sized rock from the ground, spun, and threw it, hitting Emmett right in the middle of his chest. The rock exploded in a cloud of dust, and Emmett dropped the tongue of the wagon, coughing and spitting rock dust out of his mouth and rubbing it out of his eyes.

While Emmett was sputtering and cussing me, Peter just quietly studied me as we continued up the incline at our moderate human pace.

"I thought you seemed a little … tense. Even Char noticed." Only the left side of his mouth went up in a smile. "You seemed a bit tense when you called a few days ago." His eyebrows went up in a silent question. "Too many Cullens around you said."

I didn't say anything. It was none of his business why I might have been a little on edge.

Then his eyes lit up and his head cocked to the side. "She's a virgin." He stated quietly. "Seems like she remembers a whole lot about her human life, so she remembers enough to be nervous. Most newborns don't."

My eyes flicked to his and away. What he said was true but what was he driving at?

Dropping his voice, he said. "I think Charlotte might have been a virgin when you and Maria caught her." He sighed heavily and a sliver of regret wound its way through his otherwise steady emotions.

I looked at him again, studying the still and somber cast of his face. I knew he didn't regret being mated to Charlotte. Had he hurt her? That was a concern that had been niggling at the back of my mind. I was more than a little eager to fully claim my mate, but Bella had seemed more anxious about it. I would have to control myself. It was becoming more difficult with each passing day.

"I didn't know, and at the time I wasn't far past being a newborn myself. You know we didn't give a shit who we fucked or how we fucked 'em." His eyes dropped to study the ground. "I was rough with her." He sighed again, smiled sadly and said, "Just go slow."

As Emmett caught up to us, I gave Peter a grateful nod. He always did seem to understand more than he let on.

"Jazz, you're an asshole. You can haul the wagon." Emmett shoved the tongue of the wagon at me and slapped Peter on the shoulder. "Pete, you and me are gonna race to the top of the mountain."

Peter's red eyes took on a playful sparkle. "Somebody a little wound up? Straight up or follow the loggin' trail?"

"Straight up. We'll pick up rocks on the way back down."
"Sounds like a plan."

"Let's go!"

-oOoOo-

We made it back to the barn with our first load of rocks just in time to see Rosalie toss a bale of peat moss at Bella. Bella caught it, of course, but she grabbed it too tightly. The plastic-wrapped bale exploded in her arms and a dense cloud of reddish brown dust blew out from her in all directions.

She darted out of the cloud, covered head to toe with the powdery peat moss, coughing and gagging, as she flung the tattered plastic wrap away from her. She was trying to wipe it from her face.

"Dammit, Rosalie! What the hell?" She brushed at the front of her shirt and ripped it. "Oh, goddammit!"

I rushed toward her. Luckily, only her stomach was exposed after she ripped her shirt. I grabbed her hands that had clenched into fists. "It's all right, Darlin'. I'll help you."

While the rest of them laughed, I stripped off my shirt and began wiping the brown dust from Bella's face and brushing it from her clothing. "Hold still. It's okay." I noticed she had ear buds in and the cord went down her back. I plucked them from her ears and pulled the iPod from her back pocket. Then I gathered her shirt and tied a knot in the front where she had ripped it.

She was growling, and her fists were trembling. "I caught the first one okay, but then I popped this one. It's bullshit!" Her frustration and anger were pulsing from her. "I got this shit up my nose, in my eyes, and in my mouth, and it tastes disgusting!" She spit into the flowerbed.

I dropped my shirt and hugged her to my chest. "It's okay, Darlin'. You'll do better with the next one." I stroked her hair, trying to get the peat moss out of it. "What were you goin' to do with it?"

She was still growling, but not as loudly. "I was going to spread it over this garden I dug up and mix it in, like I did at the back of the barn. Charlotte said the 'peat moss was a good amendment to add to the soil.'"

"Music?" I asked her.

She huffed loudly. "Charlotte said I kept digging too fast so she went and got Peter's iPod, and said I should dig in time to the music. That Perry Como and Andy Williams were bullshit so Charlotte switched it to Def Leppard. That was much better."

"Perry Como?" I asked, raising my eyebrows at Peter.

He looked everywhere but at me, while a twinge of guilt colored his emotions. He dug his toe into the grass and clasped his hands behind his back.

Charlotte had stopped laughing as she came out of the barn and walked over to us. She took the iPod from me and patted Bella on her back, her fingers going through her hair. "It's okay, Bella. You did good diggin' in time to the music, and you picked the rocks out real well. You crushed hardly any of them. You mixed the peat moss in good, too."

"Digging around in the dirt is no big deal! I can't break dirt! It's touching other stuff with my hands!" She pushed me away and held her hands up in front of her face, her fingers curved like claws. "How do I not crush things with my feet when I'm walking around? Like the floors in the house? But if I touch things with my hands I turn them to dust! It's bullshit!"
"Bella." I took hold of her hands again and kissed her fingers, noticing peat moss did taste disgusting. "Look at me." Her eyes flicked up to mine, and I saw that they were darker than they had been earlier. "I think you need to hunt, Darlin'."

"Dammit, Jasper, I'm fine! Well, I'm a little thirsty and kinda pissed off, but I'm fine! Charlotte said after I got the peat moss mixed in over here, I could plant the sunflower seeds. They need to be on this side of the barn because they'll get the most sun on this side." She yanked her hands away again. "Char gave me a stainless steel bucket to use to gather rocks, but I broke the handle off, so I was throwing them over there. See?" She spun and pointed at a three-foot high pile of rocks at the edge of the trees and spun back to face me. "Then Rose was planting some marigolds in front of the barn — I really like the solid orange ones — and she said I missed picking out some rocks, so she threw them at me. The first one hit me in the back, but I caught the others. Well, I kinda crushed them. Then Charlotte said we could test my shield by throwing rocks at me. But I wanted to finish mixing in the peat moss first, and I want to try and plant the sunflower seeds. Then we have to water them and …"

As I caught Bella's hands again, Peter smirked and crossed his arms over his chest. "Looks like Emmett ain't the only one a little wound up."

Bella frowned at him. "Hush! We have to get the seeds planted!"

"Bella." I shook her hands to get her attention. "Look at me. We have time for that. And we could use rocks to test your shield and help you practice with it."

"But Rose said the last frost date is like the middle of July. Maybe we need a green house. Emmett could build it over the flower beds, right?" She pulled her hands away from me again and darted over to Emmett. "You could build it against the barn, right?"

He and Peter were still under the cover of the trees. Bella had run through the sunlight so quickly, she was just an iridescent flash, leaving a cloud of brown dust in her wake.

"Yeah, we could build one anywhere you want. We just need to get the materials." Emmett grinned at her. "Ya know, Bells, we could play war. It'd be fun."

"Play war? What is it?"

Emmett threw his arm over Bella's shoulders and winked at me over her head. "Well, we could go in the woods, choose up sides, and throw rocks and sticks at each other. It's great."

"Yeah! C'mon, Jasper!" Her anger suddenly gone, she disappeared between the trees with Emmett trailing behind her.

As I took off to catch up with her, Peter drew up beside me, an amused smirk on his face. "Somebody else is a little, uh, tense, too."

I just narrowed my eyes at him.

"It'll work out." He chuckled. "Ya know they're probably goin' to ambush us."

Knowing Emmett, I was sure of it.

Peter laughed again. "I can't be out here playin' all day. I gotta clean up and head into town to get the mail in a while. I think there's probably some important mail there for ya."

"Oh?" I hoped it was the divorce papers from Alice. Being in an isolated place was good for Bella,
but one of the downsides was there was no overnight document delivery to the house.

"Yeah. That mail you said you were waitin' for. I think it's there." He tapped his forehead and winked at me. "Besides, the post master, Miss Ellen, can't wait to see me again."

I rolled my eyes at him. "You're an asshole."

"What can I say? She loves me," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, shit." I caught a flash of movement through the trees. Two boulders the size of small riding lawnmowers were hurtling toward us.

"Son of a bitch!" Peter exclaimed as he leapt to the right.

I sprang to the left and rolled away to the sound of Bella's exultant hoots. "We got 'em, Em!"

How the hell had they gotten up the mountain so fast?

Peter walked back toward me, brushing leaves and other forest debris off his clothes as he watched the boulders crash through trees and bounce down the mountain toward Rosalie and Charlotte.

About fifty feet or so down I heard Rosalie gasp. "Char! Catch the rocks before they roll down and hit the barn! Damn that Emmett."

Peter just grinned and shook his head at me. "I knew having a newborn around was goin' to be fun."

Chapter End Notes

Paraphrasing: "I wish I knew how to quit you." Jack Twist to Ennis Del Mar in the movie Brokeback Mountain.

"We're burnin' daylight." John Wayne as Wil Andersen in the movie The Cowboys.

Paraphrasing "One of these days, Alice. Bang! Boom! Straight to the moon." Ralph Kramden to Alice Kramden in the TV show The Honeymooners.
The waiting game is over

No need for pretending

We were meant to be.

It's only getting stronger.

The love feel for you,

It's no mystery

..

I want to be the one who loves you

(Now and forever)

I want to take my place beside you
"The Other Side" by Toto from the album *Kingdom of Desire*

-oOoOo-

*Nothing stands between us here*

*And I won't be denied*

*And I would be the one*

*To hold you down*

*Kiss you so hard*

*I'll take your breath away*

..  

"Possession" — Sarah McLachlan, from the album *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy*

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**Chapter 43, I Roll**

**Jasper's POV**

I was sitting at the kitchen island, trying to look through the newspaper comics Peter and Charlotte had brought, but I couldn't keep my mind off Bella.

Peter was still stretched out on the recliner, and Charlotte and Emmett were sitting on the floor playing video games. Emmett had said he really liked the flat screen mounted on the wall above the fireplace. I hadn't done that. Peter had bought the TV and installed it. Though it crossed my mind we should probably buy some more furniture. One recliner and three kitchen stools didn't seem like enough anymore.

I loved Bella more than I had ever loved anyone. I loved her beyond all thought and reason. There weren't words to describe the depth of the love and adoration I had for her. But she was trying my patience. She had been for the last several hours.

Playing Emmett's version of war had kept her busy for hours, and she had really enjoyed it. She had
also enjoyed the running through the woods and shrieking part. Peter had commented a few times about how loud she was.

"Loudest damn vampire I ever heard. Was her mother a banshee?" he'd asked.

Then she ran past him and nailed him right in the back of the head with a fist-sized rock, proving her aim was deadly and she could be quiet when she wanted to.

Bella hadn't been too happy about getting hit with rocks and small boulders, and Emmett had given her hell for letting us hit him, but it helped her learn to focus her attention and snap her shield up more quickly. But she couldn't leave it up at full strength, because then they couldn't throw any rocks back at us. We had learned that when Emmett threw a soccer ball-sized rock and it bounced back and hit Bella on her arm.

Fortunately, when vampires were fighting, they didn't tend to use any weapons other than their own hands, feet, and teeth.

She hadn't bitten him for that, but he'd had to fight her off to keep her from pinching him.

After Bella and Emmett had thrown boulders at Peter and me, the little war game had evolved. It had started out as the brunettes against the blonds. Emmett's idea, I had thought. After a while, we had changed it up. It was boys against the girls, then Peter had the brilliant idea of Southern Charm versus the Damn Yankees. Since Emmett had come from Tennessee, and Tennessee had furnished more soldiers to the Union oppressors than any other southern state, it was decided he would be a Yankee. That evened up the numbers on both sides, too.

No one was actually winning any of the little skirmishes, except we learned Bella's aim was so good it was fucking eerie. She could hit a moving target more often than any of us, and we nailed them most of the time.

We changed it up again to concentrate more on Bella's shield. She could shield me from getting hit, but she couldn't keep me from touching her. We assumed it was because I was her mate. So we had tried pairing her up with the others. Interestingly, when she had been paired with Emmett or Rosalie, her shield could block any rocks thrown at them, and she could stop them from touching her. It got a lot more interesting when we added Peter and Charlotte.

I got pretty damn pissed off when Peter was next to her and she put up her shield. As I threw a rock to hit him, aiming for his grinning face, he leaned over and patted Bella's arm. Lucky for him, the same thing happened when Charlotte was with her.

Next, we had tried having Rosalie and Charlotte stand next to her. She blocked the rocks, but Rosalie and Charlotte could still touch her. The same thing happened when Peter and Emmett were next to her. We tried every variation we could think of. If Charlotte, Peter, or I were included, she could block things from hitting us, but she couldn't stop us from touching her.

We could not figure out why that was.

Rosalie had stood quietly for several minutes, her right elbow propped on her left hand, her right index finger tapping her mouth. The position had reminded me of Carlisle.

"Venom," she had finally said.

Emmett frowned at her. "But Bella hasn't bitten Char."

"Not Bella — Jasper," Rosalie explained. "What they have in common is Jasper's venom."
We all just stared at her.

"But she's bitten everyone here except Char. Oh, wait." Emmett scratched his head. "She didn't get that much venom in me and you, and Jasper …"

"Yes. Jasper sired all three of them."

"But what difference does that make? It's her shield! And you can tell Bella is his. She's smells like him, but Pete and Char don't smell like him."

"Yes, they do," Bella said. "It's faint, but you can smell Jasper's cinnamon on them."

I stared at her blankly. I'd never noticed that on either of them. "You can smell that? Are you sure it's not from us touchin' each other?"

She put her hands on her hips. "Have you touched Charlotte since we've been here?"

"Actually, no."

"I didn't smell it at first, but I've been near them for a while, and I can smell it."

I was amazed at that. If she could do that, she had a hell of a nose on her. Might even be another talent. It was said that Aro Volturi could detect very subtle scents and was frequently able to determine a vampire's progeny or sire by scent alone.

Emmett pursed his lips, studying all four of us. "So, Jazz bit all of you, and Bella bit Jazz and Pete. Char bit Pete, but not Jazz or Bella, and Pete bit Char …"

"But Peter's bitten Jasper, too," Charlotte piped up.

At Emmett's blank look, Peter grinned and waggled his eyebrows at him. "We told ya Jasper and I had been … close." A sly smile broke over his face.

Emmett looked puzzled, then surprised, and then his hand went to his forehead. He had a bewildered look on his face. "Bit Jazz? Really?"

"Take it easy, Em," Peter warned him. "Your brain's goin' to start smokin' here soon."

Charlotte blew out a loud breath in exasperation. "Oh, for cryin' out loud, Emmett. They were fightin', and Peter finally got his teeth into him and wouldn't let go."

"That's what we told her," Peter mumbled out of the side of his mouth.

Emmett scowled at him. "Shut up, Pete." Emmett crossed his arms and stared at us, deep in thought. "Ah ha!" he exclaimed, holding up a finger as his face brightened. "We got an uncle-daddy, sister-mother thing goin' on here. We need to experiment. If any of you bit anybody else …"

"Oh, Je-sus Christ." Peter threw his hands up in the air. "The only way to experiment is to have Jasper bite you or Rosalie and pump ya full of his venom."

"No," Rosalie stated flatly. "Jasper can bite Emmett. He's not biting me."

I huffed loudly at them. "Did any of you take into consideration that I might not want to bite Rosalie or Emmett?"

Bella was grinning, and her head was whipping back and forth to watch each speaker. "I'll bite …"
"No!" we all shouted at her.

She frowned at each of us.

"You all decide who's gonna bite who." Peter brought up both hands and waved them as if he was brushing us all aside. "I gotta get cleaned up so I can run into town and pick up the mail. Hell, let Bubba bite everybody. Then she can be the sister-mother-aunt-cousin-niece-granny." He grinned. "I gotta go. Miss Ellen's waitin' for me at the post office."

Peter had kissed Charlotte on the cheek, snapped a jaunty salute, and started running down the mountain, disappearing through the trees.

Then Bella had decided she wanted to finish mixing the peat moss into her last garden by the barn and try to plant sunflower seeds.

I'd left my peat moss-covered T-shirt down by the barn, and I hadn't missed her quick, admiring glances in my direction. She could cover her emotions, but she couldn't hide the look in her eyes. Especially since she was trying to hide the fact that she was looking at me. I didn't know what had changed. Or had I not noticed her doing it before? I thought I would have noticed — my eyes were always turning to her. Had it been because of our play battle, running through the woods, and using rocks as weapons? The physical activity? I just didn't know. But then it seemed as if she was trying to avoid me. She had bolted down the side of the mountain, and when I had caught up with her, she was already busily spreading the dark brown dust around her fifty by ten-foot garden on the west side of the barn. She had been angry earlier in the day because the bag had exploded all over her, but there she was — slinging around handfuls of the powdery dust and churning it into the dirt with her hands.

When she had run into the barn to grab another bale, I had started wondering how much gardening stuff Charlotte had brought in.

"Did you leave anything at the store, Charlotte?"

"Oh, stop! We brought some stuff with us, and Peter and I went and got some more," she answered as she brought out another flat of bright orange marigolds. "We put it in the last two stalls on the right."

"Two stalls?" I thought that maybe I should go look, but then again, I really didn't want to know.

"Only two." She smiled sweetly and handed the flowers to Rosalie and went to get more. "You and Emmett can start putting those rocks you brought back around these flowerbeds in front of the barn. Unless you want to plant flowers?"

"Dammit," Emmett grumbled. "Esme had me out in her flowerbeds, and now Char's doin' it."

"Just do it, Emmy-dear." Bella stood up from her mixing and brushed her hands together. It didn't help get any of the dirt off. Then she announced, "Char! I'm done with the peat moss, and I smoothed out the dirt. I'm ready to plant the seeds!"

Charlotte had run into the barn and came back out with a few dozen packets of seeds. "These are different kinds of sunflowers, Bella. Don't ya just love the pictures? We'll put the tall ones in the back and leave some space between the rows so we can walk through 'em. Look at these short ones! We'll put them up front."

She and Bella then had their heads together reading all the seed packets and planning where to plant them.
Emmett and I had been using the rocks from the pick-up bed wagon and realized we'd have to get a lot more to go around all the flowerbeds, but he didn't want to go get any more rocks. Neither did I, truth be told. I didn't want to be away from Bella again.

While we had been building little walls around the little gardens in front of the barn, I'd been watching Bella from the corner of my eye, and though she kept herself busy, I noticed she kept peeking at me. She'd been blocking me from feeling her emotions for hours, and I was wondering what was going on.

Bella had been very carefully poking holes in the dirt with her finger, then she would very gingerly reach into the bucket she had broken the handle off of earlier and pick out a seed. She'd drop the seed in the hole, carefully cover it, and then peek at me through her hair.

When I'd reached the flower bed to the right of the barn door, and Bella was at the far end of her sunflower bed, Rosalie had wandered over with another flat of marigolds.

She leaned in close as she planted a few more and whispered in my ear, "Lovely night. The quarter moon is bright enough to make Bella glow — even through all the dirt." She patted the soil down around another little flower. "Have you noticed Bella looking at you? She can't keep her eyes off you. It's a wonder she hasn't crushed all those seeds."

"I have noticed. And she does glow in the moonlight," I sighed and rearranged a couple of rocks so they were steady. "But she's blockin' me again, and it's like she's avoidin' me."

"Jasper, she's nervous. But she wants you."

"Jasper, she's nervous. But she wants you."

"Jasper, she's nervous. But she wants you." Rosalie grinned at me. "Shirtless? Running through the woods and being all Rambo with the rocks? She's practically been drooling."

Oh?

I looked skeptically at Rosalie from the corner of my eye.

"I was shirtless before. Quite a bit since she kept rippin' them off me."

"But you weren't being all macho warrior and trying to obliterate your friends with rocks then — flexing your muscles and looking all deadly and vicious and sexy. What girl could resist?"

"Bella, apparently," I grumbled. "Why doesn't she want me near her?"

"She's nervous," Rosalie repeated. "But you're wearing her down, I think. When you finish this flowerbed, why don't you go take a shower and wear one of those V-neck T-shirts? She likes those."

"Bella, apparently," I grumbled. "Why doesn't she want me near her?"

"Bella, apparently," Rosalie winked at me, patted my cheek, and planted the last little marigold at the front of the bed. "All done," she said happily as she stood up. She smiled at me again and took the rectangular plastic tray that had held the flowers into the barn.

I studied Bella in the moonlight. She was so beautiful and maddening, and still pretending to ignore me. I wanted her so badly there was a constant hum of need vibrating through my body.

But Rosalie had said I was wearing her down. Was that why she was blocking me?

Bella had been moving slower than human speed, and Emmett and I were getting bored lying on the grass, watching the girls, even though the view was pretty damn nice. We'd used up all the rocks from the wagon. We had offered to help Bella so it would get finished faster, but she wouldn't let us. I had about given up on waiting on them and was trying to decide if I should just go get a shower since Bella was still pretending to ignore me. I also wanted to see what Peter had picked up at the post office. He had come back hours before.
Finally, about midnight, Emmett started whining. "This shit is boring. You girls can play with these seeds and flowers, I'm goin' to go play video games." He loped toward the house.

"Jazz?" Rosalie had said as she and Charlotte came back out of the barn carrying more flats of flowers. "Why don't you go with Emmett and get cleaned up? We'll be out here for a little while longer." She grinned at me and shooed me away.

Peter had been stretched out on the recliner watching TV when Emmett and I went in the house. Emmett ran upstairs to get a shower, and I threw my T-shirt in the laundry room, and then looked over the mail Peter had dropped on the kitchen island. A sale flyer from the local home center and hardware store. After Charlotte had been there shopping, I wondered if there was anything left to put on sale. There were a few credit card ads, and my divorce papers from Alice.

"Somethin' important?" Peter asked.

I must have made some sort of sound when I recognized Alice's swirling handwriting on the large envelope.

"Divorce papers from Alice."

"Ahhhh. Read 'em over good," he called after me as I ran upstairs.

After showering and dressing in clean jeans and a grey V-neck T-shirt, I wiped my belt clean and brushed my boots and put them back on. I would need a pen, so found one in the little library upstairs. I dropped onto the bed and read over the divorce documents while I waited impatiently for Bella.

She had finally come in about five in the morning and ran upstairs. She skidded to a stop when she saw me lying on the bed.

"Oh, um, hey," she said as she began to nervously pick at her fingers.

I had rolled to the edge of the bed, grabbing the divorce papers and the pen. "Bella, look." I held the papers up so she could see them. "These are my divorce papers from Alice." I flipped through the pages, writing my name where my signature was required, bracing against my leg. When I had finished, I set my copies aside and shoved the remaining pages in the pre-addressed envelope that Alice had thoughtfully included. I sealed the envelope, dropped it on the bed and looked up at Bella who was staring at me with wide eyes. "They're signed. Peter will take this envelope to the post office and mail the copies back to Alice." When she didn't say anything, I said, "I'm divorced."

Bella's hands flew up to her mouth, and she blinked at me several times.

I heard someone coming up the stairs.

"I need a bath!" Bella exclaimed, and she fled into the bathroom.

I could hear Rosalie chuckling as she rounded the wall separating the hall from the stairway, and she walked toward me.

I was just sitting there on the edge of the bed, dumbfounded, staring after Bella. I thought she would be happy that I was "officially" divorced.

Rosalie came close and leaned over to whisper in my ear. "She's about to break." She straightened and then said in a more normal tone of voice. "I came to help Bella get undressed. You run along now. I'll call you when she's finished with her bath."
I had been baffled and bewildered. Bella was my **mate** and she would hardly let me touch her until I told her I was *getting* a divorce. I signed the papers right in front of her, showing her I *was* divorced, and she had run away from me. If she was about to finally give in to me like Rosalie had said, she had a damn funny way of showing it.

And Rosalie had just chased me out of my own goddamn room.

Dazed, I had gotten up and gone downstairs. Belatedly, that was when I started to really wonder what the hell it was the women talked about when the men weren't around.

-oOoOo-

It wasn't until nearly eight o'clock in the goddamn morning when Rosalie finally called downstairs, letting me know Bella was out of the tub. What the hell had they been doing in there for **three hours**?

I'd had it up to *here* with Emmett's whining because Charlotte was kicking his ass at his stupid video games, and I'd had enough of Peter's fucking bullshit. I'd made the mistake of telling him I was divorced, and Peter started in with jokes about losing the ball and chain and suggesting we should go bar hopping over in Jackson Hole and cruise for chicks since I was single. I was about ready to punch him when Rosalie said they were finished.

I darted upstairs, and Rosalie was waiting for me in the hall. She whispered quickly, "Bella needs to hunt. Her eyes are getting dark, and she's being a little … fussy. She let me get her dressed, but she wouldn't let me help her put her shoes on." She patted my shoulder. "Congratulations on your divorce." She grinned and gave me a saucy wink as she left me in the hall. "Good luck."

Good luck? And what was the wink for?

I found Bella sitting on the floor near the bed. Just the sight of her began to ease the aggravation I had been feeling at Peter's shit. Rosalie had braided her hair, and the thick, shining plait was draped over her shoulder. She was wearing dark jeans and a deep charcoal Henley. I loved that color on her. It contrasted beautifully against her skin and was a striking background for the rich mahogany of her hair. Well, I loved any color on her.

She was frowning and trying to put on her other navy blue Converse.

I knelt down in front of her. "I'll help you with that, Darlin'."

"I can do it!" she snapped out. "I planted like ten bazillion sunflower seeds without crushing them. Mostly. I can put on my own damn shoes!"

I took in a deep breath to calm myself. It had taken her nearly **five hours** to plant those seeds. I had to admit I was more than a little annoyed about that. I let the breath out slowly. Rosalie had warned me that Bella was **fussy**. Another couple of good words would have been tetchy and prickly, but I wasn't going to let her make me lose my patience.

"Ha!" Bella got her shoe on without ripping it and proceeded to pull gently at the laces. She glanced up at me and back to her foot. "I can tie it!"

I sat back on my heels and watched her agonizingly slow pace tying her shoe. I should have been able to control myself better, but my patience was wearing thin.

It suddenly became very quiet downstairs, and I felt a burst of glee and excitement from them. There was a tiny trickle of worry mixed in.
What the hell was that about?

Next, I heard Peter and Emmett muttering to each other as they moved out to the front porch and settled their weight onto the creaking rocking chairs. Charlotte and Rosalie were chatting quietly in the kitchen. Puzzled, I felt a sense of anticipation from all of them.

Ignoring them, I said softly to Bella, "Darlin', let me help you tie your shoe."

She glared at me and turned to her other foot. "Dammit, Jasper. I tied that one. I can tie this one."

From the porch I heard Emmett say, "Uh oh. She's gettin' pissed off."

Getting?

She was still blocking me, but it wasn't hard to tell she was getting angrier. It was radiating off her like a heat lamp. Her eyes were quite a bit darker than they had been yesterday. Her constantly blocking me, and using her shield so much yesterday, not to mention all the rock throwing and running around — she needed to hunt.

"Darlin', you need to hunt. Let me help you tie your shoe," I said very calmly though I could feel my own irritation building.

She let out a little growl and looked up at me again. "I can do it!" Then both laces snapped.
"Arrrgh!" She growled louder and flung the pieces away from her. In a blur, she was on her feet, and her hands were clenched into fists at her sides. "Oh, goddamn those fucking cheap-ass piece-of-shit shoelaces!"

Emmett started laughing.

I was beyond merely annoyed and getting mad myself. I stood in front of her and reached for her hands.

She snatched her hands away from me and stepped back.

Forget annoyed, I was pissed. "Isabella, if you had let me help you, the laces wouldn't have been broken. Your shoes would have been tied, and we could have been outside already."

"Don't you 'Isabella' me, Jasper Whitlock." Her voice was getting louder, and she pointed her finger at me. "I know when I'm thirsty or not, and if you weren't rushing me, I wouldn't have broken those crappy shoelaces."

Peter and Emmett, the stupid shits, were actually giggling out on the porch, and that didn't help my temper any.

My eyes narrowed, and I stepped toward Bella, reaching for her hand. "Evidently you don't know when you're thirsty. You need to hunt. Now. Let's go."

As she batted my hand away, a scorching wave of anger and lust broke over me, stunning me. "Oh, fuck me." I gasped and staggered back away from her.

In the blink of an eye, she sprang over the bed and crashed through the front window, landing on the porch roof with a loud thump; shattered glass and broken pieces of the window grid rained down around her and out over the yard.

She turned toward me. Her eyes were a glittering black, and she had a wicked grin on her face.
"Well, you have to catch me first," she said tauntingly. She spun and jumped off the roof, her shoes flipping off her feet.

Wait. What?

Peter yelled after her, "Bubba, them windows ain't cheap, ya know!"

"Ha!" she shouted, her voice already fading, she was running so fast. "Jasper'll pay for it!"

I was standing there in our bedroom like a goddamn fool, absolutely thunderstruck. My brain was stalled out. Was she taunting me? I'd said, "Oh, fuck me" and then she had said …

Was Bella finally letting me know she was ready?

I was going to fucking find out. I leapt through the window and landed heavily on the dry grass a few feet in front of the porch.

Peter was grinning like an idiot and pointing toward the north. "Guess ya gotta catch 'er."

"I'll catch her." The excited growl in my chest was getting deeper and louder. "Always do."

As I sprinted away to catch my mate, I heard Emmett's worried voice.

"Maybe we should …"

"No fuckin' way, Emmett, m' boy," Peter answered him. "The Major's been snortin' and pawin' the ground in a high snit long enough."

-oOoOo-

If Bella was trying to evade me, staying on the ground hadn't been a good idea. She was blocking me from feeling her emotions again, but I easily followed her tantalizing scent. We would have to discuss how to elude detection, but that would be a discussion for another time. I was more than ready to capture my mate, claim her, and make her completely mine.

Knowing Peter would do periodic runs around the perimeter and keep Emmett away, we would be safe and undisturbed.

She stayed well within my … our territory. Running up and down the mountain made it seem farther, but she really hadn't gone that far from the house yet. I would have to make sure she remained in our designated lands. If I needed to, herding her wouldn't be too difficult, and I knew Peter had thoroughly marked the boundaries. I hoped his scent would alert and turn her away from the lines.

She stopped running, and I knew she was just ahead of me behind one of those larger pines, but I couldn't see her yet.

I quickly searched the ground and found what I was looking for — a rock about the size of a fifty-cent piece. I stooped down soundlessly and picked it up. I threw it past where I believed she was hiding, and when it skittered across the ground, making a rustling sound in the mix of dry, scattered leaves and pine needles, she appeared. She scrambled silently around the side of a large pine and squatted down, her back to me. Placing her hands against the trunk of the tree, she gingerly leaned out to the right, her thick, lustrous braid sliding across her back. She peeked around the side of the pine, looking cautiously toward the sound.

The light breeze was coming toward me as I crept up behind her until I was about fifteen feet away,
breathing in her beguiling fragrance and the delicious scent of her arousal. Anticipation swept through me, and desire for her increased. I could almost feel my hands on her, my lips on her bare skin.

I crouched down slightly, ready to spring at her, and smiled, knowing she would not be able to escape me. "I'm behind you, Darlin'," I whispered.

She froze, then turned slowly to locate me. When her deep red eyes found me, she squeaked, her eyes going wide with alarm. She jerked up to a standing position, her back to the rough bark, her hands down and flat against the tree. Then I had her.

Well, I thought I did. Astonishingly, she darted to the side and was away, barely a blur of motion through the trees.

More determined than ever, I was after her. She would be mine.

Bella was moving north and curving slightly to the east. She seemed to be heading for a pond I knew was in that direction. The trees were sparse, but she would stick to their cover, until she saw the pond. There weren't any trees right next to it.

I followed her scent directly to it. She couldn't seem to resist the water. I scanned over the two hundred-by-seventy-five-foot pond and saw no unusual ripples. I didn't think she had gone into the water, but I saw no sign of her in the trees. Silently, I stalked around the perimeter of the pond, keeping inside the line of trees and searching their branches. I considered blasting a heavy dose of lust into the area, but I didn't want to resort to that just yet. I would find my mate.

Circling the pond and dashing quickly across small open areas, I didn't find a trace of her scent, but I knew she was nearby. I could feel that she was close to me.

Returning to the south end of the still body of water where I had begun my search, I decided I'd wait a while for her to show herself.

My little demon was being especially devilish, but it would make capturing her all the more satisfying.

Despite my best efforts, I grew impatient quickly and paced through the area where her enticing fragrance was. I came to the realization she must have either back-tracked or gone into the water to hide. I didn't see any tracks near the edge of the pond, but the ground was fairly dry. While approaching the water, I hadn't detected any trails leading off in any other direction. She had to be in the pond. But I couldn't get any closer to it without being in direct sunlight. It was hours until the sun went down, and there wasn't a cloud in the vivid blue sky to block its bright light.

I could wait until sundown, hoping she'd get bored in the meantime, but I didn't want to. I'd waited long enough to claim her, and I would have her.

My options were to wait for her, jump into the pond and try to find her in the murky water, hit her with the lust that I could barely control, or try to lure her out of hiding.

What did I have besides myself to lure her with?

She had liked seeing me in the sunlight. Her reaction the first time she had seen me in the sun had been very … stimulating. Drawing her out of her hiding place might not be so difficult using myself as Bella-bait. It was extremely rare for any humans to be out that far, and they would be more interested in the Teton National Forest west of us. It wasn't likely any would be around and see me.
Anticipating having Bella in my arms very soon, the pace of my breathing picked up as I peeled off my T-shirt and toed off my boots. Pulling off my socks, I considered stripping off my jeans, but thought that might be a bit of overkill. No need to overdo it. She would come to me.

Taking a steadying breath, I stepped from beneath the shade of the leafy trees and into the warm sunshine. Walking cautiously toward the pond, my eyes darting back and forth over the water and along the trees opposite me, I stopped about ten feet away from the edge.

The sparkling from my skin pissed me off yet again. The world's most dangerous predator, the very pinnacle of the fucking food chain, and there I was, shining like I'd been dipped in some little kid's fucking rainbow glitter.

*Does that seem right to you?*

Turning slowly away from the pond, my hands propped on my belt, I once again examined the perimeter and the upper reaches of the trees. They weren't as tall as in Washington, but there were still a lot of places she could hide. I really didn't think she was in the trees, but I knew she wasn't far from me.

As I turned my back to the pond, irritated again by the glittering of my skin and the goddamn twinkling reflections cast along the low grass and trees, I heard a faint sound come from the water. Bubbles breaking the surface, I thought. I continued my scrutiny of the forest, pretending I had not heard anything, but I could hardly contain my nervous energy. She was coming toward me — I could feel her. Sensing her presence coming ever closer, I nearly quivered in anticipation. In all my years on this earth, no one had excited me like my Bella, and she was being annoyingly contrary. But wouldn't that make our reunion all the sweeter?

I wanted her more than anything I had ever wanted before, but I had to bide my time; I had to be patient. I would wait for her to approach me if it killed me. But if she didn't hurry, I just might fucking explode.

Hearing another barely perceptible ripple of bubbles in the still pond, I suspected my little hellcat would try to pounce on me from the water.

Was she teasing me or was she nervous? I would be her first, she would be *all* mine, and that thought had the venom nearly flooding into my mouth and my dick responding rapidly.

Swallowing quickly before I began to actually drool all over myself, I gave myself a mental slap. Of course she would be nervous — it would be her first time. Once again, I was being a goddamn fool, but she had to know that I wouldn't hurt her.

Then I *knew* she was in the water right behind me, and I spun around at the same instant she leapt from the pond, making hardly a splash as she arrowed straight for me.

I must have had an evil grin on my face because when she saw that I was facing her, her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open in shocked surprise. But I had her. She would not escape me again. Stepping forward, I captured her wet form in my arms, twisted around and darted back under the cover of the trees.

As I raced northwest through the forest, I held her tightly to my body, and I noticed she wasn't wearing a bra. Another surge of lust pulsed through me. I kept running. I didn't know why, I just wanted to be higher — farther up the mountain.

Neither one of us spoke a word as I ran, but her arms and legs wrapped around my body and she
tucked her head under my jaw.

Finally, I reached an area that looked good, though I wasn't sure what I liked about it. The air smelled of the long-needled pines scattered around, and there was a thick bed of their needles under my feet.

I slowly turned in a circle to look around us. The bright mid-morning sun was filtered and softened, and the light breeze whispered through the branches of the pines. Not far away, I heard some rustling in the old fallen leaves of the deciduous trees in the area. Probably squirrels or chipmunks. Otherwise, it was very quiet.

The only scents I picked up, besides Bella's captivating and entrancing aroma, were the pines and the smell of old, dry leaves. Deer had browsed not long ago, and coyotes had been through the area recently. I smelled no vampires or humans or any hint of their having been anywhere near the spot.

Off to my left, something larger than a squirrel stumbled through the sparse underbrush. As I turned my head to look for whatever it was, Bella reached up and kissed my throat, causing my breath to catch.

A spotted whitetail fawn tripped into view through the trees and when it saw us, it bleated and its large ears flicked back and forth. It was curious about us, but when our combined scents reached it, its tail flipped up, it blew out a whistling snort, and it bounded away in the direction it had come from.

Bella's head snapped around quickly in the direction of the fawn. Where there were fawns, there would be doe not too far away. Bucks would be a little harder to find.

Kissing the top of her head and moving just enough to put my lips by her ear, I asked in a husky whisper, "Do you want to hunt, or do you want me?"

Her body stilled, and she swallowed noisily, turning her face back to my chest. Her breathing had picked up, but I thought it was due to nerves. Her hands trembled on my back.

Slowly, she tilted her face up. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth. When her eyes finally rose to meet mine, they were a shining, liquid black.

"Uh, I … I want you," she whispered in a voice so soft, I had to strain to hear her.

I released the breath I didn't know I'd been holding. I gazed intently into her eyes as I gently pulled her arms from around me and urged her to stand in front of me. A few hairs had come loose from her braid, and I brushed them from her face as I bent down to taste her lips. Then, because I couldn't get enough of her, I lightly kissed her, bringing my left hand up to her jaw. "I love you, Bella." My hand drifted slowly over her jaw to cup her neck, as my right hand slid down her shoulder and over her back, pressing her body to mine. I struggled to keep my building lust from her, but I couldn't hide the physical manifestations. My breath came faster, and my kisses over her jaw and throat became more urgent as my hands gripped her more tightly. Her body was still stiff against mine as I reached her lips again and teased her with the tip of my tongue.

I desperately wanted to taste her, drink her in, and finally, her lips parted. I moaned as I experienced her. She was warm and spicy. She was intoxicating. She was what I'd been searching for. She was my home, and she was my love.

I couldn't help myself — I devoured her. I tried to restrain myself, but I had to have more. My tongue sought hers, and then they met, allowing me to taste more of her. I clutched her to me and lowered
her to the ground. I'd have preferred to be in our bed, but I didn't want to stop.

I held her head as I settled myself over her, slipping my right leg between hers, my right hand sliding up her arm and over her shoulder. I knew I couldn't just ravish her, as much as I wanted to. I would force myself to move slowly and gently no matter how badly I wanted her.

Knowing what most women liked to have done to their bodies would help, but I wanted to learn her body, discover every inch of her and learn what she wanted.

Leaving soft kisses over her mouth and along her jaw, I moved to her throat, licking and kissing as I pulled her wet shirt away from her neck. I found my claiming bite and kissed then licked over the scar, feeling the ridges my teeth had left on her. My mark, on my mate.

Her hands were still on my back, but they hadn't moved.

"Bella, tell me what's wrong." I whispered against her skin. "Tell me."

She breathed hesitantly over my ear. "I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of?" I ran my tongue over my mark again. I loved feeling the slight ridges that told every other vampire she was mine.

"I … I never did this before. I don't know what to do," she said in a small voice. "Well, I know about the mechanics of it but …"

I smiled against her neck. "You don't really have to do anything, or you can do what you want." I nipped her neck, gauging every reaction, no matter how slight. "You can watch me." I took hold of her arm and brought her left hand to my mouth. Watching her from the corner of my eye, I left a trail of kisses from the back of her hand to the tips of her fingers. I turned her hand to repeat my kisses across her palm. When I reached the tip of her index finger, I took it between my teeth and her eyes widened. "You can do what I do." I lightly licked her skin. "Or you can enjoy what I do to you." I closed my lips over the end.

Her breath caught as she stared, transfixed, at my mouth. "Um … oh … oh."

I moved her hand to my side and slid it down my waist to rest above my hip as she continued staring. "Where do you want my mouth?"

"Huh?"

"How about here?" I bent to her neck again, slowly licking the scars I had left on her. When I placed my teeth over the marks, she pushed against me and sighed, and her hands trembled on my skin. I brought my right hand down over her shoulder, pulling her against me, lifting her from the ground. I turned enough to sit up, seating her on my left leg. My fingers worked their way under the hem of her Henley, and she gasped as my fingers brushed over her stomach. I started lifting it, exposing her, and when it reached the top of her shoulders, she stiffened.

"What's wrong?" I continued placing soft kisses along her neck and the top of her shoulder.

She turned her head away from me. "Um … I … I'm not as, uh, bosomy as Rosalie and Charlotte."

I still couldn't feel her emotions, but she was acting as if she were embarrassed. Was she feeling inadequate? "Bella, I love you. I love all of you." I turned her face to mine and kissed her.

She pulled away, not looking at me. "And … and, um, Rosalie is gorgeous, and her hips are curvy,
and she has long legs, and Charlotte is so pretty, and they're blonde …"

"Why are you comparing yourself to them? There is no comparison." I stroked her hair. "I don't want Rosalie and Charlotte. I want you."

She blinked rapidly several times. "Er, I …"

"Are you suggesting that I try to woo them away from their mates?" I whispered into her ear, instantly wondering if I should have kept my mouth shut. A little jealousy from her wouldn't be a bad thing. But if she became very angry, she might decide to kick me as opposed to kiss me.

Her hands tightened on my sides, and her head snapped around so she could look at me. A spark of anger flashed through her eyes. "No! No wooing. You're mine."

"And you're mine." I grasped either side of her face and held her as I kissed her. "No one is as beautiful as you are." I began exploring her lips and mouth with my tongue.

Her eyes closed, and she leaned into my kiss. I reached for her shirt again and began lifting it. I wanted her to be comfortable and not be so nervous or self-conscious, but I also had a goal. I wanted her so badly my nerves were thrumming under my skin.

She gasped again and pulled back from me, but she lifted her arms so I could take it off. I dropped her shirt to the ground and kept my eyes trained on her face though I very much wanted to take in the sight of my nearly nude mate. I didn't need to feel her emotions to know she was embarrassed.

"Don't be self-conscious, Bella." I hugged her to me, sighing as I pressed her breasts against my bare chest. I lowered her to the ground.

We might feel nearly as hard as stone to humans, but she felt soft to me. Her skin was as smooth as silk, and I could hardly wait to touch every inch of her.

Her hands fluttered nervously over my back.

"I love you. I love it when you touch me," I whispered to her.

I kissed the corner of her mouth and nudged her jaw to the left so I could reach my other claiming bite — the one that was higher on her neck. I licked over the faint scars lightly while my right hand moved to her hip and held her to me. I needed to get rid of her jeans, and mine, but I didn't think ripping them off her was a good idea at the moment.

At least not yet.

Go slow. Go slow.

It was difficult not being able to feel her emotions. It was almost like driving blind, but no one could say I wasn't persistent. She was my mate, and I would make her completely mine. She hadn't jumped up and run away, so I would keep going. She moaned quietly when I put my teeth over my mark, and her hands gripped my shoulder blades and slid down the curved muscles of my back. When I felt the tiniest flutter of her lust, I reached for it and pulled it to me, wishing she would open completely to me.

"Bella." I pressed my teeth a little harder against her skin, and she squirmed against me. The pressure of her hip against my dick was delicious, but it only made me want more. I reached for the button of her jeans and slid down the zipper. As I hooked my thumb in the waistband, she turned her head toward me and kissed my jaw.
"Jasper, is it going to hurt?" she asked me worriedly.

I kissed her throat before answering her. "Yes. Some. But it won't last. I can help you. Let me feel what you feel. All of it."

The great horned beast deep within me nearly crowed in victory, but I fought to control it. One should never celebrate a victory when one had not actually achieved the objective.

She swallowed thickly. "Um, do you need to?"

I gazed into her eyes, trying to show her the love I felt for her. "I don't need to, but I want to." I shifted my position enough to lightly hold her neck with my left hand so I could brush a few stray hairs from her face with my right. "Why?"

She looked away from me. "Um, I want to feel what I feel." She glanced up at me. "Okay, maybe that didn't sound right. I don't want you to influence what I feel. Can you do that?"

Good question. I was having a hard enough time controlling myself and keeping my lust from influencing her, though it was becoming more and more difficult as her mesmerizing scent swirled around me and filled my senses. I had hoped I would be able to experience her feelings and give them back to her — share mine with her.

"I can try. Bella, I want …"

Her love and her own lust flowed softly into me, and I gasped, throwing my head back, closing my eyes, and my hands tightening on her. There was some uncertainty and a small amount of fear mixed in, but then her lust and appreciation spiked.

I was momentarily confused. Appreciation for what? I hadn't really done anything yet. I clenched my teeth as I struggled to keep from projecting my want and need onto her, and my hair fell into my face as I looked down into her eyes. They were a sparkling black and so beautiful. I loved her so much.

Her eyes widened slightly and her lips parted. "Never mind," she said with barely a breath.

"Oh, shit."

Never mind? Never mind what? Did she want me to stop? I didn't know if I'd be able to. My dick was so hard it fucking ached.

"What, Bella? Never mind what?" If she wanted me to stop, I'd have to, but then I'd have to go somewhere and jerk off because I didn't think I could stand being so hard and not coming. Again.

"You're so beautiful." She blinked and said quietly, "Let me feel you. Let me feel what you're—"

I didn't let her finish. My mouth crashed onto hers as I let go of the tight hold I had on my own lust, but not releasing it completely. She gasped into my mouth, and her entire body stiffened beneath me. Then her fingers dug into my back, and I thrust against her, groaning.

Her hands raked down my back until they reached the waistband of my jeans. As she ripped them from me, easily snapping my leather belt, she flipped me onto my back, her legs straddling my hips. Her teeth and lips and tongue were all over my throat and chin.

I continued holding the back of her neck, but with my right hand I ripped the side of her jeans and nudged her off me as I rolled, pushing her onto her back again. She growled into my mouth and anger flickered through her lust.
Before she tried to shove me over again, I ripped the denim and the cotton boy shorts from her, tossing the ragged pieces of fabric over my shoulder. Pine needles rained down over us, but I didn't care. Before she could plant her foot for leverage, I shoved her leg down and held her neck as I pulled away from her lips. She growled again.

"I can't make love to you with my pants on, Darlin'." I rose away from her, releasing her neck and bracing my hand on the ground beside her head. I tore my jeans the rest of the way off, and before I could settle my body between her legs, she tried to push me over again, her lust beating into my head like a drum.

I wasn't sure what she was trying to do, but she wasn't going to flip me onto my back. I grabbed the back of her neck and seized her left wrist, pinning it to the ground next to her head as she growled again. The fingers of her right hand dug into my back. "No, ya don't. You're not rollin' me onto my back." I grinned at her. "Yet." I licked her lips. "You will be claimed properly."

Lowering myself until the head of my rock-hard dick was barely touching the soft curls I desperately wanted to see, I watched her face as I brushed against her. I was breathing harder, and my venom was filling my mouth.

**Go slow. Go slow.**

Swallowing quickly, I brushed my lips over hers. Letting go of her wrist, I trailed my hand from her shoulder to her waist and continued over her hip until I reached her knee. Lifting her leg, I rasped out, "Put your leg over my waist."

She gasped, and a jolt of fear coursed through her.

"Don't be afraid, Bella." I kissed her lips, still gazing into her eyes. "I love you. Feel how much I love you." Reinforcing my love and adoration of her, I lifted her leg over my hip as I drew up my right knee. She sucked in a breath, and a faint smile played over her soft, pink lips. Our love spiraled and danced around us as I shifted my hips until I could feel the head of my dick at her entrance. My breath became more ragged when I realized how ready for me she was. She felt warm and wet, and the scent of her arousal surrounded me. It was her, but muskier, spicier … somehow more. My desire soared impossibly higher, and I fought to contain it. As much as I wanted to slam into her, I couldn't. I wouldn't.

**Slow. Go slow.**

Maintaining a steady wave of my love, I slid my hand up her thigh to her hip to hold her still as I entered her, slipping slowly into her.

A shudder overtook me as I filled her, feeling every silken inch. I clenched my teeth and moaned, my body curling over hers. "You're perfect. Perfect. I love you."

She sucked in a hissing breath, and both her hands were on my sides, but her fingers were spread wide and trembling. "Jasper … Jasper." She was panting into my ear. "It … it hurts, but it's not t-too bad." Breathing over my ear, another rush of her love flowed over me as I loosened the hold I had on my yearning and desire.

Her want and lust coiled around me like satin ribbons, and she began to draw her right leg up the outside of mine.

"Stop," I grunted to her. Just that slight movement was almost more than I could bear. I drew my hand from her neck, clenched my fist, and pushed it against the ground under her head. I was so
close to coming, I didn't dare move.

"Why? Why stop?" Bella's hands slid up my ribs and back down to my waist. She tried to pull me closer.

"Because if I move, I'm gonna come," I gasped out.

An instant of puzzlement colored her emotions. "But isn't that the point?" She slid her leg up and over my ass and pulled me in more tightly with her heel. "I want you, Jasper," she breathed into my ear.

"Oh, mercy, hold still." I was begging her. Every nerve in my body was buzzing and snapping, my dick pulsed inside her heat, and I couldn't breathe.

Finally, I could draw in enough of a breath to speak again. "I want you to feel good, Bella. I want this to feel good for you."

Her fingertips drew delicate, fiery lines from my waist, across my stomach, and up to my chest. "It does. I do feel good. You make me feel good." She kissed the corner of my jaw.

I shoved my nose in the hair behind her ear and sucked in a deep breath. I could do it. I could fight off my own orgasm, and I would — to make sure my beautiful, perfect mate felt as good as I did.

Releasing my grip on her hip, I slid my quivering hand to where we were joined, reaching with my thumb to caress her slick clitoris. She gasped, then she groaned and dug her heels into my upper thighs. As I slid my thumb over her, I pulled my hips back slightly and pushed into her again.

"Oh!" Bella's arms went around me, and she tried to pull my chest to hers as I moved with slow, short strokes.


Hearing her say my name with such feelings of pleasure sent another pulse of desire racing through me.

Her hands clutched at my back, then they were on my shoulders, pulling and grasping. Her head pushed against mine and she mumbled into my hair.

Loosening the hold I had on my lust and craving for her, I moved more quickly, though keeping my strokes short so I wouldn't hurt her. Her hands fluttered over my arms and shoulders like she didn't know where to put them. Our combined lust was echoing through my head. I concentrated it on her, increasing the pleasure she felt. When she gasped and her hands grabbed my arms, I knew she was getting close; I just had to hang on a little longer. I wasn't sure I could.

A growl started low in my chest and began to build, vibrating through the center of me and fanning out, reaching up my throat and down to my groin. Somehow my lust increased, and a sense of elation started to build.

Bella's heels dug even harder into my thighs. "More. Please. More," she moaned. She was feeling everything I was, and her pleasure spiked. It was nearly overwhelming.

Suddenly she gasped and her body went rigid. "Oh, Jasper!" she exclaimed, and I felt her tighten around my dick, squeezing me, her orgasm breaking over me like a wave in the ocean.

It released a sensation of possession and ownership over her that was so intense, so all-
encompassing, it completely consumed and filled my mind, and my growl rumbled louder through my chest and up through my throat.

Mine.

Slow and steady, I kept thrusting into her as she came. I moved my right hand back to her hip and raised myself up on my left elbow so I could look at my mate, watch her beautiful face as she experienced the ecstasy I was making her feel. Threads of satisfaction and love wove themselves through her euphoric release. I drew it to me as I lifted myself farther, bracing my left hand on the ground beside her shoulder. It was so overpowering, I couldn't form any thought but one.

"You're mine, Isabella. You're mine."

"Yes! Yes!" Her eyes were squeezed shut, and she was panting. Her hands were alternately grasping and releasing my arms, and she strained up against me.

My growl was nearly a snarl. "Only mine."

"Only yours!" Her left hand slapped down on my right at her hip, and her fingers closed over my wrist, gripping it tightly.

I growled as I slid into her again. She was luscious. She was exquisite. "Who does your body belong to?"

"My body is yours, Jasper!" she screamed. Her hand slid over my back as she pulled me to her.

I lowered my face to hers and reached to cup her neck. I lifted her toward me as I bent to her, needing to taste her; my instincts demanded that I bite her and fill her with my venom. That urge had been strong before, but it had been nothing compared to the need I currently felt.

My right hand slid up over her shoulder, and I licked her neck with a long slow stroke of my tongue. "And who do I belong to, Isabella?" I hissed in her ear.

"Mine! You're mine!" She growled against my neck.

I immersed myself in the ecstasy of her orgasm, bit into her throat at her jugular, and drank in her venom. As the cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger of her essence coated my tongue, the coil that had been winding tighter and tighter in my groin finally broke, and I thrust into her one last time. The euphoria that burst through my mind and body was utterly indescribable. It was incandescent light and heat, satisfaction and fulfillment. It was relief and comfort. It was Bella's scent and Bella's love. It was the consummation of our joining. It was just … Bella.

Then my hips thrust into her again and again as I came. I began forcing my venom into her artery to ensure that she would carry my scent for eternity. There would be absolutely no question, ever, that she was my mate and only mine.

When the last achingly delicious spasms of my orgasm subsided, I pulled my teeth from her throat and licked over the wound, sealing my venom inside her. I pushed up from the ground, arching my back as another growl throbbed through my chest. I looked down at my heartbreakingly beautiful mate. Mine. She was mine.

And I roared.

-o0o0o-
It was some time later, I wasn't sure how long, when my eyes finally opened to gaze at my mate, my love, my Bella.

She was purring softly and curled against me, her head on my left shoulder, and her hand spread over my chest above my heart. Her legs were bent over my hip and thighs; which was only possible because I was curled around her as close as I could get.

Never before had I felt such peace and contentedness. Bliss suffused every cell in my body as I looked at my mate: the rich chestnut and deep brown of her hair, the fifteen light freckles across her nose, the luminescence of her skin. I had never been so happy before. I had never loved anyone like I loved Bella. I felt a faint thrum begin in my heart. It was almost as if it were going to begin beating again.

Bella's eyes opened slowly, and she looked up at me in wonder. "Jasper, you're purring!" Her delight and enchantment fluttered around me as she smiled. She kissed the end of my nose. "I wondered if you ever would. Rosalie and Charlotte said male vampires don't do it as often as females, but they do purr."

At last, I understood what would make a vicious, blood-thirsty, murderous vampire purr — only his mate. I hadn't thought that I ever would. I never thought it was possible, and then I found Bella. "I love you, Bella. I love you so much."

"I love you, Jasper. So much." She blinked at me and her hand came up to stroke my face. "I think you need to hunt. Your eyes are gold, but they look darker."

To think I had started this day frustrated with her, trying to get her to go hunting. It had turned out quite different and so much better. Better than I could have imagined. "Yes. I expect I do." I smirked at her and ran a finger along her jaw. "A little demon gave me quite a work out."

She smiled shyly and her eyes dropped.

"Don't be embarrassed, Darlin'."

She hesitantly glanced up at me, and her eyes turned away. She was feeling unsure. "Did … did you like it?"

I was absolutely flabbergasted. How could she think I hadn't liked it? I fucking loved it. I'd finally claimed my mate. I'd made her mine. It was the best sex I'd ever had. And it was the best I'd ever had because it was with my mate. I wrapped my arms around her, squeezing her to my chest and kissing the top of her head. My purr became even louder. "Bella, how could you think I didn't like it? I loved it. It felt so goddamn good I swear I blacked out for a while. I'm not even sure how we ended up in this position." I placed my hand against her cheek. "Feel this. Feel what I'm feeling."

Love, satisfaction, satiation, bliss, fulfillment, pride — all of those and more flowed gently from me to her. Her eyes slowly closed, and she sighed as she snuggled into my chest.

"Yes, Jasper. I feel that. All of it. I love you." She kissed my chest. "But you still need to hunt."

"I could eat." I winked as she grinned up at me. "I think you should join me. Remember? I was tryin' to get you to hunt, until …"

She sighed. "Until I broke my shoelaces." A pleased smile graced her features, and her own blissful purr grew louder. "But can we stay here like this for a while longer?"

"As long as you want, Darlin'."
Chapter End Notes

"Does that seem right to you?" — quote by bounty hunter Jubal Early, Firefly episode "Objects in Space."

"Who does your body belong to?"— Jasper to Bella in The Angel by Savannah-Vee on FFn.

"My body is yours, Jasper!" — Bella to Jasper in The Angel by Savannah-Vee on FFn.
Chapter 44, I Worry

Emmett's POV

While Char and I were playing video games, I was thinking over stuff. Since I wasn't paying close attention to her, she was kicking my ass and killing me every time I turned around.

I had to say, playing war with Bella had been fun as hell. Using rocks as weapons was more fun than gathering them to build borders for flowerbeds, for Christ's sake. Though, I did kind of wonder why they didn't put flowers around the house.

That weird thing with her double shield messed with my head. She could block rocks being thrown at her but she couldn't stop Jazz, Pete, or Char from touching her. Strangely, she could block rocks and keep me and Rose from touching her. I sure couldn't figure it out, but I think Rose nailed it. Jazz had sired Bella, Char, and Pete, and he hadn't ever bitten me or Rose. I still didn't get it because it was Bella's shield, and she had bitten Jazz and Pete. She hadn't bitten Char, though.
It was just more of that mind mojo juju shit I could never figure out.

Somehow, I got the impression Char wouldn't let Bella bite her. Like Pete had said, the only way to experiment would be to let Jazz bite me or Rose and then see if Bella could block rocks being thrown at us and block us from touching her at the same time.

For just a second, it had crossed my mind that we could use Edward and his mind reading. It would be a good way to see if Bella's shield could cover somebody besides Jazz, and see how many of us she could shield from him.

I didn't particularly want the perv around. I was still mad at him. What he had done to Bella was just fucked up. Was he going for a Renfield Bella? Stepford Bella? It was total bullshit. I thought he would have finally drained her anyway. I was real glad he didn't.

I knew Jazz didn't want him within a hundred miles of her — make that a thousand. Rose would probably torch little parts. Pete and Char hadn't ever liked him, and he gave them a few more reasons to hate his glitter guts. They seemed attached to Bella already and they just met her. Pete had sure gotten pissed off when I told him about Edward trying to save her blood.

Apparently, so did Char when Rose and my Belly-boo told her about it. Char had been champing at the bit to find his degenerate ass, light a bonfire, and roast his marshmallows. Maybe that was what happened to somebody when they didn't drain their singer. I had just drained mine. Done and over with.

Hell, Pete and Char just ate people — they didn't tease and torment them, dazzle them, take souvenirs of their blood — Okay, I guess they did dazzle and torment them before they killed them. They just didn't do it for months and months before they ended up killing them. I really didn't know what they did with the humans they drained. Didn't think I'd want to go hunting with them either. I knew I'd get caught up in it and kill people. Sometimes I really missed human blood.

Anyhow, we'd figure out more ways to test Bella's shield without Edward.

Bella could sure throw a rock like nobody's business. She was so fucking accurate; it was scary. Who'd have thought our klutzy little human — who couldn't even aim her own feet right — would have turned into Dead-eye Bella?

Or Dead-eye Bubba.

Pete coming up with that nickname for her was pretty damn funny. Just add a little venom and Little Miss Bookworm had turned into Little Miss Rebel Yell. She had a set of lungs on her, and she loved running around the woods and smacking the absolute shit out of people with boulders. Then there was the digging in the dirt like a deranged gopher. Hell! She didn't even really mind being covered head to toe with it. Alice would have been screaming bloody murder.

I bet she would love the ATVs. There were a couple in the garage. She used to ride motorcycles with her wolf buddy Jacob. I bet if we got some dirt bikes she'd like them, too — after she could control her strength a lot better. Didn't need her crushing the handlebars and shit. When it snowed in the winter, it would be nice to have some snowmobiles.

I wondered if the snow was the fluffy kind? We were so high up and it was so dry, it would probably be the powdery stuff.

Well, while we had been outside, Pete had taken off to go to the post office, then Bella had decided she needed to go dig in the dirt some more. I hadn't missed her looks at Jasper, so I had figured she'd
want to go cuddle with him since he was all about the cuddling, but she had taken off for the barn. Jazz had seemed a little bummed out.

_Chicks!_

Building low rock walls around the flowerbeds hadn't been so bad, and I knew we weren't going to have enough rocks, but Jazz and I sure went through them quick. Should have had Bella go get some more but she was concentrating hard on planting those seeds. When she wasn't looking at Jazz.

When she ran out of the one kind of seed, Char or Rose would grab the packets from the other kind and dump those in the little bucket she had been carrying around. I didn't think she had crushed very many of the seeds either. I didn't know how — she couldn't keep her eyes off Jasper.

Rose had told me earlier she thought Bella was about ready to attack him. I knew Jazz was about to vibrate right out of his own skin. He was putting off some fucking wicked vibes. That had been another reason why I had suggested the rock wars — work off a little of that energy. Hadn't helped a whole lot. Jazz was still being a pissy bitch.

Between the bitchiness and the lust, he really needed to get a grip and quit projecting that shit. If he didn't, I was going to have to grab Rose and break in that bed in our room. The only thing stopping me was I thought it might be a little too much for Jazz to handle, and Bella would probably be the first vampire to ever blush.

Maybe Rose and I could run the perimeter and check it out. Do a little of our own territory marking.

Both Jazz _and_ Bella needed to get laid. I thought it would calm them both down, but I had to admit, I was worried about it. I knew Jazz and Bella were mates and all but …

Throwing rocks and boulders at her was no big deal, but sex? Jazz was a big guy. I mean, he wasn't hung like a horse or anything, but he was a bit bigger than the average male.

Speaking of average males … always cracked me up whenever we had taken showers after gym class. There were a couple of the boys that had a real hard time trying to hide the fact they were checking him out. Jazz always knew though.

Oh, God. I thought those boys were going to shit bricks in our last gym class before we graduated last year. After his shower, Jazz turned so he was directly facing them — full monty and all. The jerk even stretched and ran his fingers through his wet hair before he grabbed his towel. I thought those boys were going to hyperventilate. Then the smart ass smirked at them and winked. Could have sworn they were going to die right there. If I hadn't been a vampire, I would have split a gut trying not to laugh. I knew exactly what he was doing.

Gave those boys a thrill they would never forget. Their hearts had been pounding so hard, it was a wonder they didn't have heart attacks.

Okay, so maybe we tormented the humans a little bit.

Well, anyway, teasing the defenseless humans aside — which was always good for a laugh — I was a little worried about Bella. Jazz was pretty damn strong. He wasn't as strong as me, and Bella was stronger than all of us at the moment, but sex could get a little rough sometimes.

I'd never felt so protective over anybody before — except for my Rose. It was a whole different feeling though. Rose was my mate, and I loved her more than anything in the world, but somehow Bella was damn near as important to me. She was my baby sister and my best little bud. BFFs, as a matter of fact.
She was my video game partner, and she'd watch the action movies with me. It was like we were meant to be, and I didn't want anybody laying a hand on her.

*We're total biffles now.*

Rose had glared at me and said I needed to chill the fuck out and get over it. Mates needed to mate, and they couldn't deny their instincts, but I was a little worried.

It sure looked like the instincts were working overtime. While Jazz and I had been building the stupid flowerbed borders, Bella ignored him at the same time she peeked at him.

I didn't know how the hell females did that shit.

It was even worse when we were finished and stretched out in the grass watching the girls. Watching my Rose crawl around on her hands and knees had become one of my new favorite past times, and Char was a hot looking babe, too, but I kept watching Jazz and Bella. I'm not an empath like him, but I swear the tension in the air kicked up to DEFCON 3.

By midnight I couldn't stand it anymore. It was like the air between them was vibrating, and I went in the house. Jazz was right behind me.

Guess he couldn't take it anymore either.

When I got out of the shower, Jazz was in his room, so I went downstairs to see what Pete was doing. He was watching old John Wayne movies. There was only one TV so I flopped down onto the floor and joined him. I always had enjoyed watching the Duke kick ass no matter how many times I'd seen him do it. I didn't mind lying on the floor either, but I thought Jazz could buy some more furniture. One recliner and three stools didn't quite seem like enough with six of us in the house. Well, there had been four stools until Bella smashed one — with Pete's body. That had been fucking hilarious. The dumb shit had been asking for it, too.

*Bella's a pistol!*

I had to remember to write her a check for the ten thousand dollars I owed her. She had won that bet fair and square.

She hadn't torn him up too much. She hadn't ripped off any parts, but she sure kicked his ass and showed him who the bitch was.

She'd been doing good with the other stuff, too — for a newborn. She had only broken a stool and one section of rail out of the deck so far, but we hadn't been in Wyoming very long yet, and most of that had been spent outside screwing around. Like Bella had said, "You can't break dirt."

Speaking of being outside — the girls hadn't come in until five o'clock in the morning. Had there been that many damn sunflower seeds?

Bella ran right upstairs, and Rose followed her up after a few minutes, so I talked Char into playing video games with me for a while. That was how I ended up getting my ass kicked for the last few hours.

Then I heard Bella squeak, "I need a bath!" Next thing you know, Jazz came downstairs, pouting. I swear the bottom lip was stuck out and everything. One of the most feared vampires in the fucking world, and he was pouting like somebody stole his favorite cap gun.

He dropped onto one of the stools at the kitchen island and was looking at the funny papers. Pete had
zeroed in on that pouty lip and began his frontal assault.

It could have turned into a suicide mission.

I hadn't known what the fucker was up to, but by the time Rose finally called downstairs that Bella was out of the tub, three hours later, I thought Jazz was going to beat the piss out of him. Pete had said he and Jazz should go cruise for chicks since Jazz was single. Jazz practically had flames shooting out of his eyes, and I thought Pete was going to be turned into a crispy critter.

It was a good damn thing Rose said they were finished when she did. Jazz somehow managed to keep himself from stomping Pete through the recliner, and darted upstairs. It was about time for a break anyway. Char had wiped the floor up with me in Halo.

So, there we were, kind of staring at each other. Rose came down, and she had an odd, happy kind of look on her face. She, Char, and Pete all had this expectant look on their faces, and it made me wonder what the hell was going on. When Rose waggled her eyebrows at me and said Bella was being fussy, and Jazz was going to take her hunting, Pete started grinning.

He rubbed his hands together and whispered, "This is it, folks. The Major's either goin' to get his ass handed to him or finally get some ass."

Char handed me the game controller. "That'll be a relief. The tension's so damn thick between those two I think you'd need a chainsaw to cut it."

Then we heard Bella. "I can do it! I planted like ten bazillion sunflower seeds without crushing them. Mostly. I can put on my own damn shoes!"

Rose looked up at the ceiling. "Yes. There's quite a bit of unresolved sexual tension between them."

I started to get a little worried.

We couldn't hear Jazz, but I could just imagine he wasn't real pleased. After putting up with Pete's shit for hours, and he was enough to piss off the Pope, Bella decided to give him a hard time. Then she snapped out, "Ha! I can tie it!"

Pete got up out of the recliner and poked me on the shoulder. "I think that tension is about to be resolved. Let's go sit on the porch, Emmett, and watch the show."

"Okay, Pete, but …"

"Just c'mon."

I followed him out to the porch, and we sat on the rockers. Damn things creaked like they were going to fall apart.

Then we heard Bella say, "Dammit, Jasper. I tied that one. I can tie this one!"

I looked over at Pete, who had this sly grin on his face. I tried to warn him. "Uh oh. She's gettin' pissed off."

He just gave me a big toothy grin while he was rocking back and forth.

Figuring he didn't fully comprehend what I was trying to tell him, I whispered to him, "When she gets pissed off, she breaks shit."

Bella growled and practically shrieked, "Oh, goddamn those fucking cheap-ass piece-of-shit
I should have made a bet that she would break those shoelaces. I couldn't help laughing because it was fucking hilarious when she started cussing like that.

We still couldn't hear Jazz but then Bella's voice got all growly, and she said, "Don't you 'Isabella' me, Jasper Whitlock. I know when I'm thirsty or not, and if you weren't rushing me, I wouldn't have broken those crappy shoelaces."

I could just imagine her pointing her finger right at his nose. My eyes got big, and I stared at Pete. "Oh, damn. He must have called her Isabella. He only does that shit when he's pissed off at her."

Pete started giggling, which was so damn funny I started giggling at him. I couldn't help it. But then we heard Jazz say in a hard voice, "Evidently, you don't know when you're thirsty. You need to hunt. Now. Let's go."

**DEFCON level 1.**

"Oh, shit," I said and gaped at Pete. I glanced up at the porch ceiling, and almost wished I could disappear into the floor. Only God knew how much stuff Bella was going to tear up.

That fucker just smirked at me, lifted his arm up to look at his wrist as if he had a watch on, and said, "Mission Unresolved Sexual Tension about to be resolved in three … two … one."

Right above our heads, there was an ear-splitting crash of glass shattering and then a loud thump on the porch roof. Pieces of glass rained down into the yard and then Bella landed right in front of us. Both her shoes fell to the ground beside her and bounced in the grass. She growled, spun around, and took off through the yard and across the parking area, heading north, her braid flying out behind her.

Peter laughed and yelled at her, "Bubba, them windows ain't cheap, ya know!"

"Ha!" she yelled back as she entered the trees. "Jasper'll pay for it!"

Next thing you know, Jasper dropped into the yard almost exactly where Bella had, and he growled deep and low like I'd never heard him before. His teeth were bared, and his eyes were as black as night.

"Guess ya gotta catch 'er." Peter laughed and pointed toward the north.

"I'll catch her." Jasper practically snarled. "Always do."

Then he was gone — just a sparkly blur across the yard.

I was a lot more worried then. I started to get up out of the rocker. "Maybe we should …"

Pete reached over and clamped his hand down on my arm. "No fuckin' way, Emmett, m' boy. The Major's been snortin' and pawin' the ground in a high snit long enough."

"But he might hurt her." I was ready to go after them.

"She's his mate. He ain't gonna hurt her." Pete patted my arm. "Besides, he has to catch 'er first."

"He always catches her," I mumbled.

"That's as it should be." He got up and carried his chair toward the north side of the porch. He sat
down again and propped his feet up on the rail and clasped his hands behind his head. "Won't take him too long, I reckon."

I carried my rocking chair over next to Pete and sat down again. I was felt nervous and started rocking, the chair creaking and squeaking. "What are we lookin' for?"

"You'll see in a while." He scratched his head. "I s'pose we should clean up the glass and fix the window, but that can wait. I have some extra windows in the basement."

"How'd you know we'd need extras?"

"Had a newborn comin' to the house. They always break shit, and the dumb shits almost always go for the windows. I guess because they can see through them, or maybe they're jumping toward the light. I don't know — instinct, I guess. When I woke up, I was outside, and Maria and Jasper looked like they were gonna kick my ass. Then they did." He brushed some dust off his jeans and put his hand behind his head again. "I have some windows and even have an extra sliding glass door. I just hope she doesn't break the bay windows. I didn't get any of those. They're expensive." He started rocking slowly and his chair creaked, too. "Maybe while they're gone, we should re-glue these chairs and tighten them up. I have wood workin' stuff in the garage."

I crossed my arms over my chest and continued to rock. "Uh, I can fix the window. I'm pretty good at buildin' and fixin' stuff."

Rose and Char came out onto the porch, and Rose stood behind me and patted my shoulders. She kissed the top of my head. "He's very good at building and fixing things."

"Good to hear. We might need it." Pete leaned back and scratched his stomach. Then he got up and retrieved the other two rockers from the other side of the porch. "Why don't you ladies sit here with us for a while and enjoy the mornin'. Emmett, move down a bit."

I moved my rocker closer to the deck at the back of the house, making enough room so Rose and Char could sit between us. When Rose sat down next to me, she reached over and patted my hand. "Don't worry Emmett. You know how much he loves her."

I sighed sadly. "Yeah, I know, but she's my baby sister and …"

"And she's a big girl." Rose kissed my cheek and sat back in the rocker. "I'm more worried about Jasper." She started chuckling. "She could break something off him."

Pete outright guffawed and said, "I hope not. They're on their honeymoon. Be a damn shame if she hurt him."

"You guys are so bad!" Char exclaimed, smacking Pete on the arm. She waved at him like she was brushing him off and turned toward Rose. "He just turned her a week ago, right?"

Rose gently rocked her chair. It didn't make as much noise as mine did. "Yes, almost exactly a week ago. It was about 9:30 in the morning when she wrecked her truck and he found her." She squeezed my hand. "She woke up in about sixty hours. Carlisle was amazed. He'd never seen a transformation take less than about seventy-two hours or so. I think it was because Jasper was helping her." Then Rose let out a heavy sigh. "Then she woke up." She rolled her eyes. "It's been a long week."

"So, how did Jasper help her exactly?" Char asked.
Rose finished the story about how Jazz had helped Bella through her transformation, and how Bella had responded to him. I had to add in how Bella had responded to Edward and Alice. I thought everybody was pretty much caught up on the fun that had been. Especially the part where Jazz had ripped Edward's arm off and thrown it through the window.

Pete grinned like the cat that ate the canary, and Char looked all starry eyed.

She clasped her hands together under her chin and cooed, "He's never done that for anybody before. He must really love her. It had to be awful for him. I sure remember when I was turning into a vampire."

"Ahhhhhh," Pete said, raising his eyebrows. "Took longer than I thought, but there it is." He pointed out toward the northwest.

"What? What are we lookin' for?" I was stared out at the trees and mountains and didn't see anything.

"Maybe about five miles out."

Off in the distance, I spotted it. A flock of birds flew up and away from a ridge in the distance. Different kinds of birds, too — big ones and little ones. If I was human, I wouldn't have seen them.

"So, what about the birds? What made them fly up like that?" Rose asked.

"Give it a few more seconds." Pete just grinned again.

About twenty-five seconds after we first saw the birds fly up, we heard it. I never heard a sound like that before. I stared at Rose, and she looked as baffled as I did. I looked to Pete for an answer.

"What the hell was that?"

He looked over at me from the corner of his eye. "You never heard Jasper roar before?"

"Not until this last week, but that sounded … that was different."

Pete just tipped his rocker back again, clasped his hands behind his head, and said, "I never heard that particular roar before, but I'd say she let him catch 'er."

Rose and Char helped us clean up the glass and then Pete and I worked on clearing away the broken window and putting in the new one. Bella hadn't torn up the frame too bad, though it would need to be repainted.

"How long do you think they'll be gone?" I asked as we finished up the job. We hadn't heard anything in a while, and I didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

"Few days or so, I guess. Jasper'll be makin' up for lost time." He winked at me. He dusted off his hands and picked up a few tools to put them away. "I'll be runnin' the perimeter tonight."

"Let me go with ya."

"No."
Rose and Char had decided to paint Jazz and Bella's room — beige with cream trim, of course. It was a nice beige, but even I was starting to think there was too much of it in the house. At least painting trim was a whole lot easier as a vampire, but they could only go so fast with the rollers. Really couldn't use the vamp speed with that, and they still had to wait for the paint to dry, too.

Funny how Pete had known to bring in some paint.

Rose and Char wouldn't let me paint with them, and they chased me off. I guess there really wasn't enough room for three people in Bella's room. They had shoved the furniture to the center of the floor and covered it with old sheets. That hadn't left much room to move around near the walls. I was downstairs playing video games and listening to their voices as they chatted back and forth. After a while, I was tired of playing video games by myself, so I went to find Pete. He was running the weed eater out by the barn.

"What's up, Em?" he asked as he shut off the weed eater.

"You said they'd only be gone a few days. It's Tuesday. They've been gone three days."

Pete set the head of the weed eater on the ground and leaned on the handle. "A few … several. What difference does it make?"

"Uh, none, I guess, except I thought they'd be back by now." I stared off into the woods. It was another nice, sunny day — would have been a good day to throw rocks at Bella. "Um, you never said if you saw anything when you ran the perimeter Saturday night. Or Sunday or even Monday."

"That's because I didn't see anything." Pete picked up the weed eater and got ready to start it again. "If you need somethin' to do, there're two mowers in the barn. Char managed not to cover them up with flowers and shit. Push mower and a rider. Take your pick. But keep your ears open for them damn planes. I don't know why the hell they keep flyin' around here. Stupid humans gotta keep takin' pictures of the goddamn mountains and shit. It ain't like the Rockies changed much in the last thousand years."

"Google Maps?" I shrugged at him.

"Maybe." He turned away from me. "I'll be runnin' the perimeter again tonight after I go to the post office." He turned back toward me. "Maybe you could go to the post office. Miss Ellen would probably get a kick outta you. Said she was goin' to hire an assistant. Follow my scent over. I told her I'm just hangin' in the hills for a while. Folks don't ask a lot of questions around here." He turned back to his weed eater. "Keep in mind there's hardly any trees over in town and not many buildings to make shadows — that's why I go in the evenin'. Miss Ellen is there in the mornin' for a few hours. She closes up through the middle of the day and then she's open in the evenin' for a few hours for folks who commute. Perks of being the boss, I guess."

"After I go to the post office, can I run the perimeter with you?"

Pete looked over his shoulder at me. "No."

I got more worried even though Bella was with Jazz. I knew he could take care of himself, and he would protect Bella, but we hadn't heard anything from them for days. It was Friday already. I had tried calling Jazz's phone, but it went right to voice mail.
When I cussed it, Rose heard it and yelled at me. "Emmett, I told you to leave them alone. I'm sure they're fine."

"But …"

"No buts. Finish with the deck rail so we can go to Jackson and pick up the furniture we bought. Nice to have satellite internet here for shopping. We'll be taking both trucks. Charlotte wants to look at end tables, too." She went back in the house, grumbling, "They have this whole house here and hardly any furniture except for bookshelves and beds. Bookshelves in every room? Just a table and a lamp in the living room?"

"We got the important stuff," Char said from the laundry room, laughing. "But it will be nice to have some more furniture and another stool for the kitchen. I really like those big chairs. Chair and-a-half or whatever they're called. We were so lucky that woman decided not to buy those chairs after all. Rich folks are so strange — special order four leather chairs and then change your mind. We got such a deal on them. I love internet shopping! Even better when you can send photos, too. Hey, Emmett, you'll be able to burn that old recliner."

"I kinda like that recliner."

Char peeked out the kitchen window at me. "You can put it in your room if you like, sugar."

"Our room isn't big enough."

"You could get rid of the bed and get a futon." Pete came out the door at the back of the garage. "Those rockers are ready to go back on the porch. Em, I'll help ya put the tools away. Good job on the rail."

"Thanks." I gave him a nod. "I don't think Rose would go for a futon."

Rose poked her head out the sliding glass door. "No, Rose wouldn't."

I picked up the hammer and the screw gun while Pete grabbed the level and the box of screws and then followed him into the garage. He did have a nice set-up, though there wasn't any room for cars. All the toolboxes, workbenches, and the ATVs made sure of that. I thought there was plenty of room for a couple dirt bikes, though.

I set the tools on the rear workbench and started wiping them off as I put them away even though they didn't get greasy. I liked how he had labels on all the drawers and cabinets. In fact, Pete was pretty damn anal about his tools, and it was one of the cleanest workshop garages I had ever seen. It rivaled Rose's. I'd never tell her that, though.

"Got the ATVs cleaned up and ready to go. Next I have to work on the tractor in the barn. Gotta work on my truck, too, but that can wait a while." Pete brushed some sawdust into his dustpan and dumped it in a bucket. "Ya know, Em, after we get back from Jackson and rearrange the furniture about ten thousand times for the women, we oughta run the perimeter. I think Jazz and Bella will be back tomorrow."

"Yeah? Why are you lettin' me go with you this time? Seemed like you didn't want me to go."

"I didn't, but I think tonight somethin' will be different."

"Different? Like what?" That had me worried. Bella was out there, and I didn't want anything happening to her. If Jazz had found anything, I think he would have called us. He'd just have to run up a mountain to get reception. That was the trouble with the damn mountains — they blocked cell
"I don't know. But I think whatever it is is west." He clapped me on the shoulder. "It's not a big deal. I gotta take a shower. Wash off the gasoline and oil. See ya in a few."

-oOoOo-

Once we finally got out on Route 287, it took about an hour-and-a-half to get to Jackson, in the Jackson Hole valley, as Rose reminded me. Damn, that road to the house sucked. Long Creek Road or whatever it was called. It was long all right. Jazz had been right about his place being isolated.

When we drove into Jackson, the sun had just gone behind the mountains, so we didn't have to worry about sparkling in front of the humans, and Pete and Char put in colored contacts. Char looked pretty good with purple eyes — looked real good with her purple shirt. Pete just put in some dark brown ones. Made his eyes look nearly as dark as some of the Quileutes back in Forks. Seemed kind of odd with the blond hair.

While Rose and Char looked over the furniture and lamps and stuff, Pete and I slipped out, saying we were going to walk around for an hour or so and give the girls time to shop. Actually, I wanted to get away from the saleswomen. The two of them wouldn't leave me and Pete alone. They'd kind of stand there and stare at us. Guess I forgot what it was like to have the women falling over me; we'd lived in Forks long enough for the humans to get used to us. Well, sort of get used to us. The human girls would still stand and gawk at us if we were right next to them. Of course, all the boys would drool over Rose. When they weren't scared spitless.

We wandered east out toward the edge of town. I noticed a lot of motels, spas, and other touristy stuff. There were hardly any trees in that town, either. Seemed like the humans had found a flat place between some mountains and decided it was a good place to live. They should have planted some trees.

We worked our way north, and when we hit the edge of town, Pete stopped and put his nose up into the air, inhaling deeply.

"Smell that, Em? Vampire."

The serious look on his face got my attention. I walked over toward him, and I could smell it. It was a male vampire whose scent reminded me of cedar. He must have been through the area within the last couple of days.

"Do you think he's passin' through or stopped to hunt?" I looked up and down the street and out toward the mountains like I was being a tourist. The place was full of them.

"Don't have a clue. There really aren't that many humans that live in this town. Though there's about ten times as many people here as in Dubois, so if he's goin' to pick up a meal, I would hope it's here. Better yet would be over in Idaho or run over to Caspar. Me and Char have been through here, but we didn't specifically mark it. We can hope he's just passin' through." Pete ran his hand through his hair and looked south. "We'll get a newspaper and check for missing persons. We should head back to the furniture store. The girls are probably ready to go."

We continued our slow human pace south, pretending to look around and admire the mountains and wave at the occasional human driving by who would wave at us. We grabbed a couple of newspapers out of the boxes in front of an ice cream shop.

We were nearly to the furniture store when Pete said, "I think this vamp may have been passin'
through, but we don't have time to run all over town lookin' for his scent. Don't mention it to Rose until we're in the trucks and headin' back. It's not dark enough yet for me to follow his scent and see where he went."

I just nodded at him as we walked along. "You could let me out north of town, and I could sneak back and pick up his trail."

"Good idea, Em, but I should get out north of town. I've been through here before. You go back with the girls and I'll meet ya at the house."

"Okay." We were coming up on the furniture store and saw the girls waiting outside the front door.

"Oh, good, you're back." Char smiled up at Pete and patted his arm. "The stuff is ready to be loaded, and we can head back."

Pete and I pretended to strain picking up the chairs, ottomans, and the tables they'd bought. The chairs were nice — they were a medium reddish brown color. At least they weren't beige or tan. Better looking than the photos the sales ladies had emailed, too. They'd bought a few lamps and four new stools, also. Didn't know what they were planning on doing with them.

The sales ladies stood back, admiring us flexing our muscles while we tied down the chairs. Pete just smirked while I rolled my eyes at him. Thank goodness Rose and Char had paid them already so we didn't have to go back in the store. We waved to the ladies and headed out of town.

I was glad to be going. I explained to Rose what was going on, and she was in a hurry to get back to the house, but I couldn't start speeding. Didn't want to bust up the furniture we just bought. Didn't need to get pulled over either. I watched in the rearview as we got out of town and saw Char pull over to let Pete out. It wasn't full dark yet, but he just seemed to disappear. There weren't even any trees around for him to hide behind.

The ride back to the house was quiet; there wasn't much traffic, and then it slowed way down when we finally got to the dirt road. God, I hated that road.

Rose, Char, and I unloaded the furniture and got everything inside and situated, and Pete just appeared in the living room. I had been listening for him and hadn't even heard him come in the house.

"Found the trail and followed it east. He crossed over into our territory by Mud Lake then went south. Seemed like he was following Route 287, so I came back here."

"And you didn't recognize his scent?" Char asked.

"No, Sugar. I hope he's just a nomad wanderin' through. Hey, Em, we'll head over to Dubois and scent the area, since we claim that town, then we'll come back and start along the boundary lines."

Rose adjusted a table and lamp and nudged an ottoman into place. "You don't think he'd be friendly?"

"We can't count on that. Until he proves otherwise, we'll assume he's dangerous, even though we should never assume." Pete grinned at that. "I gotta get Jazz and Bella some clothes and leave them out there."

"I'll get the clothes. I don't want you pawing through Bella's underwear." Rose stopped on her way to the stairs and turned back. "What makes you think they'll need clothes?"
Pete cocked his head and gave Rose an incredulous look. "C'mon, Rose. Really?"

"Yeah, Rose." Char put her hands on her hips. "Have you forgotten what it's like to be newly mated?"

Rose held her hands up. "Okay, okay. I get it. Never mind. I'll just get them some clothes. I've got a backpack in my closet."

I couldn't take it anymore. It was all bullshit as far as I was concerned. We needed to get out there and look for that vamp and get Bella back to the house. "You think they're runnin' around out there nekkid and there's some strange vamp in our territory?"

"Em," Peter began as he crossed his arms over his chest. "The strange vamp was west and south. Jasper and Bella have been north. There's miles and miles between 'em. Besides, you know if Jasper found anything he would have called us or been back to the house. Or we'd have seen purple smoke and then he'd have been back to the house. Take it easy."

Rose brought us the filled backpack and we headed out.

-oOoOo-

We ran over to Dubois and found the strange vamp's scent along the main road toward town. He went north around the town, staying outside of Pete's boundaries, but Pete wanted to check near the post office anyway. He didn't want anything to happen to Miss Ellen or her new assistant, Skye, so he spit around the entire building. I was surprised he didn't track them down and rub himself all over their houses.

We circled the town, remarking his lines, and when we did come to a tree, he clawed it and rubbed against it. I thought he was going a little overboard, but I didn't say anything. He was finally satisfied, and we headed back toward the house. Before we got there, Pete headed north.

"Our territory sort of follows the government's boundaries of the national forest on the east side. Up north we stay inside the road a few miles. On the west side we stay inside Yellowstone Lake then head down to Mud Lake," Pete explained as we ran north. "That spot is as close as we get to any of the roads or highways."

"Good thing we're vampires or we'd never get around the whole thing." I went a ways past one of Pete's marks, and clawed up a tree and spit on it. "A lot of it looks like desert."

"It's really dry here, but part of the appeal is all the water. Lots of oxbow rivers and creeks, and most of the ponds have water even in high summer. Keeps the animals around for Jasper. Not that he's been here much." Pete jumped a gully and waited for me. "The mountains are pretty, and not too many humans come out here. Which makes it a bitch for me and Char to hunt." He shrugged his shoulders. "If it was flat, it would only be about 160 miles around. The house is near the bottom of our territory."

We ran in silence for a while through the night. The moon was nearly full, and it was really bright. Pete stopped when he reached the top of a ridge. We were at the north end of their claimed lands.

"This mountain here is called Fortress Mountain. The elevation is nearly 12,000 feet. Still has a little snow on it. Let's keep goin'." He pointed west. "I'm not sure where to leave their clothes. Maybe closer to the house? There's a pond just north of the house that would work, I think."

As I was about to answer him, a rippling snarl echoed up through the valley below us to the west. One of the loudest, nastiest vamp snarls I'd ever heard. "What the fuck? Was that Jasper?"
Pete started laughing. "No!" He was almost choking he was laughing so hard. "I think that was Bubba! That's my girl!"

Suddenly, Pete stopped laughing. "Oh, shit. Don't take this personal, Em, but get the fuck away from me. Run east along the ridge."

"What for? What's the matter? They gotta be a few miles down that valley."

"Jasper projecting. Just fuckin' run!"

Oh, shit was right. I ran. If Pete said to run, I thought I might have something to worry about. I'd been hit by Jasper projecting his happy feelings a few times when he was with Alice, and it had been pretty damn nice, though not overpowering, but if Pete was nervous, I thought I had something to be concerned about.

If Jazz was really happy about finding his mate, I didn't need to experience it anywhere near Pete. If it hit while we were next to each other — I didn't really want to think about what could happen.

Stopping, I turned and looked back toward Pete and it seemed like there was a kind of trail along the ridge, and there were hardly any trees, so there weren't any in the way. I could still see him in the distance. Suddenly, his whole body stiffened, he threw his head back, clutched at his chest, and dropped to his knees. He might have been groaning, but I couldn't hear him. Then he jerked and fell over, landing heavily on his side.

Oh, shit.

Jazz's lust never hit me like that before. I turned to run again, hoping I could get out of his range, but it was too late. Lust like I've never felt before hit me, and my goddamn legs turned to rubber. I think I rolled across the ground, but I wasn't sure. All I was sure of was I wanted to get my hands on Rose, rip her clothes off, and fuck her until she couldn't see straight.

Oh, my God. I wanted to come so bad I was in pain. It was almost agony, and it lasted forever. My mind was so filled with it, I thought it would crack my skull and bleed out. Maybe I was moaning. I wasn't sure about that either.

A feeling of possession shot through me and all I could think of was Rose. She was mine! Mine! I needed to get back to her!

Then a bolt of mind blowing pleasure, and I thought it was … love? … exploded inside me. I wanted Rose so bad — I needed to be with her!

I came so hard I thought my dick would split. I was afraid to touch it. I didn't actually know if I was touching it.

Almost screaming, I came and came, and when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, it eased up and finally faded away.

I was fucking exhausted, and vampires didn't get exhausted. I just laid there on my back, staring up at the stars and the Milky Way, waiting for my brain to unscramble itself. The moon had moved across the sky, but I couldn't tell how much time had passed.

Slowly, I realized I had dirt and pine needles all over me, and I began to notice sounds again. It was too cold for bugs up at that elevation, but I heard some small rustlings in the pine needles a ways from me. With that blast of lust, I'd think all the animals in the area would have been in a goddamn coma. I knew Jazz could calm down animals — why wouldn't they feel lust, too?
After a while, I heard someone walking toward me and sat up straight to see who it was. It was Pete, and he was moving real slow. He moaned a little as he brushed off the dirt and pine needles that covered him.

"You okay, Em?" His voice was rough and low.

"Yeah. You?" Even my voice sounded a little raspy.

"Yeah, except my dick got so fuckin' hard I broke the zipper on my pants." He blew out a deep breath. "That goddamn Jasper. I'd have preferred rollin' all over Char instead of the fuckin' ground."

I couldn't help it; I started laughing at him. I thought I laughed for five minutes. When that finally calmed down, I struggled to heave myself to my feet and brush the pine needles off me. "Holy shit. Jasper's been doin' that to her? How do they fuckin' stand it?" My worry came back full force.

Pete leaned forward and braced his hands against his knees. "I think that's both of them. Both of them together must make it more intense. Jasper's hit me with some shit, but never like that."

"Intense isn't exactly the right word for that."

"Well, whatever. My brain ain't workin' quite right yet. Best sex I ever had. Too bad I was by myself." He straightened and ran his hands through his hair, knocking loose more dirt and pine needles. "Seems like there haven't been any strange vamps out this way, but we should finish markin' the lines. We'll stay to this side of that valley even though the boundary is farther west. I don't think I want to go down there. If we run across Jasper and Bella, he might get a little possessive. Or Bubba might." He turned and looked back down the ridge. "We might make it home before dawn." He shook his head slowly, dropped his chin to his chest, and sighed. "I need to get home to Char, and I think I need a nap."

We started walking sluggishly along the ridge, heading west and then south. A nap sounded like a great idea.

"Uh, Pete, uh, we don't need to mention this to anybody, right?" I asked him as I adjusted my jeans. I came all over the inside of them and they were stuck to me. I guess Jazz wasn't the only Mr. Stickybritches anymore.

"No need to far as I can see."

"Maybe we can tell the girls we were wrestlin' or somethin'? You said there was a pond you wanted to put the backpack by. Maybe we could jump in and take a swim before goin' to the house?"

Feeling embarrassed, I glanced over at him. "Uh, thanks for tellin' me to run. I don't know what would have happened if you didn't."

He looked up at me and grinned. "I'd have fucked your brains out, and you woulda loved it."

..
bloodyblond on FFN. I just about died laughing when I read that. Emmett's great.
I Exclaim

Chapter Summary

Let's get it on.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Beta services provided by ElleCC and Fmfg of Project Team Beta.

A/N: Boom-chicka-wow-wow, or maybe brown-chicken-brown-cow. (Trace Adkins has a song by that name. Can find him on YouTube.) LOL

Perhaps this is the chapter some of you have been anticipating. Over 11k.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and A Different Forest (ADF) — feed a tree!

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

BetterinTexas — go check him out on FFN. He just kills me. LOL

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Alone With You" by Alpha Rev from the album New Morning

Ch 45, I Exclaim

Jasper's POV
Idyllic perfection. The pine needle-covered ground felt as indulgent as the thickest feather bed beneath us. Warm sunshine from the setting sun filtered through the fresh green leaves and long needles of the trees that surrounded us. The hint of a fragrant breeze whispered through the branches above us and caressed our bodies like the gentle touches of a lover. Like the light touches of my lover's hands on my skin.

Lying in my arms, Bella delicately traced the curves and slashes of each scar she could easily reach on my chest. After drawing her finger over the silvery marks, her soft lips would follow with a light kiss, and she would breathe out, "I love you." Her bliss enveloped me and drew me to her, though I didn't think there was any way I could possibly get closer to her.

I kissed her forehead and whispered, "I love you," as I sent more of my love and joy to her.

Happiness, peace, serenity, and fulfillment held us in a comforting cocoon, and I never wanted to move from that spot. But I felt the need of Bella's growing thirst, and I knew we would have to leave that sublime place.

Bella kissed my chest again and turned her face up to mine. "Jasper?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes, Bella?" I closed my eyes and kissed the end of her nose. "Say whatever it is. I will do anything for you."

She blinked slowly and looked down. "You're going to think it's … weird or silly or something."

I tilted her chin up so I could look into her darkening eyes. "We won't know until you tell me."

"Well, it's always kind of funny when we use quotes from movies and TV shows, but I … I don't have words to tell you how I feel right now. But I remembered a song." Embarrassment flickered around the edges of her love and contentment.

"Don't be embarrassed. I can feel what you feel." I pressed my lips to her brow. "You don't need to say it. I love you."

"I can feel what you feel." She sighed again. "I want to say it, but I don't have the words." She blinked again and looked away. "But this song —"

"Don't look away from me, Darlin'." I urged her face to mine. "What song?"

Her head bent down, but her eyes peered up at me shyly as she swallowed nervously. "You fill up my senses like a night in a forest …"

"Like the mountains in springtime," I whispered to her, recalling the way John Denver had sung "Annie's Song" in honor of his wife years before Bella had even been born. It was very fitting.

A small smile curved her lips. "Yes. Now I understand what he was singing about. I know what he was saying in that song, and it says exactly what I feel." She kissed my chin. "You fill up my senses."

I hugged her to me. I understood exactly what she meant. Even with all the words we knew, even as quickly as our brains could sort through them and put them together, there were times when words were inadequate to express the fullness of what we were experiencing. "I know. His words are perfect." I tightened my arms around her as my lips touched hers. "Let me lay down beside you, let me always be with you. Let me give my life to you."
"Come let me love you. Come love me again." Her eyes closed as she took in a deep breath, taking in my scent as I breathed in hers.

Her need shifted to want and desire. As much as I wanted to make love to her again, I knew she had other needs that required attention. It was vital that I take care of my mate in all ways. "You need to hunt, Bella."

She huffed quietly. "I am a little thirsty," she admitted.

"I think you're becoming very thirsty."

Embarrassment skittered around her emotions again. "But I'm naked. I … I don't want to hunt naked. I know the animals won't care if I don't have any clothes on, but I care." She sat up, pulling me with her. She drew her legs up and crossed her arms over her breasts, trying to cover herself. "Er, we're both naked and, um …"

"It's okay, Darlin'. I think we can work somethin' out with the clothes we have left." I stood up beside her.

Her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open. "Uh, you're, um, you are, uh … that fit in … Oh, my God." She dropped her face to her knees and covered her head with her arms. "Holy shit."

I couldn't help chuckling at her. If she had been human, I was sure her entire body would be blazing red. She hadn't actually seen all of me until that moment, and I couldn't suppress the smirk that stole over my face. "What's the matter, Darlin'?"

"Huge." She gulped. "You're, uh … huger … than I thought you were … No, uh, bigger, I mean and I, er … I don't know!" She ended with a squeak.

I bent over and kissed the top of her head. "Thank you, Darlin'. I'm not huge, but I'm glad you think so. Remember, I was made for you and you were made for me." I ran my fingers over her hair and down the braid resting along her back. "I'll find our clothes and be right back."

As I turned away from her, I felt a definite surge of appreciation and desire. I stopped and looked over my shoulder at her. "First things first. You need to hunt." I was quite enjoying her reactions to seeing me naked.

All she said was "eep" and hid her face again.

We hadn't moved too far from our clothes, and I picked up what was left of my jeans and belt. The belt couldn't be worn again, but I thought I could do something with the legs of the jeans. My shirt was a few miles away back at the pond where I caught Bella. Bella's shirt was intact, but all that was left of her panties were scraps.

"Did you want me to wear somethin'?" I asked her innocently.

"Yes, please," she mumbled into her knees.

Our jeans were not wearable. I ripped the legs off Bella's jeans, and split the one seam to open it up. I did the same to the other leg. I couldn't think of a damn thing to do with them. I picked up Bella's shirt and stared at it. Maybe I could wear it as a breechclout. But what would she wear?

Then it came to me. Using my fingernail, I cut the legs from my jeans and split them open. One leg I took apart at the seams and tied the short ends together to make a long strip. That would be the belt for my breechclout. It was awkward, but I put the other jeans leg between mine and held it with my
thighs until I could catch the flap of denim in the back with my contrived belt. I pulled the remainder of the denim up my belly and tied the fabric by my hip. I let the front flap fall. It would work.

I took one of the legs of Bella's jeans and separated the front from the back. I tied the short ends together. "Okay, Darlin', I think I got it. You could wear your shirt and then make a breechclout out of the legs of your jeans like I did, or …"

Bella gasped and when I looked at her, she was peeking at me through her fingers.

"What?" I asked her. I was as dressed as I could get with what we had left.

"Uh, what do you call that, uh, there?" she asked, stammering.

"A breechclout. They're also called breechcloth. It's a kind of loincloth." I cocked my head at her. "Native Americans wore a similar kind of thing. Only theirs weren't denim."

"I never saw Jacob wear anything like that."

"I suppose not, though the wolf-boys don't wear much more than this most of the time. I did happen to see Indians wearing them." I looked down at the denim in my hands. "This wider piece you put between your legs, and you use this piece to tie …"

Without warning, Bella tackled me. Her lips were on mine as I fell back onto the ground. I tossed the denim and her Henley and planted my hands on her back, holding her to me as she squirmed against me. It felt so good, I moaned as I pushed up against her leg.

I tried to remember what I had wanted her to do as I flipped her onto her back.

Then it came to me. "Bella," I said, gasping as I kissed her. "You need to hunt."

"You are so fucking beautiful." She was licking my neck. "My beautiful, golden god — golden all over — in nothing but a loincloth." She began to growl as her hands held me to her. "How do you take it off?" She nipped at my chin and her lust pounded into me.

Oh, God.

"Bella, you need to feed." I couldn't believe I was saying that. "I'll show you how to take it off after you hunt."

She had her lips on her claiming bite, sending jolts of pleasure through me. I groaned and pushed my hardening dick against her.

"Bella, stop." What the hell was I saying? Was I a fucking idiot? "Bella, please." Then she started to suck at the scars, and I groaned louder.

She raised her left leg up and wrapped it over my hip, pulling me to her. "Jasper. Take it off. Now." Her growl had deepened into an erotic purr.

Well, okay then. Who was I to deny my mate? I braced my left arm against the ground and lifted my hips, reaching down with my right hand. I pushed the makeshift breechclout down just far enough to release my swollen dick then reached for her, sliding my hand to her downy curls. She was so wet and so soft, so ready for me, I couldn't wait to be inside her. I guided the head of my dick to her entrance, and I marveled at the heat as I pushed into her, feeling her muscles tighten around me.

My mind stuttered as her exhilaration, longing, and desire swept through me. She wrapped her other
leg around me, clawing at my back, as her need and lust beat into me.

I couldn't catch my breath.

I pulled my hips back and eased into her again, straining not to slam into her, and then she bit me. Her left hand came up and gripped the back of my neck as she sucked at the new wound, drinking in my venom. It would have been a perfect bite if she were trying to drain a human.

"Oh, fuck," I groaned as I pulled my hips back from her again and began to thrust into her, smoothly, slowly, feeling every velvety inch of her.

She started forcing her venom into me. The fingers of her right hand dug into my back, her hips met mine, and I came. I'd hardly had time to register the sensuous burning of her venom entering my veins, I came so fucking fast.

Her fingers dug into my neck, and her right arm crushed me to her. Her legs slid up and clamped even harder around my waist. The slight change in angle was absolutely exquisite, and I shuddered against her as my own venom pumped out of me and into her.

Another growl worked its way up her chest, vibrating throughout my torso. Her lust and pleasure suddenly peaked. She stiffened against my body and yanked her teeth from my throat. Her growl became a roar as her orgasm overtook her, feeding my own, forcing my mind into a chaotic spin. Both of her arms closed around my rib cage, and I thought I felt them crack as she clutched at me.

Ignoring the pain in my sides, I held her to me as she came.

At last, the tornado-like whirl of her emotions began to slow, finally releasing mine, and I collapsed on top of her.

"Oh, God, Bella. Oh, God." I gulped down the venom still filling my mouth and pressed my jaw to hers. "Oh, my fucking God." Her arms relaxed their vice-like hold and slid from around me, her fingers grazing lightly over my skin. I raised myself up and realized she was panting, her eyes closed. "Bella, I love you."

I couldn't believe I had come so fast. It was almost embarrassing.

I raised myself a bit higher, feeling the ache in my ribs, and kissed the corner of her mouth. "I can do better than that."

"Better? Are you fuckin' kiddin' me?" Her eyes opened slowly, revealing her shining black irises. "If it were any better I think I'd fucking die."

Sometimes, I really liked it when she just blurted things. Other times, not so much.

Only trouble was, what did she have to compare to? A possessive growl reverberated through my chest. I was eminently glad she didn't have a comparison. She was all mine, and I would just have to show her how much better.

If I survived it.

"Ooooo." She closed her eyes and sighed. "The growl. The vibration. I like that." Her arms went around me again, and she pulled me to her.

A sharp gasp escaped me, and I must have grimaced. I was healing, but not quite fast enough.
Her hand cupped the side of my face, and her concern washed over me. "What's the matter?"

I had hoped I would heal before she noticed anything, but no such luck. "I'm pretty sure you cracked my ribs during our throes of passion."

"Oh, Jasper, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do that! It just felt so good, and I wanted to be closer to you. I just couldn't get close enough and …"

"It's okay, Darlin'. I kissed her to quiet her apologies. "Hold still. I just need a few minutes and I'll be fine. Then we need to hunt." I kissed her forehead. "You can pull me as close as you want. Just not right at the moment."

"I'm really sorry, Jasper. I didn't mean to hurt you." She reached up to nuzzle my throat where she had bitten me. "Except for this." Her silky tongue drew a broad, wet stroke over the new mating bite she'd given me. "You're only mine." A sweet purr began as she licked me again.

My own deep purr answered hers. "Only mine." Who cared about a few fractured bones? I had my mate in my arms.

"I love to hear you purr. It's so sexy." She pulled my head down to hers. "You said we need to hunt. How often do you hunt?"

I kissed her cheek and breathed in her scent which was mixed so thoroughly with mine. "Every two to four weeks. Newborns should feed every few days or so. As you gain more control, that time will lengthen until you feed only once or twice a month. If you were a human drinker, it would be every four or five weeks. Unless you were injured. Feeding helps the healing."

"Animal drinkers have to feed more often?"

"Yes. Animal blood isn't as good as human blood." I kissed her again.

She began to feel uncomfortable, and her purr stopped. "But, uh, Edward went hunting all the time?"

I didn't want to even think about that son of a bitch while I was still inside my mate. My purr ceased, but I controlled the flare of anger so I could answer her. "Because he fed from animals, and he was trying to keep himself full so he wouldn't drain you."

"Oh. I think he did tell me that." She kissed my bottom lip. "I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have mentioned that, er, him right now. It just popped into my head." She looked up at me apologetically.

"You ask me whatever you want, Darlin'. I'll try my best to answer it." I grinned at her. "Even if the timin' is a little off." I nipped at her lips. "Now, we need to try to get dressed and go hunt. I'm pretty sure I need to hunt again."

I eased up away from her and sucked in a breath at the pleasurable sensations. I could stay right there, inside my mate, all day and all night, but she needed to hunt, and we had time for that later. "Oh, God, it feels so good inside you." I forced myself away from her. As I straightened to kneel between her legs, I couldn't stop my eyes from roaming over her beautiful body.

The fading sunlight gave her ivory skin a golden glow. Her breasts were perfect with their soft pink nipples. I couldn't wait to take each one in my mouth and taste her. Taste every inch of her. No, she wasn't as bosomy as Rosalie and Charlotte — she was perfect just the way she was.

While human, she had lost weight when we had all left her, but as I had glimpsed before, she had gained that weight back plus another ten pounds or so, giving her hips a delicious flare that she
hadn't had previously. Her body had matured into more womanly curves, and I fucking loved them. I gazed at the soft brown curls of her sex and started to reach for her. "You are so fucking beautiful, Bella."

She was embarrassed suddenly, and my eyes flicked to hers. Her gaze dropped to my groin. She snapped her eyes shut and then she tried to cover her breasts with her arms.

I pulled up my breechclout, tucking away the little soldier for the time being, and re-tied the denim strap above my hips.

"It's okay, Darlin'. I'm dressed. Sort of. I'll help you." I jumped up and grabbed her shirt and the torn denim. "I'll be quick. Sit up and raise your arms."

She was trembling with her sudden humiliation but she sat up and lifted her arms. I dropped the wider piece of denim on the ground and spread it out. I quickly sat her on it, causing her to gasp in surprise, and pulled her shirt down over her arms and head. I tugged her messy braid out of the neck of her Henley and settled it along her back.

"Jasper, I'm so embarrassed!" she wailed, covering her face with her hands.

I dropped to my knees in front of her and tried to pull her hands from her face. "Why, Darlin'? You have no reason whatsoever to be embarrassed. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"But I'm naked! And now I'm kind of, uh, sticky. I mean, it's not bad ... it's you, but it's different and ..."

"Yes. Our venom is all over us. I fuckin' love it." I held up the front flap of her breechclout, and she grabbed it without thinking. "Hold this. Gently." I reached behind her and took hold of the rear flap. I tied the jeans-leg belt around her waist, catching the denim. "You're dressed, Darlin'. Let go of the flap here."

Before she had a chance to exclaim, I hauled her to her feet. "I don't want to run back to the house so you can get a bubble bath, but there are ponds and creeks around you can wash in if you want to."

"I actually like your scent on me." She was looking down at herself, then at me. She took a step toward me. "I like my scent on you, and I like this breechclout thing. Add a few more of these flaps and it's almost a kilt. Very simple and ... and sexy." Her shame forgotten, her desire started to grow again. "You would look fucking hot in a kilt."

Newborns and their mood swings! She had just been so ashamed she wouldn't even look at me, and the next instant she was stalking me. If she hadn't needed to hunt, I would have gladly let her chase me for a while and might even consider wearing a kilt, but I needed to make her focus on feeding. "Bella," I said firmly.

"What?" Her eyes snapped up to mine.

"That's right, Darlin', my eyes are up here." I smirked at her. Actually, I was quite pleased she found me attractive, but we had other business. "Breechclouts are very efficient articles of clothing." I reached for what was left of my jeans and found my phone and my lighter. I folded them into a section of my belt and fed the end through to create a small pouch. "We are going to hunt. We'll head down the mountain toward water. Since it's evening, animals will start moving in. If we haven't chased them all away." I winked at her.

"Okay. Hunt. I got it." She pointed at the little bag I had created. "Like a fanny pack. Good idea. Why do you have a lighter?"
"I always try to have one with me. You never know when you might need it." I grabbed her hand and started down the mountain before she came up with any more questions. "Remember — listen and sniff the air. In the Rockies, there are some whitetail deer, mule deer, elk, some moose, big horn sheep, black bears, mountain lions, lynxes, wolves, and coyotes. Along with squirrels, rabbits and chipmunks. There might even be some wolverines."

"Well, like Emmett said, chipmunks are hardly even an appetizer." She laughed as we ran between the trees.

I had to laugh with her. "Emmett would know."

Tugging at her hand to slow her down, I whispered to her, "We're near the first pond, but I don't smell any animals nearby. We must have chased them off. If there aren't any at the next one, we'll head north."

She just nodded at me as we stepped out from between the trees to approach the water. The pond was a little one, and there was no sign of any animals around. When we were about halfway across the clearing, I heard a small plane. The mountains were beautiful, but they often blocked the sound of aircraft until they were nearly on top of you.

"Bella, into the trees. There's a plane."

"But the sun's not shining on us."

" Doesn't matter. I don't know yet how low he is. He could see us." I pulled her into the trees with me and watched the sky.

It was a little biplane, flying low. Probably a tourist. "He would have spotted us. He might even have reported seeing us. We don't need that. Let's check the other pond. There're more trees around it."

We ran down the mountain to the next, larger pond and didn't find anything there. We'd have to go north.

As we neared a large creek, I caught the scent of deer. Definitely more than one.

"Bella, there are deer near here. I think it might be mule deer. Do you want to try for those or look for something else?"

"Mule deer?" Her hand went to her throat, and I knew her thirst was growing. Her emotions shifted to want, quickly followed by excitement and anticipation. I didn't think she'd want to look for anything else.

"Bigger than whitetails, not as big as elk. Follow your nose. You can do it. I won't be far behind you."

She nodded and closed her eyes, raising her nose into the air. When she tensed, I knew she had caught their scent. She bolted away to the northwest, following the creek, though staying under the cover of the pines.

Seeing her in that denim breechclout was a whole new experience for me. Even though it was getting darker, I had a perfect view of her as she ran. Her braid bounced across her back, and the denim fluttered around her hips. Even wearing a modern Henley, she was my warrior huntress gliding through the forest. She was beyond beautiful and so fucking sexy.

She hissed when she spotted a small herd of mule deer doe and their fawns by the flowing water.
Just beyond them were a few young bucks standing in the creek. They looked to be yearlings.

Bella snarled; her need to satiate her thirst was nearly overpowering — her bloodlust suddenly forcing its way into my mind — as she burst through the first group and leapt for the young bucks, reaching for the necks of two of the four; the force of her leap and her extraordinary strength easily snapping their necks. She splashed into the knee-deep water as her arms went around one, and she threw his limp body toward the bank. She twisted around and snatched up the second, snarling and drawing his neck to her mouth. The group of three does and their five fawns bugled and snorted their panic as they bounded out of the creek to the opposite shore. The two remaining young bucks reared away from Bella and scrambled to get away from her.

If I had wanted to feed, I should have gone after one of the does, but I found it impossible to tear my eyes away from Bella. She was vicious, deadly — magnificent. I stood at the edge of the rocky creek and just watched, transfixed, as she drained the first yearling and flung his body to the shore. She plowed through the water and gained the bank just as a snarling mountain lion broke from beneath the trees and ran toward Bella's other buck.

We must have interrupted his hunt. I knew Bella couldn't be hurt by the large cat, but I went for it. No creature would threaten my Bella and live through it.

Bella, intent on draining her second buck, had been startled by the unfamiliar snarl and stopped to search for the source as she reached for the mule deer.

The golden cat's eyes were fixed on Bella, and he growled as he gathered his muscles to spring at her.

I caught him in the middle of his leap, my left arm circling around his back and my right reaching for his lower jaw. I forced it up, jerking his head back to break his neck. I landed solidly, clutching the lion to my chest as I bit into his throat. Between Bella's bloodlust and the adrenalin-like surge of my own, I needed to drain that cat. It wasn't quite good enough, but the carnivore's blood was better than a mule deer's would have been. His warm blood flowed down my throat, barely quenching my sudden, incredible thirst.

I heard a snarl behind me, and some part of my mind registered how close I was to Bella and her deer. It was always so easy to get caught up in the kill.

Turning, all I saw was my mate possessively holding the buck to her chest, her teeth at his throat. She was growling and snarling in anger as she backed away from me, still trapped in her bloodlust and attempting to protect her kill from me.

I would never take food from my mate. Something in me shifted, and I was instantly in front her, pulling my teeth from the great cat's jugular, fresh blood spilling down my face and neck to my chest. I realized I was bringing my kill to her, and a tiny portion of my mind drew back in shock. I had never done that before. Not ever. But in that moment, it was the exact, right thing to do. I would do anything I needed to in order to care for my mate.

Her snarls abruptly stopped, and her nostrils flared as she took in the scent of the hot blood. She flung away the little buck and reached for the cougar, her claw-like hands grasping at the air. Astounding myself again, I held the still-warm lion out to her, offering it to her. Strangely, against all my normal, animalistic, selfish instincts, I hoped she would accept it, take it from me and feed.

She stared hungrily at the tawny fur and licked her blood-stained lips. She reached hesitantly for it, and her glittering, black eyes looked up to mine. She was unsure, and a sliver of fear shot through her thirst and want. Her hands jerked back toward her chest. It was instinctive for us to protect and
keep our kills from others, and she was afraid to take it from me.

I held the lion's limp form out toward her and bathed her in my love. My mate could have anything that I had. Everything I did have was hers; she had only to accept it.

Her eyes widened as my love for her went out and around her in a nearly tangible wave. Her hands slowly moved toward the cougar then she snatched it away, turned, and dropped into a crouch at my feet, crushing the large golden-furred body to her chest as her lips found where I had bitten him.

More than almost anything else she could have done, accepting my token and feeding directly in front of me spoke to the deepest part of me of her absolute trust. She had approved of my gift and accepted me, fully and completely. She was permitting me to stay near while she fed.

I had never allowed anyone too close to me while I had fed. I had once thought that I wanted to at least be near Alice while she hunted and fed, but she had always run from me and wouldn't allow me near her immediately afterward. Any other vampires had automatically shied away when I hunted, whether I had been chasing down humans or animals. The only difference would be when I would take my newborn unit into a human village and massacre everything that had a heartbeat.

Above anything else, Bella's actions soothed my raging instincts and filled my heart with such love I felt it would burst. I dropped to my knees in the rounded stones by the creek edge beside her and simply gazed at her — truly awestruck, utterly smitten, unreservedly in love with her.

She drained the large cat and released him, wiping blood from her lips with the back of her hand. She turned to me and whispered my name. "Jasper. You are mine."

"Yes. Yours." Instantly, I had to have her, I had to be buried deep inside her and possess her. It didn't matter that we had already consummated our mating, it was imperative that I claim her again, right then.

My right hand darted out, gripping her neck and pulling her bloodied mouth to mine. Nothing tasted as good as my Bella, except my Bella with the blood of my gift on her lips.

Her hands shoved the denim belt down over my hips, freeing my straining dick, while I ripped her improvised breechclout from her. Her need for me blasted through my mind. I had to have her. No other thought entered my consciousness as I licked the blood from her face and throat and spun her in front of me, drawing her back to my chest, forcing her ass against my hard dick.

She reached up to grab my hand at her throat, and the fingers of her right hand slid up my forearm. She growled lowly, the rich sound of it calling to me, as she arched her back, pushing her ass against me, wanting me inside her.

My left hand slid slowly over her breast, down her stomach to her hip, and I held her to me more tightly. My own rumbling growl joined hers as I drew my tongue up her shoulder and the back of her neck. I pushed her down, compelling her to let go of my arm and making her brace her hands against the rocky ground.

I grabbed her hips and slid into her slick, welcoming warmth as she pushed back against me. As she met each powerful thrust, I growled louder and deeper, my fingers digging into her curves. I roared my triumph at winning my mate and reached for her neck again, wrapping my fingers around her throat. Curling over her back, I buried my nose in her hair, breathing in her mesmerizing scent, and thrust into her again and again. I could feel my climax edging closer, and I drew my tongue over the curve of her shoulder and neck, preparing to mark her again.
She gasped as her own pleasure erupted, and I drove my dick into her as I sank my teeth into the muscle at the top of her shoulder, flooding her with my venom.

Her inner walls clenched with her orgasm and it wrenched mine from me. With each erratic thrust, I filled her with my venom and growled against her skin until it I had no more to give. I pulled my teeth from her left shoulder and collapsed over her back. Only her immense newborn strength kept us from dropping to the ground.

She snarled with her release and extreme pleasure. Then she lowered us both, dropping her shoulder so my deliciously limp body slid gently to the ground on my side. Purring loudly, she burrowed under my arm, snuggling against my chest. She licked the cougar's blood from my throat and chin, and reached to taste my lips.

"Only mine," she whispered.

-oOoOo-

Sitting in the shade of a tall pine, my back resting against its deeply ridged bark and my eyes half-closed, I watched Bella lounge in the sun on a large flat rock about twenty feet away. We had spent the better part of the last couple of days playing in the lake, when we hadn't had to hide from another damn plane that flew over.

Bella tried to wash what was left of our clothing. She laid her shirt and the denim breechclouts out on the rock, and stretched out beside them, purring like a cat in a sunny window. She rolled lazily from her back to her stomach, the bright mid-day light shimmering across her skin and bringing out gold and red highlights in her hair.

Fortunately, being completely naked didn't seem to be bothering her at the moment, though it was causing me a bit of discomfort. The little soldier was eager to get reacquainted. After all, it had been a whole day since I'd last had my mate.

She was stunning. I had seen many vampires in the sun and most reflected a harsh, glaring glitter, but not Bella. Her ivory skin always seemed to have a soft glow, and it was brightened and enhanced in the sun. She glistened and gleamed with a breath-taking soft luster.

She loved being in the sunlight. I wondered how she could have ever left the light and heat of Phoenix to live in cool, grey, rainy Forks. Thank God she had.

I could watch her in the sun all day, unless another plane flew over. If she kept moving like that and making those contented little sounds, I wouldn't be able to just sit much longer.

She was beyond beautiful in the summer sun, and I couldn't wait to see her in the pure white snow and blinding sunlight after a snowstorm. Up in the higher elevations there was still some snow. We might have to make a run to find it.

"Jasper?" she purred.

"Yes, Darlin'?"

"If I'm being too nosy, just say so, okay?"

"You can ask me anything, Bella. You know that." She'd asked me a few questions now and then. Like when my birthday had been. I didn't remember, though I thought it might have been at the end of 1843 or beginning of 1844, making me nineteen or twenty years old when Maria had caught me.
Surprised, she had exclaimed, "So you're a Capricorn!"

How she remembered that sort of obscure information about Zodiac signs was completely beyond me.

Then there was the question about why we hadn't buried the animals we had drained.

"There's really no need to bury them like the Cullens did, unless we're near an obvious hiking trail, and not many humans come out here. That's a habit of Carlisle's, and he taught it to the rest of them. Normally, within about twenty-four hours, predators or scavengers will have the meat gone and the bones scattered. It won't be long before the rodents have gnawed the bones down to nothing. That's why people don't find the antlers deer have shed very often even though they shed them every year."

"Oh" had been her only reply.

Out of the blue, a little wave of nervous curiosity shivered around her contentedness, and I began to wonder what sort of question she might ask next.

Never opening her eyes, she asked, "Er, you've been … intimate with a lot of women? Vampires?"

Oh, shit.

Should have expected that. Thinking back, I should have realized she had been building up to that question, but I could be nothing but honest with my mate. Even if it might be a little uncomfortable for me. Not that I was ashamed about the number, or that I had had sex with so many humans while I drained them. I wasn't sure what it was. Maybe it was because if Bella had sex with human men and then drained them, I would be more upset about the sex than the fact that she had killed someone.

"Yes. Humans and vampires." I shifted my position uneasily and unnecessarily cleared my throat.

"Human women?" She frowned slightly. "Did you kill them?"

"Most of them. A few became soldiers for Maria."

She crossed her arms on the rock in front of her and rested her cheek on her hand. "And what else? It seems like there's something else."

Edward had said she was very perceptive, and she truly was. Maybe she had heard something in my voice.

"Males."

She was quiet for a time, thinking that over. She had accepted me in a way no one else ever had, but she hadn't had the full story. Would knowing I had been with males make her change her mind about me? Humans often had a very different view of sex than vampires did — except for Edward. His views on sex were beyond even a puritanical human's.

"Male vampires and humans," she stated.

"Yes."

She still hadn't opened her eyes. She was silent about ten minutes, and I didn't know what to think. Her emotions had remained steady with her contentment with an edge of curiosity.

The curiosity gained a touch of suspicion, and Bella inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. "You had said back in Forks that I was the only woman you wanted. Do I need to worry about you and Peter?"
"Never," I assured her. She took me completely off-guard with that question, though I quickly wondered why she had asked about Peter and not Charlotte. Before my startled brain had time to give it any more thought, she continued.

"You've marked him, and I think I can understand why you would be upset about that bite I gave him looking like a claiming bite. Why did you mark him with a bite that looks like a claiming bite?"

Bella was so perceptive and observant it was fucking scary.

"Maria and I each had our favorites, and we did not share. I marked him as mine so that Maria would leave him alone. Peter hated her, and I was afraid if he spent too much personal time with her she would figure it out and have me kill him, especially after I changed Charlotte. I didn't know Peter and Charlotte were mates — he hid it very well from me — but I knew there was something different about her."

"Charlotte already told me she hasn't had sex with you," she said matter-of-factly. "She said she didn't want me to be jealous and try to claw her up like I did Alice because then she'd have to whup my hiney." She smiled slightly and adjusted her cheek on her arm. "She'd do it, too. She wouldn't be afraid to hurt me like you men are."

Well, that answered the question of what the women talked about when the men weren't around.

Bella huffed lightly and continued on. "Peter has mentioned that you two were close, and I thought he was just teasing Emmett, but he's touched a scar at the base of the left side of his neck a few times. He was looking at you when he did it. Not at Charlotte, at you." She sighed. "You've bitten me on my left side more than my right side." She crossed her ankles and raised them up, waving them slightly back and forth. "I didn't really notice at first, but Peter kind of looks at me funny sometimes, not that I've actually spent much time with him, and that made me watch him. The scar he touches is below the one I put on him." She sighed again. "The vampire brain makes you remember everything."

I had never noticed him touching a scar at his neck. I had thought Peter had looked at her too often, though there was nothing in particular I could put my finger on. I just chalked it up to my own jealousy exaggerating it. She was a beautiful, exciting vampire.

"Do you want him?" she asked quietly.

"No. I only want you." I was starting to worry though I wasn't sure about what. "I love you."

Bella's eye opened slightly, and she smiled at me. "I know you love me. I know you love Peter and Charlotte, though I can tell it's different. Kinda like the way you love Rosalie. Over the last week, I've felt just about everything you've been feeling, even when you try to block it." She closed her eyes. "I was a little worried that you might want him, but I am glad you love him."

"You don't ever have to worry about me wanting him." She truly was glad that I loved them. Her love circled me, and I basked in the feeling, but a small doubt nagged at the back of my mind. "I could never want Peter the way that I want you. Uh, how does he look at you?"

She smiled more broadly. "Nothing to be jealous about, Jasper. He looks at me like he's studying me. Like I'm a strange bug or something." She laughed quietly. "Please don't worry. Remember what I said — I don't care who you are, where you're from, don't care what you did, as long as you love me."

Relieved, I chuckled at my mate, her sense of humor, and at the unusual ways she found to express...
her love for me. No one could reassure me like Bella, and I went back to basking in her love. Thankfully, all seemed right with the world, and we drifted into a comfortable silence.

After a long, sunny while, Bella stirred slightly. "Jasper, why don't you come over here with me? The heat of the sun feels so good." Her chin was propped on her arms, and her eyes were still closed.

Thinking about lying next to her glistening body perked me and the little soldier right up. Grinning at her, I asked, "Is that why you like bubble baths? Because the water is hot?"

"Well, yes. I like the water — couldn't you tell?" She smiled broadly. "And I like that it's hot. Water feels soft against my skin. Clothes are a little rough."

"You don't have to wear clothes," I suggested helpfully. "We could just stay out here — naked as the day we were born. It's not like we need to live in a house."

"We cannot stay out here, and I like living in a house. I like your house." A small frown puckered her brow. "It's not … ostentatious. It's comfortable, homey, and cozy, and I like it. Even if it is all beige inside and has hardly any furniture." Her frown deepened. "Quit avoiding the original topic. Why don't you come over here with me?"

My eyes followed the long curls of her rich brown hair over her shoulders and trailed down the concave arch of her back and up over the rounded curves of her ass. I noticed the top of that rock was just about counter height, and if she were on her back and her ass was at the edge of …

"Jasper!"

"Uh, what?"

Though her eyes were still closed in her relaxed comfort, she was beginning to get annoyed.

"I've spent most of my life as a vampire avoidin' the sun, Darlin'. It's a hard habit to break. I still feel a little uncomfortable in the sunlight. Even though using my sparkly self to catch you worked out well." The little soldier was becoming more insistent by the moment, and I brushed my fingers down its hard length. "Why don't you bring your sun-warmed self over here and heat up my lap?"

Her eyes snapped opened and widened as she watched the movement of my fingers. "Er, uh, I never, uh … I mean, I … I never sat …" she stammered.

"I'll show you." I dipped my head down and looked up at her as my fingers went around my hard dick and slid to the head. "Come here, Bella."

The bright red of her eyes turned to a glittering black, and she was instantly in a crouch on her hands and feet, her hair swirling around her shoulders and back. As she stood up, her hair covered her breasts but wasn't long enough to hide the smooth flare of her hips. My eyes were drawn to the soft, brown curls at the apex of her thighs. I sucked in a breath and almost jumped up to take her on that rock shelf that was just the right height, but I waited for her to come to me.

It was very difficult.

She jumped down from the rock and walked slowly toward me. I groaned as she brushed her hair back over her shoulders, exposing her perfect breasts to me. The venom surged in my mouth, and I swallowed repeatedly to keep from drooling, but oh my fucking God, she was gorgeous. She was superb.

If she didn't get a move on, I was going to attack her.
She was aroused, and definitely interested, but a little nervous.

"Don't be nervous, Darlin'. You know I'll take care of you."

Stopping at my feet, her eyes trained on my hand slowly stroking my dick, she mumbled, "Uh, yeah."

"Come closer." I breathed in her scent and let it fill me. I loved her spicy scent. It was even better with mine mixed with it. No one would ever be able to deny that she was mine and I was hers.

Hesitantly, she took a couple steps and paused next to my right thigh, her fingers nervously pulling at each other.

"That's not where I want you." I grabbed her hips and pulled her to me. "I want to taste you. All of you."

"Uh, but uh … Oh!"

She was so warm from lying on the sun-baked rock, it made her scent even stronger, and I couldn't breathe deeply enough. I needed more. Her delicious fragrance bloomed around me, and I moaned in exquisite pleasure.

"When you smell like that," I groaned, "I just want to fuck you and bite you and rub myself all over you."

I kissed her soft curls and slid my tongue between her lips, finally tasting her, ecstatic that I was the first and only to experience that ambrosia. It was her scent, but so much more. There was a faint trace of muskiness that was purely Bella, and all woman, and she was mine!

Grabbing hold of her right ankle, I moved her foot over my legs so hers were spread and I better access. I tipped her hips back and dove into her, my tongue starting low, sliding up to her hard clitoris and pressing against it.

She gasped, and her hands were on either side of my head, fisting handfuls of my hair, holding me to her. Her head dropped forward and her hair fell over her shoulders. "Oh, God. Oh, God. I never … this is …"

I held her hips firmly as my tongue swirled over and circled her clit. Her lust and pleasure oozed over me, and she was panting faster. When her legs began to tremble, I pulled slowly away from her.

"Don't stop," she whined. "Please, don't stop." She tried to hold my head in position, but I wouldn't let her.

"Do you want me, Darlin'?" I kissed each of her thighs.

"Oh, yes."

"Sit on my dick and ride me."

Her surge of lust told me she liked the idea, and I grabbed her hips more tightly before she dropped onto me. "Nice and slow, Darlin'," I whispered against her stomach as I lowered her.

My tongue left a wet trail from her navel to her sternum, and when I reached her beautiful breasts, I held her still. Standing at full attention, the head of my dick was just touching her slick entrance, but I stopped her, nuzzling against her left breast.
Frustrated, she growled. "Jasper, quit teasing … oooo!"

I captured her pale pink nipple with my lips and suckled her, drawing the tip of my tongue across her stiff nipple, and she pulled my face into her chest.

It was a good thing we didn't need to breathe.

She bent her head down and inhaled deeply when her nose was in my hair. "I love the way you smell. You smell better than anything."

I eased her down, pushing the head of my straining dick inside her, and she gasped, flinging her head back and arching her body toward me.

Being inside her was pure heaven, and all I wanted to do was throw her to the ground and mount her, but I fought against that immediate urge. I swallowed the venom filling my mouth. "You've bitten me so many times …" — I eased her down another inch, and she groaned — "… your scent is mixed completely with mine."

Another inch lower and her hands let go of my hair. Her fingers splayed out over my shoulders, and she began to tremble.

A little lower. I could hardly stand it. She was shaking so hard she was nearly vibrating, and I sucked in a breath. "I've bitten you enough …" — I drew my tongue up her throat as I lowered her another inch — "… my scent is part of yours."

I shoved her down onto me, and her knees hit the ground on either side of my hips. "You are so fuckin' good."

Throwing my head back against the tree, I clenched my teeth, struggling not to come yet. Being inside her felt so goddamn good, I hoped I would be able to control that need to come the moment I slid into her. I hoped it would be soon.

Perhaps with more practice?

A breathy, whining moan came from Bella, and she began to lick my throat and my shoulder where she had bitten me the last time. She squirmed against me, and I had to grab her hips to hold her still.

"What's the matter?" She nipped my ear lobe then blew a breath across my ear.

She was driving me insane. "Nothin'. It's so good. You're so good. I love you," I said, panting the words.

"But I haven't done anything yet." She raised herself, sliding up my cock a few inches, and eased back down. When she repeated that motion, I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven.

She started to drag her tongue across her bite on my shoulder as she raised herself slowly again. "So, you like that?"

Not being able to form coherent sentences, or even a single word, I grunted as she slipped down over my throbbing dick. I thought I was the one who had been directing the show, but she had easily taken over and had complete control of me.

"How about this?" She placed her teeth over the scars of her bite and at the same time she squeezed my dick with her silky, wet warmth.
And I came.

I came so fast and so hard, my entire body jerked with the spasms. I slid sideways and flopped to the ground. My fingers dug into her hips, pulling her down as I thrust up, my venomous semen shooting up into her. She grabbed my shoulders and started to roll her hips against me. I felt that she was close to an orgasm, and I'd hardly touched her.

She grunted and shoved her hips against me, and I swear to Christ, I came again. The exquisitely, deliciously, almost painful sensations coursed through me, and I groaned and growled and gnashed my teeth, my feet digging into the ground.

Bella threw her head back, a keening wail starting low in her throat, as I felt her tighten spasmodically around me. Then her orgasm blossomed and spread; it washed over me as she bent forward. Her forehead thudded against my chest, and her hair flowed down and over my shoulders and arms.

She was panting, her fingers spasmodically gripping my shoulders. "Oh, oh. Ho-lee shit. Oh!" She sighed and collapsed on my chest.

I wrapped my arms around her and drew up my knees to hold her in place. "Holy shit is right." I squeezed her body to mine. "I love you. I love you so much. No one has ever made me feel like you do, Bella."

-oOoOo-

As the crow flies, we'd gone about forty miles almost directly north of where I'd first claimed my Bella. She had been amazed at the geography — the height of the mountains, the pines giving way to barren, almost desert-like ground; the stony buttes, and how some of the higher peaks were treeless and still had some snow. I had tried to get her to play in the snow, but she had said there was time enough for that when the first snow fell at the house. She hadn't gotten over her human aversion to snow just yet, but that hadn't kept her from diving into every pond we came to or slogging and splashing through every snowmelt creek or stream we crossed. She had complained that our "clothes" weren't really clean, so I had shown her how to wash them in a creek, without soap, and after they were dry, I showed her how to work the fabric to soften it again.

"Well, thank God for washers, dryers, and fabric softeners!" she'd said after carefully laying the denim strips and her shirt out on another sunny rock to dry.

I had managed to keep her from getting dressed for a couple of days, primarily by enticing her with sex, playing in the water, and lying in the sun, but by Friday she told me to quit stalling.

"Stop it, Jasper!" She batted my hand away from her sweet ass. "It's time to get dressed. Well, sort of dressed. Besides, if we wear them, we don't have to carry them." She dropped to the ground in front of me. "Would you braid my hair again?"

Noting that someone was becoming a tad fussy, I combed through her long, soft hair with my fingers, picking out the occasional pine needle and twig. Running my fingers through her hair was relaxing for both of us. "I love your hair."

As I separated it into three thick lengths, I kissed each one before I began braiding it. Luckily, we still had the elastic band. I kissed her shoulders and neck and licked over the claiming bites I could reach.

"It feels good when you braid it." Then she sighed. "Stop the kissing."
"Yes, Darlin'."

"How long have we been out here?"

"About a week. Today is Friday the ninth."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yes, Darlin'."

"Maybe we should head back to the house tomorrow."

"If you want to, Darlin'."

As soon as I had twisted the band around the end of her hair, she was up and trying to put on her denim breechclout.

"I'll help you."

"I can do it!" She bent over to flip the length of denim up her back and wrapped the repaired denim belt around her waist, catching the front flap. "And quit it with all the 'darlin's.' It sounds like you're saying 'yes, dear'."

At the sight of her bent over, I nearly choked on the venom that began to flood my mouth.

Oh, my fuckin' God.

I couldn't stop myself. I reached for her bare breasts. I never even saw her move, but she slapped my hands away.

"Quit it! Help me tie this." She held the ends of the denim belt with her left hand and jutted her hip toward me. "Jasper!" She huffed loudly. "Look here at my hands."

"Yes, my eternal love."

"Oh, my God! Would you stop it?" she squawked. She snatched her shirt from the ground and thrust it toward me. "Would you help me put my shirt on without all the bullshit?"

Grinning at her, I took the shirt and studied my beautiful mate dressed in only a ragged denim breechclout. "Are you sure you want to put this on? I don't have a shirt."

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Dammit, Jasper! If I try I might rip it."

I eased the dark grey Henley over her upraised hands and over her head, pulling the thick plait from the neck. Maybe my hands brushed over the sides of her breasts as I smoothed down the material.

"Jasper! For Christ's sake!" She pushed my hands away again. "Do you still have your phone? Has anyone called?"

"I haven't checked it. We'd have to go to the top of a mountain to get a signal anyway." I put on my breechclout and tucked my phone and lighter in the belt. When I looked at Bella again, she was standing a few feet away from me with her hands on her hips. She was gorgeous when she was mad at me, but I was beginning to think she needed to hunt again.

"Finally! Oh, look! There's a mountain right there." She waved at the peaks behind her. "So we have to go to the top of a mountain to get reception?"
I nodded at her.

"I think I'm thirsty. You said there might be black bears around here?"

"Yes, Darlin'."

"Oooo! I could just punch you!" She glared and shook her fists at me. "Okay! Let's go!"

In a blur, she was gone.

-oOoOo-

She was like a ghost running through the moonlight. It was nearly full, and was very bright. Beautiful night for a run through the Rockies with a cantankerous newborn.

As we neared the top of the mountain, Bella skidded to a stop and dropped into a defensive crouch. "I smell somebody. I think it's Peter." Jealousy twisted around her emotions.

"It is Peter's scent." I pulled my phone from my tattered denim belt and flipped it open. "There's no need to be jealous. I love you. We're at the northern edge of our territory. Peter's been runnin' through every night, I think. His scent isn't very old. He'll probably be through again tonight." I turned toward the east and picked up more of his scent. "One call from Emmett earlier today. No message." I turned it off and tucked it away.

"I think he was worried about me and maybe you hurting me. He should have worried about me hurting you." She came to me and hugged me, her jealousy gone, and snuggled into my chest. "I'm sorry I broke your ribs."

"It's okay, Darlin'. They healed." I nuzzled against her head and held her body to mine, running my hands up and down her back.

"It's so beautiful up here. The moon is so bright. I've never seen so many stars." Her head snapped to the left. "Did you hear that grunt? What was that?"

"Might have been a bear."

"Woo hoo!"

Somebody was a little wound up again. There went the romantic moment in the moonlight I had been hoping for. She was gone again.

By the time I caught up to her, she was down in the valley, peering from behind a tree, watching a bear that was pawing at a rotting tree trunk.

"Remember the wind, Bella. It's comin' toward us. Can you smell the bear?"

"Yeah. Smells kind of wet. Almost like a dog." Her need for the blood was growing exponentially.

"There's a creek farther west. He may have been in it and then decided to come over this way to look for grubs in that log. I'm surprised he's up this high. Young one, I think."

"But I can eat him, right? Or is it a female? Does she have puppies? Er, cubs or whatever?"

"It's a male. Whenever you're ready." I was starting to get excited just thinking about watching her tackle that bear, even though it was a small one. I loved to watch her hunt. I abso-fucking-lutely loved what happened afterward.
"Do you want the bear?" she asked. She was beginning to tremble, her hand went to her throat, and I could feel the raging need of her thirst.

"I'm fine. You go ahead."

I saw that her higher thought processes switched off and instinct took over. Bella's muscles bunched and she sprang forward, sprinting toward her prey. The bear was so intent on tearing apart that log, he didn't realize anything was wrong until Bella snarled and leapt onto his back, flinging her arms around his thick neck as he reared up, bellowing.

Once again, she was elegant in her leap and faster than death as she clamped her hands on either side of his head and gave it a sharp twist, snapping his neck. She jumped away from his sagging body and landed gracefully about ten feet away as he dropped. A growl rumbled through her chest and she pounced on the bear. She grabbed a handful of his fur and ripped it away from his neck, exposing the muscles and sinew. She growled again and attacked his throat, biting quickly and sucking deeply at the thick, hot blood.

My dick was instantly hard. I couldn't stop myself from stroking its length through the denim. Grunting, I quickly untied the frayed strip I was using as a belt and dropped the denim to the ground. Bella's bloodlust was pummeling me, but it only enflamed the pure lust I was feeling. Watching her throat move as she took long pulls from the bear's neck, her muscles flexing as she clutched at the bear's thick shoulders, hearing her low growls as she drank deeply of the dark red blood — I could have come just looking at her.

I stalked slowly toward her, forcing myself to wait until my newborn mate had had her fill. When I was about ten feet away from her, I felt the flicker of someone else at the very edges of my awareness, and I came to an abrupt stop. Not wanting to alarm my mate if I didn't have to, I sent my senses out, searching for whoever it was.

Two beings. Because I knew them so well, I recognized Peter's and Emmett's mental signatures. They were east of us and seemed to be about two miles away. That would put them up on the ridge behind us. I hadn't thought that Peter would bring Emmett with him when running the perimeter. Something must have changed. If it was very important, Peter would have called me and left a message, or he would have followed my scent and found me. It wasn't like Bella and I were trying to cover our tracks, and there were more than a few places that had been heavily doused with our scent. At first, we hadn't been very far from the house at all. If it were critical, Peter could have found us easily. Maybe it was a good thing Bella had suggested we go back to the house tomorrow.

Then the proud, strutting beast deep within raised its gloating head and chuckled in glee. Out in the forest, making love to and fucking my mate, I hadn't bothered to try and contain my and Bella's overwhelming, mind-blowing emotions and sensations. If they both stayed within my range, they would soon be knocked on their asses. If they continued along our boundary lines and came too close to us, I couldn't make any promises about their continued good health either.

It had been rare, but when any of Maria's newborns had behaved as if they were mated, Maria had me kill them as quickly as possible. I hadn't been present when two vampires discovered they were mates. From what I'd heard since, you didn't get too close to vampires when they were newly mated and mating. I almost laughed out loud when I thought about Bella's flare of jealousy over Peter and wondered what she might do to him. Then again, if Peter came anywhere near my Bella while we were … enjoying each other, I might not be able to control my jealousy and possessiveness.

It could be dangerous.

For them.
Speaking of dangerous …

My savage huntress stood from her kill and groaned, her bloodlust sated, drawing the back of her hand across her mouth, smearing the dark red blood across her glowing, moonlit skin.

In a flash, she was facing me. The remnants of her bloodlust exploded into pure sexual lust as she dropped into a crouch. "Jassssssp," she hissed. Her sparkling, black eyes moved slowly from my face, down over my chest, and stopped at my groin.

Feeling my dick twitch under her fiery gaze, I growled and took a step closer to her. "Bella."

Her red-stained lips curled back from her teeth and she began to snarl. It increased in volume until it was ringing throughout the valley and echoing from peak to peak in the clear, crisp air.

Panting in anticipation, I took another slow step toward my lustful, newborn mate.

She launched herself at me, her snarl deepening into a throaty come-hither growl. I side-stepped her and caught her arms. Turning, I shoved her against a tree and attacked her throat, licking the bear's blood from her skin. Moving up her neck and over her jaw until I reached her sweet mouth.

Before I could shove my tongue between her lips, she jerked her face away. "What did you hear?"

Her voice was a low rasp. Her legs clamped around my hips, squeezing my rock-hard dick between our bodies.

That denim would have to go. I held her arm with my left hand and ripped the breechclout from her, flinging it away. Next would be her shirt.

"Hear?" I pressed the length of my dick against her wet heat and groaned, throwing my head back.

Her tongue blazed a trail from the hollow of my throat to the point of my chin. "You heard something or felt something."

Bella was so attuned, even while she had been draining that bear, she was aware of me.

"Peter and Emmett are not far away. A couple of miles or so. I think they're up on that ridge east of us. Running the perimeter." I gave myself just enough room to rip away her shirt while she was kissing my neck.

"Peter?" she said through clenched teeth. Her hands slid over my chest, brushing over my nipples and sending an electrifying jolt of pleasure through me. Her left continued up my chest to grasp the side of my neck. Jealousy and possessiveness erupted from her, and her teeth were at my throat. A low growl vibrated through her chest.

I stilled at the touch of her teeth. Was my mate feeling insecure? "You could never have called him my lover. I fucked him to control him — to dominate him. Some males require that show of force. Later, I fucked him and marked him." I pulled my neck away from her teeth and swiftly buried my dick in her, changing her angry growl into a surprised gasp and then a sensuous moan. "Isabella, that strategy doesn't work on me."

I gripped both of her arms and began to move slowly inside her, caressing her from the inside. She groaned and squirmed against me, her hands clenching and opening spasmodically as I took the fierce pleasure we were both feeling and fed it back to her. "He never marked me." I pulled back and slid into her again. "I am only yours. Only yours." I thrust into her again. "There is no other."

Her breath was coming faster, and her legs were squeezing me tighter.
Nuzzling at her neck, I whispered, "Only you, Isabella." I put my lips to her ear. "Feel what only you can do to me." I released the last hold on the sensations she sent through me and let them pour into her.

Her entire body stiffened, and she sucked in a breath. "Oh, Jasper! Only mine!" A powerful sense of possession rushed from her and blew through me as her jaw pressed against mine. Her hands clawed at my arms and sides as her orgasm swept through her.

"Yours," I moaned into her ear.

"Oh, God, yes! Mine!"

Inundated with her ecstasy, I couldn't stand it any longer and thrust into her once more as I came. I pulled her away from the rough bark of the tree and wrapped my arms around her, holding her to me as I shuddered and groaned with my release.

"Yours!" I roared.

Chapter End Notes

"You fill up my senses like a night in a forest. Like the mountains in springtime. Let me lay down beside you, let me always be with you. Let me give my life to you. Come let me love you, come love me again." ~ "Annie's Song (You Fill Up My Senses)" by John Denver from the album Back Home Again.

"I don't care who you are, where you're from, don't care what you did, as long as you love me." ~ Backstreet Boys from the album Backstreet's Back.

"When you smell like that, I just want to fuck you and bite you and rub myself all over you." ~ Eric Northman to Sookie Stackhouse in From Dead to Worse by Charlaine Harris.

"My eternal love." ~ from Growing Up by BetterinTexas on FFN
Jasper's POV

In the early morning light, as we approached the house, Bella was becoming nervous and was trying to huddle even closer into my side.

"What's the matter, Darlin'? You know everybody at the house, we were only gone a week, and you have all your clothes on." I slid my hand down her side over the deep green T-shirt and the fresh blue jeans she was wearing.

We had found a backpack saturated with Rosalie's familiar rose fragrance near the pond where Bella had tried to hide from me. Traces of Peter and Emmett had also been on it, but I knew Rosalie had packed it because she had included underwear for me. That was Rosalie being subtle.

After pulling out the clean clothes, I had shoved the T-shirt I had discarded a week ago into it, and because Bella's shoes hadn't been included, I stuffed my boots and socks in also.

Bella had hardly been embarrassed at all as I helped her to get dressed. Of course, I made sure she was still experiencing a small touch of the sensuous afterglow of sex. Making love to my mate in a pond was something we would have to do again. Soon.

She hadn't even minded that I ripped the remnants of her shirt from her breasts and attacked her. After I'd torn the Henley from her last night, there hadn't been much left to cover her with.
I hadn't minded it at all.

Bella clutched at my own dark green T-shirt, drawing my thoughts away from her in nothing but a breechclout and a strip of cotton covering her breasts, her beautiful face moaning in pleasure, and the hypnotic scent of her arousal.

"Darlin'?"

She peered up at me. "They're all going to know that we … er, they'll know we had …"

"Sex?" I smiled and pulled her into my chest, relishing the feel of her against me. Peter and Emmett would most assuredly know. I knew they had been caught in the orgasmic emotional explosion from Bella and I, and I wondered how they had handled that — being so close to each other. They had still been knocked senseless over an hour later, and I felt it when they finally regained some semblance of consciousness. I had expected the alarm and astonishment, but I was curious about the feelings of wistfulness and regret I had sensed from Peter and the worry mixed with utter relief from Emmett.

I might have to ask Peter about that later. As I had said to Bella before, knowing what someone was feeling didn't always help. Sometimes it just made things more confusing.

Aside from that, I thought they might have enjoyed themselves. I certainly had.

I kissed the top of Bella's head. "Sex among the pines? Up against the pines? In the valleys? At the top of a mountain? Sex by the creek and in the creek, and in a pond and …"

"Oh, Jasper, stop!" she whined. Her embarrassment flared, and she tried to hide her face.

"If you'd like, we could have some more sex. We don't have to go back." I kissed her forehead, wishing we could just stay out in the wilderness. "We only went north. We could go west or east. There're a lot more ponds and lakes …"

"Quit it, Jasper!" She pushed me away. "They're going to know. Especially Emmett and Peter because I'm sure they were close enough last night to hear us."

"They felt it, too."

"Oh, God!" She groaned and covered her face. "Emmett's going to tease the shit out of me."

"I don't think so." A smirk spread across my face as I caught her arms and hugged her. "Darlin', of course they'll know. That's what mated vampires do. They have sex. Lots and lots of sex." My right hand crept down her back and over the curve of her ass. "I wouldn't mind more." I gripped her firmly and ground against her. "I'll take your clothes off very carefully so I don't rip them."

"Dammit, Jasper! Knock it off! We're going back to the house," she said with determination. She backed away from me and grabbed my hand. "I decided I need a bubble bath. It's been a week."

"But, it's been two whole hours since we had sex."

She glared threateningly at me and pointed her finger at my nose. "I want a bubble bath."

Amused at her feigned anger and her anticipation of a bubble bath, and only a little disappointed that she'd rather have vanilla bubbles instead of me all over her, I sighed heavily and followed as she began to run. "Yes, ma'am. Maybe I could get in the tub with you?"
Her swift steps faltered but she recovered quickly. "Uh, no. We both wouldn't fit."

"We would fit."

"Jasper Whitlock!" she exclaimed in exasperation. "Ooo, I wish you had a middle name! Why don't you have a middle name? You don't have one, right? Well, anyway, when I use your whole name you should know ..." She stopped suddenly, practically yanking my arm off as I whipped passed her. "What's that noise?"

I stared at her, a little vexed myself. "It sounds like a lawnmower."

"Oh! Who is it?" She dropped my hand and raced away.

My little hellcat did love to run.

Bella broke through the trees and spotted Emmett at the south end of the clearing by the barn, trudging along behind a push mower. Even with our speed, we couldn't make a mower cut the grass any faster. I slowed to a human walk, backpack slung over my shoulder, and headed for the open garage doors.

Needless to say, Bella and Emmett's reunion was nothing if not exuberant. And loud.

"Emmy-doll!" she squealed as she ran toward him, arms extended.

There was no way he couldn't have heard her.

He looked up, a huge smile nearly split his face, and he let go of the mower and ran toward her. "Belly-babe!" he bellowed back to her.

They slammed together so hard, I was sure the thunder was heard over in Dubois.

Bella practically disappeared in his embrace, but I could still hear her happy warbles and yelps. I almost expected to hear her say, "Em. Can't ... breathe," as he lifted her up.

"Em, I really missed you! I didn't realize how much!" She was slapping his back and laughing. "It's so good to see you!"

"I missed you, too, Bells!" He squeezed her again before setting her on her feet and looking intently into her eyes.

With a gentle move I rarely saw from him, Emmett very carefully ran his fingertips down the side of Bella's face.

"I really missed you," he said quietly.

Her hand reached up to cup his cheek. "I really missed you, too."

I was sure they had. They hadn't fought in a week.

If I hadn't been able to feel the familial love they shared, I would have been completely pissed off and jealous at their tender display. Emmett wouldn't have any arms left to hug her with.

I was amazed again at the strength of feeling that Bella evoked in vampires. She'd had the same effect while human. Obviously, it had carried over.

As I drew even with the two open bays of the garage, Peter and Rosalie came out of the shadows,
"Hey, Maw!" Peter yelled back toward the house. "The young'uns are home!"

From somewhere upstairs, Charlotte yelled back, complaining, "Like I couldn't tell. Bella and Emmett's greetin' shook the house and rattled the windows. They're actin' like they haven't seen each other in a month of Sundays."

"Good to see you, Jazz," Rosalie said, chuckling as she watched our mates continue to pound on each other.

"Rose." I gave her a nod and looked to Peter.

"Nice honeymoon?" Peter asked.

Honeymoon? I supposed that it was. The Bella and Jasper version of one; there was none of that trip to Paris or Milan bullshit. Though if Bella ever wanted to go, I would make sure she got there.

I nodded at Peter and looked back to Bella. Her hands were fluttering around Emmett's arm as he pointed at the lawn mower and gestured toward the flowerbeds. Bella squealed again and they went to look over the sunflowers that were beginning to sprout. She was so happy about the tiny seedlings she crowed and thumped Emmett on the back. They were both jabbering very quickly, and I couldn't make out what they were saying.

I gave Peter another quick nod as I watched Bella and Emmett in the sun. I marveled at how beautiful she was in the sunlight with her soft, shimmery glow. I would never get tired of looking at her. Then there was Emmett; sparkling almost as gaudily as a disco ball. That reminded me of my own glittering skin, and I gestured toward the garage. Rosalie led the way back into the shade, and I stood near the opening so I could watch Bella.

"You sure make pretty vampires," Charlotte said with a sigh as she joined us.

"And loud ones," Peter mumbled.

Ignoring him, I turned to Charlotte. "That's all Bella."

"C'mon, Jasper. You know you don't have the same glitter that Emmett does. Even Peter and I aren't as sparkly as some other vampires." She poked my shoulder.

I raised an eyebrow at her and looked to Peter again, who was watching Bella and Emmett with narrowed eyes.

He was glad to see us, but otherwise his emotions were subdued, muffled; like they normally were.

"So, what's been goin' on?" I asked. I expected a full report from my captain.

Peter's bright red eyes met mine. "An unknown male vampire came briefly into our territory at the southwest corner by Mud Lake a few days ago."

A low growl started in my chest. I hadn't been to the northern spread often, but I hadn't ever come across the scent of another vampire. There was a low population of humans in Dubois and there were no large cities in the immediate area. There was no reason for traditional vampires to linger.

Peter and Charlotte had been to the property more than I had, but they had never mentioned any strange scents before. I would have to run the perimeter myself since I hadn't done that yet. I wanted
to take Bella so that she would be exposed to the scent. With her sense of smell, she would pick up more nuances to it than I would. But if there was an unknown vampire out there, did I want to take a chance on her being anywhere near him?

I didn't want any other males around my mate, and I was very glad I had thoroughly marked and scented her.

"No worries, Major. Like I said, he left." Peter held his hand up to me. "Probably just a nomad passin' through. We first came across his scent when we went over to Jackson last evenin'. Bought a couple of newspapers and they don't report any unusual disappearances. From there, I followed his scent almost directly to Mud Lake while Emmett and the ladies drove home. I came to the house, got Emmett, and picked up some clothes for you and Bubba." He finished with his rag and tossed it onto a workbench along the outside wall of the garage. He propped his hands on his belt. "The vamp paralleled the highway to Dubois then he went north around the main part of town. Emmett and I marked around the post office and came back. We started around the perimeter on the east side. Didn't come across any other signs of vampires." He turned his head and looked at me from the corner of his eye. "Except for you and Bella."

I felt a smirk tug at my mouth, but I suppressed it.

Charlotte smacked Peter's arm. "Peter! You didn't tell me you saw Jasper and Bella out in the woods!"

"Didn't see 'em. We heard 'em."

Rosalie laughed knowingly. "Got a little too close, I'd say. That would explain why you both had gone swimming and were dripping wet when you came back early this morning. and why Emmett was so subdued." She smiled mischievously at Peter and wagged her eyebrows. "Then I put a load of clothes in the wash. It's almost impossible to keep a secret from the person who does the laundry."

As my smirk broke loose and spread and Peter rolled his eyes at Rosalie, we heard another engine start in the barn. Out came Emmett and Bella on the riding lawn mower. He was driving, and with his size he looked like one of those circus clowns riding a tiny bicycle. Bella was crouched behind him, her hands on his shoulders and her feet on the little rear fenders. Both of them were laughing.

"Rose told me those two could make a game out of anythin'," Charlotte said with admiration. "Aren't they cute?"

"They are cute, but it's like they get within a few feet of each other and turn into a couple of ten-year-olds." Rosalie laughed.

Then another one of those epiphanies struck, blazing through my mind like a falling star shooting across the night sky. Seeing Bella and Emmett playing together like a couple of little kids, I knew it was something that Bella required, and anything my mate required I would strive to make sure she got. Even if it was time to be a child.

"She needs it."

A set of gold and two sets of red puzzled eyes turned to me.

Peter cocked his head at me, perplexed. "She needs to act like a kid?"

"Yes." I turned to Rosalie. "You know that Bella had mentioned to Edward and Esme how she always took care of her mother. Making sure the bills were paid and there was food in the house — that she cooked." I gestured toward Bella and Emmett on the lawn tractor. "She did the same thing
when she moved to Forks to be with her father. She never got to be a kid. She never had the chance
to just play — to just live. She can now. She's always taken care of everything, but I'm here now to
take care of her."

Rosalie and Charlotte, their eyes suddenly moist, stepped toward me, one on either side, and they
each placed an admiring hand on my arms. Both were exuding such strong waves of tender
affection, I almost backed away from them.

Charlotte's deep red eyes glistened with her unshed tears. "Awww, sugar. That's so sweet I could
just cry."

Rosalie gave me a small, teary smile, and ran her hand up and down my arm and gave it a squeeze.
She reached up and placed a quick kiss on my cheek and whispered, "Remember, Jazz. Perfect fit."

She squeezed my arm again. "He really missed her while you both were gone." She sent me a quick
shot of appreciation; telling me she was grateful for what I was doing for Bella and for Emmett.

I was becoming rather uncomfortable with the near adoration and being fawned over by the women.
I was only doing what anyone would do for their mate.

Peter's impatience and disgust pushed its way through. I could always rely on him to help me out of a
sticky situation.

Flinging his hand out toward Bella and Emmett, he snorted. "Missed her? The damn fool was pining
for her, for Christ's sake. All his mopin' and moonin' was about to pluck my last nerve. Maybe now
he'll get the grass cut. The boy's been needin' somethin' to do."

"I kept him as busy as I could when I wasn't painting." Rosalie batted her eyelashes and chuckled
again. She rested her hand on my arm. "Oh, to complete Peter's report — Charlotte and I painted
your room and then Charlotte decided to paint her room. We bought some more furniture, too. That's
what we were doing in Jackson. We bought chairs, end tables, lamps, and four new stools for the
kitchen."

With apprehension, my eyes flicked to Charlotte.

"Don't worry, Jasper," she assured me. "Rose and I wiped down the furniture to get the human smell
off while Peter and Emmett were runnin' the lines." She looked at Peter with disparagement. "And
whatever else they were doin' last night."

Peter just huffed and crossed his arms, intently watching Emmett and Bella cutting the grass around
the barn.

Rosalie began snickering. "A house needs more than beds, bookcases, and a couple of lamps."

Relieved they had remembered to do that, I turned to look at her cynically. "What for?"

Rosalie sighed with exasperation and slapped my arm. "Had to go and be a jerk, didn't you?"

In all honesty, I wasn't sure why I had bought the bed to begin with. I'd never used it, though I was
looking forward to christening it; soon and often.

Bella's angry screech forced all our eyes to her. Emmett was roaring with laughter and scrambling to
get away from her. She managed to punch him on his shoulder before he got his long legs untangled
from the little steering wheel of the riding mower. Luckily, Peter hadn't disabled the kill switch, and
the engine stopped as soon as Emmett was off the seat.
He leapt away from it and Bella bounded into the trees, Bella hot on his heels.

"Welp. There they go." Rosalie sighed wearily. "Again."

Charlotte's eyes widened with concern. "What happened?"

I ran my hand through my hair and sighed. "Emmett said somethin' to piss her off, and she's goin' to chase him and try to kick his ass."

"Should we catch her?"

"No. In about two minutes she'll either bite him or be laughin' her ass off."

"Maybe both," Rosalie interjected.

"They do that a lot?" Peter asked, watching the flashes of color as Bella and Emmett darted through the tree tops.

"Kind of. Remember, she's only two weeks old …"

"And a week of that was spent honeymoonin'." Peter grinned. "I noticed she bit you a few times."

"A few," I replied smugly.

"Aggressive little thing."

"She is."

As predicted, Bella's laughter was ringing through the trees as she and Emmett swung from limb to limb around the perimeter of the clearing. I stepped out of the garage to try and keep my eyes on her as they made their way along the north edge. They would be behind the house soon.

Charlotte followed me out with a delighted smile on her face. As we turned to face the house, a softball-sized rock flew over the roof. I leapt and caught it. My little hellcat's scent was all over it.

"Oh, those brats!" Charlotte's eyes lit up with mischief. "Let's get 'em!"

-oOoOo-

During a brutal game of Obliterate the Boys, we learned that Bella's shield could cover me even when I was up to a hundred feet away from her at the same time she could cover herself, Rosalie, and Charlotte.

We had them surrounded and pinned down in a depression between the trees not too far from the house. Rocks and stones were raining down on them from Emmett's direction down the mountain. He didn't care that none of the missiles were meeting their targets; he was just having fun throwing shit at the viciously snarling beauties.

And beautiful they were; especially my savage warrior. She was at the top point of the triangle, teeth bared, hands formed into claws, legs spread. The trio had their backs to each other with Rosalie positioned to her right and Charlotte to her left. Bella had such a firm hold on her shield, and Rosalie and Charlotte trusted its strength so well they never even flinched when Emmett launched a boulder big enough to hit all three of them and let out a war cry that would have frozen the hearts of a battalion of Green Berets.

Having seen what Emmett was about to do, I sent a flood of hysterical giddiness at them, thinking
Bella would be startled and drop her shield when the boulder came at them. Not a one of them even batted an eye lash. The boulder shattered when it hit her hardened shield and the pieces bounced harmlessly away.

With the shield up, they couldn't throw anything back at us, but it didn't matter too much. Peter, the fucker, made up for it. He accused me of cheating because Bella's shield had kept me from being hit. When Bella was concentrating on protecting the Warrior Women from Emmett, Peter took it upon himself to start zipping rocks at me.

He got me a couple times before I fully realized I was being attacked by someone who was supposed to be on my side. Not that I was distracted by Bella or anything.

"Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!" I shouted at him as I shot off a rock in his direction.

Bella snorted and her explosive laughter rang out. Then she spun to face Peter and snarled. "Ha, ha, ha. Mine is an evil laugh. Now die!" In a very dramatic gesture, she raised her clawed hands up above her head then stretched her arms out toward Peter, looking very much like a wizard casting a spell.

When Peter was slammed to the ground, we knew she had thrown her shield around him.

"What the hell, Bubba! Die? Ain't I your favorite uncle-cousin-brother? First you don't let anybody hit Jazz, now you're holdin' me down. Nothin' but a bunch of low down, dirty, rotten, cheatin' …" She growled. "Shut up, Peter, or I'll bite you again."

"You can bite me any time, sugar," he said with a purr, waggling his eyebrows.

I was about to go show him what a set of teeth felt like when Emmett took advantage of the opportunity to pummel me.

"Why the hell are you fuckers throwin' shit at me?"

"Cuz we can't hit the women!" Emmett explained, laughing.

Then we realized Bella had caught and held down Peter from fifty feet away.

That seemed to be her limit for others besides me, but that in and of itself was astonishing. Trouble was, she was so focused on holding Peter down that Emmett managed to nail all three of the girls in rapid succession, making them all shriek.

"And the crowd goes wild!" Emmett was strutting around, nodding and waving to his imaginary audience. "Emmett McCarty — unequivocal cham-peon, all-around great guy, and damn good-lookin' — haskicked all the asses," he boasted, flinging his arms up into the air. He broke into a run when he saw Bella, Rosalie, and Charlotte after him.

"Ladies, please!" he cried, laughing again. "I just don't have time to sign autographs!"

"Sign this, Emmett!" Charlotte shouted as she lobbed a soccer ball-sized rock at him.

He dodged it as he ran past me. "Jazz, think we found Bella's Achilles-giggle. Make her laugh — she drops her shield." He leapt up into a tree. "Since I won that round, we oughta try sumpin' else."

He pointed behind me. "Watch out. Here they come."

I spun to face them and held up my hands. "Stop now, ladies. No need to be rippin' him apart. Much
as he might deserve it." I said calmly.

"Yeah. Apparently this is educational and we're learnin' shit," Peter grumbled as he walked toward us, brushing pine needles from his clothes. "Like Bubba's a cheat."

Bella narrowed her eyes at him and raised her hand, bringing her forefinger and thumb together.

"No pinchin'!" Peter pointed his finger at her.

"Ya'll settle down." I pulled Bella to me to hug her, but she was still glaring at Peter.

Emmett's next suggestion was that Bella should try and shield all of us from being hit by rocks. After it seemed safe enough to come down out of the tree, he gathered rocks for everyone. We stood near Bella, threw the rocks straight up, and she snapped up her shield. It deflected the rocks from everyone.

Hardly a challenge for her.

Her strength had grown as far as blocking solid objects, but when it came to blocking my gift, they had to be touching each other, though they didn't all have to be directly touching Bella. It didn't seem to matter how far away I was, though I hadn't gone to the limits of my four-mile range. My effect on them would have been a lot weaker from so far away.

"To block the Jazzy Whammy, I have to, uh, beef up the shield around my mind. Maybe that's why we all have to be touching?" Bella shrugged her shoulders.

Who knew? We didn't happen to have another gifted vampire around to experiment with.

By midafternoon, we'd run out of ideas about how to test Bella's shield and decided it was time for a break. Bella was happy about a chance to get a bath and catch up with Rosalie and Charlotte.

I was only mildly disappointed that she didn't want me to help her get undressed.

As they started for the house, I called after her, "Darlin', I want to run the perimeter tonight. I want you to go with me."

"Okay, Jasper!" She disappeared through the trees, leading Rosalie and Charlotte back to the house.

"Ya sure that's a good idea?" Uneasiness emanated from Emmett.

It seemed excessive, though I could understand his concern. Strange vampires near my mate or my territory did not make me happy.

"I want her to get that vampire's scent and see if she recognizes it. I need to run the lines myself anyway. The more scent around the borders, the better."

As Peter and Emmett moved to either side of me, Peter looked between the three of us, laughed, and shook his head.

"Did ya notice?" he asked.

I glanced over at him, curious. "Notice what?"

"Char and Rose following Bubba. She's the youngest of all of us — in human years and vamp days — and they moved in right behind her."
"Yeah? So?" Emmett asked from my left.

"The Major's Mate. Like the king's consort. Char and Rose moved in to flank her automatically. Kinda like you and I just did to Jasper." Peter laughed again. "Or would we be the ladies-in-waiting?"

I snorted at him in disgust. "I am not royalty."

"But ya gotta admit that Bubba's your queen."

"Yeah, she is but … shut up, Peter." I shoved him away from me. I did not want to be compared in any way, shape, or form to those self-appointed so-called vampire kings. They served a purpose, but the threat of a visit from the Volturi was still hanging over our heads. I didn't think we would have to worry too much because Bella was very much a newborn, but I would have preferred it if they had no reason at all to take any interest in us and kept their royally dead asses over in Italy.

Once again, my anger at Edward rose up. It was because of his exceedingly melodramatic, fucked up suicide mission to Volterra that they knew anything about Bella at all. It was his fault that they had aimed their sights at us. I could crush his fucking head for that alone.

I could write to them and let them know that Bella had been changed and was a member of my coven, but I didn't want to draw any more attention to her and her shield, or my coven. If it were me, I wouldn't necessarily believe a letter or even a photograph — I would want proof. I did not want to have any sort of personal contact with them at all. The Southern Vampire Wars had drawn enough attention to me.

Perhaps it was something I should discuss with Carlisle as it affected both of our covens. If Edward was in Denali, it could very likely affect them also.

That turned my thoughts to Esme, Carlisle, and Alice. None of them had called me (for which I was grateful), and I thought that if any of the others had received a call, they would have let me know. I was curious about Edward's whereabouts. He wasn't an enemy, but he was as close as he could get without being labeled as such.

As we made our way into the back yard, Emmett began to chuckle.

"Queen Bubba. I like it. It's got a ring," he said, stroking his chin. "Besides, she ain't no damn princess."

"That ain't no shit," Peter agreed. "Though she's more like an Empress or somethin'. She's got everybody fallin' at her feet, and Lord knows she's got a ring in his nose and wrapped around her little finger." He jerked his thumb in my direction.

"Yeah!" Emmett laughed. "She kinda has that effect on everybody. She even turned Rose around. So, it's not so much the Whitlock Coven as it's the Bubba Coven."

I found their talk of Bella being a queen to be disturbing on some level. It wasn't because I didn't think she was. She was the queen of my heart — I fucking adored her — but what Peter had said about everyone falling at her feet was not really an exaggeration. Supernatural creatures seemed magnetized to her.

Not only was I wrapped around her finger, she usually had me tied up in knots; but I would also control and lead her. I'd had to forcefully convince her to submit to my leadership — nearly taking it too far — and I had accepted her submission. Then I had pleaded for her forgiveness for being an unconscionable fiend and submitted to her as her mate. While she had promised to listen to me, I had
promised to love and take care of her.

Though I had thoroughly claimed and marked her as mine, it seemed the most pivotal moment had been when, against all normal vampire instincts, I had offered her my kill, and she had accepted it.

Like a supplication to a ruling monarch.

Peter and Charlotte hadn't even met her and they had brought her gifts.

I could dismiss Edward's fascination with her as being caused by his attraction to her blood, but that didn't explain the … compulsion the rest of the Cullens had felt to be near her; the pleasure they had experienced when she was around. Alice had taken to her immediately. Even I had wanted to protect her while she was human, but I wondered if that was the result of the mating bond between a human and a vampire?

As Emmett had said, Bella had even turned Rosalie's feelings around.

I sighed. Emmett's devotion couldn't be denied. It was annoying as hell at times.

I had expected Peter and Charlotte to assist me with her simply because I had asked them to. Not only had they been willing to help, they had even welcomed her. That was damn odd for nomadic vampires who were normally very wary.

Charlotte genuinely liked her. I wasn't sure about Peter's feelings, other than the anger and protectiveness he had felt over her when he had learned about Edward's despicable actions, which in itself was unusual for him. He had been impressed by her inventiveness when he'd heard about her licking her fingers to scar Edward and Alice. My only qualms were the way he kept looking at her and the occasional suggestive comment. I couldn't get a read on his emotions like with other vampires, but he seemed to … care for her also.

That I found to be puzzling. It was unlike him.

Of course, I was attracted to her, but was there something else about her that caused other vampires to want to "fall at her feet?" That didn't even include the Quileute wolves. Most of them had been drawn to her, too.

"Bubba Coven," Peter said thoughtfully, nodding his head. "Can't say as I'd mind a beautiful female givin' me orders."

Emmett scoffed loudly. "Her first order to your ass would be to get some more rocks for her gardens or clean the bathrooms or somethin'."

"Would she be in the tub?"

The thought of Peter anywhere near Bella while she was taking a bath pulled a growl right out of me. With darkening eyes, I spun in his direction and took a step toward him while growling out an order to Emmett. "Emmett, I think you should go finish cuttin' the grass."

"Okay, Jazz."

Unlike Peter, Emmett could take a hint. He was gone; disappearing around the corner of the garage.

It was past noon and the back of the house and deck were now shaded from the sun, but I turned to walk stiffly back to the shade of the trees. I expected Peter to follow me. He did. I knew he was watching me closely. He always had.
I kept my voice low so that Bella, Charlotte, and Rosalie wouldn't hear me, but I knew Peter would be able to hear the hard edge to it. "Maria lorded it over her newborns while I controlled them and led them into battle. When you came along, you led them with me. You above almost anyone else should know that I have no desire to reign over anyone. Knowing that, you should also realize that my mate doesn't either." I looked up at the window to my and Bella's bathroom. "I'm not sure how this came to be known as the Whitlock Coven. I'm not even sure how we came to be a coven, but because I am the head, I want you to know I don't appreciate all your subtle, and not so subtle, innuendos to and about my mate."

Peter's eyebrows rose. "Charlotte and I took your name."

I growled again. "You only took my name because you couldn't remember your own."

"That's bullshit and you know it. We're a coven because you sired us."

"More bullshit. I'm not in a coven with the rest of the assholes I sired. I ended them," I said, making a chopping motion through the air.

"You didn't end me and Char. You let us live. You saved us. That's makes us part of your coven."

"Just because a vampire sires another, it doesn't mean they stay together." I turned away from him. "I left Maria and was with the Cullens for over fifty years—"

"And you were never really part of Carlisle's coven ... family ... whatever." He waved his hand dismissively. "When you realized you found your mate, I know one of the first things you did was make plans to get her away from them. You brought her back to your coven. You brought her back to us." Peter's eyes took on a hard glint. "I knew you'd be back. You always wanted your own coven and you have it now."

"Rosalie and Emmett aren't part of—"

"They are. They might take off on some of their little trips now and again, but they'll be back. Carlisle may have sired them, but you know they belong with Bella ... with us. Especially Emmett. Have you ever seen two vampires as attached to each other as Em and Bubba who weren't mates and fuckin' each other?"

I frowned, dropping my head to my chest. "Alice and Edward."

Hissing loudly, Peter spit out into the yard. "They hardly count as fuckin' vampires. I mean besides the Temperamental Twosome?"

"No."

"You're a natural leader. You always have been." Peter moved closer to me. "Your human Confederates saw it. Maria's a crazy bitch — crazy like a fox. She saw it. That's why she took you. Most of the newborns you and she sired saw it. Any vampire you meet sees it. Bubba's a natural born leader, too."

"Vampires see the scars." I looked at him from the corner of my eye. "I never wanted to lead."

"Then I will."

I turned to face him completely, my eyes narrowing. "Do you want to run this coven?"

"Yes!"
"Well … you can't!"

"See?" Peter threw his hands up in the air. "You're fulla shit. You might think you don't want to, but you do. You were born to it. Twice. If you really didn't want to you wouldn't be so fuckin' good at it." He propped his hands on his belt, raised one eyebrow and peered into my darkened eyes. "Maria stole your chance to ever have a family and you know you always wanted one." He gestured toward the house. "Shit. Most of us did … do. But you …" He pointed his finger at my chest. "You desire it, you crave it … you … hunger for it. You always have. It's what you were always lookin' for and none of those newborns were ever it. None of those humans you drained were ever it either, but you knew you took them from their families. I think that's why you were so fucked up when you were with Maria and still fucked up after you left her. You left me and Char because we weren't it either. Yet."

He glanced at the house; up to the window where our mates were. His angry eyes met mine again. "That's why you took up with the little black-haired twinkle toes. She promised you a family," he said, sneering the word. "She dangled that carrot in fronta your nose, and you couldn't find the vegie vamps fast enough."

Turning away from me, he ran his hand through his hair and his fingers brushed over the left side of his neck; the side where I had marked him so many years ago and where Bella had bitten him in anger. If Bella hadn't mentioned it I probably wouldn't have ever noticed. My eyes narrowed again at his subconscious action.

Peter studied me from the corner of his eye. "She kinda got it right — she led you to where you needed to be at the time. Things were never quite right there either, but you were in the right place to find your mate. You found her then left the Cullens as soon as you could. You need your own coven."

"What the fuck do you know about what I need?" Peter was pissing me off. That fucker didn't know shit.

Who the hell does he think he is?

Then it was as if a blinding light flared through my mind. Everything he said rang with such truth my thoughts were shocked into stillness then sent off in a frenzied spin. Alice had led me to the Cullens with a promise of family, and I had been hopeful. But I had never fit in as well as she had.

Was Peter right? How could he know me better than I knew myself? How could he see something in me I had never seen?

My anger shot up another level. I was pissed off. He was pissing me off. "I don't need —"

Peter pointed at my chest again, and his voice dropped lower. "You're right. You don't need us." His finger touched the center of my chest. "You want us. Big difference." Peter took a single step back, lowering his hand. "You can go ahead and beat my ass now if ya want, ya stupid shit." Then he started to grin. "I don't talk to Bubba any differently than I talk to any other luscious, juicy female."

She was my luscious, juicy female, and I punched that motherfucker so fast and so hard the first five trees he slammed into were blasted into fucking toothpicks and sawdust.

Growling and raging, jealousy joining the mix of indignation at him and the anger I felt at myself, I stalked across the yard to the deck. I stomped up the steps and across the decking, stopping to very gently open the sliding glass door, and then continued to stomp into the family room. I didn't need his ass, but I needed my mate. I needed her with every fiber of my being. I hoped to hell she wasn't
going to spend the rest of the day in the fucking bath tub.

I looked over the new furniture, started to wonder where the old blue recliner was, and my nose was assaulted with the fresh citrusy scent of oranges and lemons and the tangy sweetness of berries.

I nearly fucking exploded. "Who. The. *Fuck* used fuckin' orange and berry shit in here?" I roared as I made my way through the living room and toward the stairs. "You all know goddamn well who the fuck that smells like, and you, Rosalie Lillian Hale, know perfectly fuckin' well how Bella reacted to … umf!" I grunted loudly as Bella collided with me, knocking the wind out of me and flipping us both ass over teacup over one of the new chairs. We rolled across the floor and ended up against the wall.

Fleetingly, I was glad we hadn't wrecked the chair or gone through the wall. Bella's aim had improved, and she was controlling her strength better.

Through the cloud of fury, I also noticed she was on top of me, and her finger was pointed right at my nose.

"Jasper! What the hell is your problem? Calm your ass down!" Her bright red eyes were sparkling with anger. "Char and Rose used some orangey stuff to wipe down the furniture to get rid of the human smell, and they lit some kind of berry candles to get rid of the paint smell. There's vanilla candles upstairs. Did you know they painted our room?" She dropped her hand to my chest but she was still glaring at me. "Anyhow, I never said I didn't *like* oranges and berries. I *like* them. They're very appealing. I even like the way Alice smells. I just didn't like her near *you*." she thumped my chest. "Quit acting like such a fucking asshole."

I was lost in her flashing eyes. As she yelled at me, her spellbinding scent of cinnamon and nutmeg combined with mine flowed over me and through me, cooling my rage. The captivating vanilla aroma of her bath soap twined around me and reeled me in. The seductive, enticing fragrance of her arousal wafted deliciously over me, forcing all thought from my head. I flipped her onto her back, finally realizing she was still wet from her bath and wearing only a towel.

A deep growling purr started low in my chest. I wanted her. I *needed* her. I needed to taste my mate, and I attacked her mouth as I started to tug the towel from her body.

"Jasper," she gasped out, pulling her lips from mine. Her fingers were caught in my hair. "I think this is where I tell you to get a room."

"This is a room." I growled and groaned and thrust my hard dick against her smooth thigh. I tossed the towel away and reached to unbutton and unzip my jeans.

"But, Jasper," she said, purring into my ear. "We have a room upstairs." She licked over my ear. "With a bed."

..
"Perfect" and "fit" ~ from Witness by duskri123 on FFN.

"Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal." and "Ha, ha, ha. Mine is an evil laugh. Now die!" ~ Hoban "Wash" Washburn to his plastic dinosaurs on the TV show Firefly, pilot episode.

Paraphrasing "Do you want to run this ship?" - "Yes!" - "Well … you can't!" ~ Captain Malcolm Reynolds to Jayne Cobb in the "Firefly" movie Serenity.
I Scent

Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by SecretlySeverus and AnthroBug of Project Team Beta. You can find them on FFN.

A/N: Thanks to creative consultants Bonzie and juliangeles. I am slow with updating. These later chapters are harder to put together and arrange for some reason. Could be two weeks before the next update. Thanks for sticking with us.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and A Different Forest (ADF) — feed a tree!

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 47, I Scent

Jasper's POV

"Ohhhhh, I like that." Bella moaned against my throat as I slowly thrust into her.

My nose was in her tousled hair, breathing in her rich, spicy fragrance, the soothing aroma of the vanilla candles placed around the room, and the sex-saturated scent of the sheets and pillows we were tangled in. I was propped up on my right elbow, my hand grasping her neck, as my left hand slid down her hip and over her sweet ass, forcing her against me as I thrust into her again.

"What?" I groaned. I could hardly form words. All that was in my mind was Bella's taste and Bella's scent, and the feel of her. Only my mate could do that to me. Only her legs around my hips, her soft lips on my skin, her hands on my body, and the pleasure she was feeling — only she could soothe and comfort me. Her scent, her taste, and her love drove all other thoughts from my mind. I started to slide out of her and gasped at the sensations of wet, and slick, and smooth.

"Ahhhhhh, which?" I sucked in a breath through my teeth as I pushed into her again. "Tell me … tell me what it is, and I'll do it again."

Her heels were digging into my ass and thighs, and her hands were kneading the muscles on my back, trying to pull me even closer to her. "I like … mmmmmmmm … I like the way your muscles move under your skin … mmmm … when you …" She licked my throat and nipped my jaw.
"When what?" Bella had reduced me to a groveling, quivering mass. "When I what?" I had to know what it was. She had to tell me so I could spend the rest of my life doing exactly whatever it was. Over and over again. Then I thought I would do it some more. I eased my hips away from her, moaning into her ear. "Please tell me."

Her teeth grazed over my throat as I began to push slowly into her. "Ahhhhh. I like the way … your muscles move when you … fuck me."

That was the first time she had said "fuck" when I was actually, well, fucking her.

Hearing that word whispered by my beautiful mate, my orgasm exploded. My breath caught in my throat, my hips thrust into her, and my forehead thudded against her shoulder. There was pain and pleasure and release and heat and Bella and cinnamon, all churning together, taking over all my senses. I came and came until I thought I couldn't stand it anymore, and when I couldn't, I cried out her name and collapsed on top of her, my chest heaving with my breaths.

After some unknowable length of time, I rolled to my back, bringing her with me and tangling our legs even more in the sheets. When she started to squirm against me, the pleasurable sensations were still so acute they sent a shock of delicious pain through me, and I gasped again.

"Be still, Darlin'."

"But doesn't it feel good?"

"Oh, my fuckin' God, yes. It hurts so fuckin' good." I brushed her wild hair out of her face. "Every time it feels so good. Please be still."

She went nearly boneless over my chest and breathed contentedly against my throat, her lips brushing over the newest claiming bite she'd given me. She began to purr, and my own heart answered her. Dead as it was, it came alive when I was with her.

After a time, it occurred to me that it was very quiet. I heard only my own slow breaths, Bella's soft, satisfied sighs, and our mutual adoring purrs. I sent my senses out, searching for the others. I knew they weren't in the house, but I was curious about how far away they had gone.

Somewhere between the second and third round of reclaiming and re-scenting my mate, I'd calmed down enough to notice nobody else was in the house, and we actually made our way onto the bed.

Well, I had thrown her onto the bed.

It was sometime after that, and many kisses and gasps and nibbles later Bella had told me Rosalie's and Charlotte's eyes had gone very wide when they heard me bellowing like a fucking prick down in the living room. She had assured them she could calm me down, Rosalie had emphatically agreed, and she and Charlotte had escaped out of the bathroom window.

They had fled in fear, and Bella had come charging at me.

Only Bella could soothe me so thoroughly, and I ran my hands over the silky skin of her back.

About two miles to the northwest, I touched on the weary and sated emotions of Emmett and Rosalie. Peter and Charlotte had gone farther — about three miles to the south. Still in the throes of their lust, I left them to it.

Startled, I realized it was very late afternoon, verging on sunset. Most of the day had gone by in a sensuous blur of hands and lips and growls and groans and seductive purrs. "Bella, the sun will set
soon, and we'll be able to run the perimeter. I should have done it before, but I didn't want to leave you."

"I could have gone with you."

"It didn't seem like the right time, and we could still run across a stray human. I think I just wanted to keep you near the house." I kissed her forehead. "But I've painstakingly claimed and marked you. My scent is all over you. If there's another vampire out there, he'll be able to easily see that you're mine."

I had assumed the jealousy would stop once I had claimed her, but it hadn't. It almost seemed worse.

"Jasper, there is no need to be so jealous." She sat up, causing my breath to catch in my throat, and started combing through her hair with her fingers, giving me the most erotic glimpses of her breasts. I reached for her, and she pushed my hands away. "Stop." She leaned forward, bracing her hands on my chest, and eased her hips away from me, my dick slipping from her slick warmth.

I gasped again at the shock of not being buried inside her. I groaned and reached for her again, but she moved out of my reach.

"Why don't you go during the day?" She very carefully pulled her legs out of the tangle of sheets.

Seeing her on her hands and knees sent a thrill of lust through me. "Too many areas without tree cover. Come here, Bella."

"No, I want a shower."

"No. I want my scent all over you." I sat up and grabbed her arm, pulling her to me. "My scent also lets everyone else know your mine." I kissed her, holding her head. I didn't know why I was suddenly feeling anxious and on alert.

"Well, I'm pretty sure, through your painstaking attention to detail, you managed to get your scent everywhere, except this little spot right here," she said sarcastically, pointing at her elbow.

Couldn't have that. I grabbed her arm and brought the unmarked bit of skin to my lips. I ran my tongue over the point, watching her the entire time. She was engrossed with my mouth as I kissed, licked, and sucked. I didn't want to miss any other little spots.

"Er … I think you got it." She swallowed thickly. "Uh, good job."

"Thank you, Darlin'." I kissed her again.

My worries bullied their way to the front of my mind again. When we found the scent of the vampire that had come into our territory, would she recognize it? I wasn't sure if I would prefer if she did know it. Was it the vampire that had bitten her first or a completely different one?

She turned her head enough to break our kiss. "But I want to shower. Aren't you carrying this possessive marking thing a little far?"

"You'll get used to it, and no." I lightly kissed her cheek. "No more than you are when you bite me." I nuzzled against her ear, and she sighed again. "There could be another vampire out there." I wrapped my arms around her. "I can't seem to help myself." I kissed her again and reluctantly released her. "Bella, you are so perfect — any male would want you. Now, shall I help you get dressed?"
It had taken longer for her to brush her hair than it had taken us to run the five miles to Mud Lake — even stopping to scent trees along the way. Bella had enjoyed clawing the trees and spitting on them. She hadn't wanted to get sap all over her clothes by rubbing against them. When we had come across a tree that Peter had marked, she would punch it and then spit on it. Evidently, she was still a little annoyed with Peter calling her a cheat.

She was doing well. She had brushed her hair herself, and she hadn't broken the hairbrush. She had shoved her fingers through the first pair of panties, but the second pair survived. She had even pulled on her own jeans, but she hadn't wanted to push her luck trying to fasten them. I'd helped her with that, a navy blue T-shirt, and her socks. She'd put on her own shoes, but she had asked me to tie them.

I took that as a small victory on my part, even though broken shoelaces had led to an extremely pleasant week alone with my mate.

As we approached the lake, I could feel the tension building within myself. I kept it from Bella as much as I could. I hadn't asked Peter what side of the lake the vampire had gone to. We would discover it soon enough, and I wanted Bella to find it. I didn't want to influence her in any way either. It was a good way to test her sense of smell and try to teach her as we went along.

We came out of the forest a bit north of the lake and stepped away from the trees cautiously. I detected Peter's scent, but not Emmett's. I caught the scent of the other vampire immediately, even though it had faded somewhat. Bella took a little longer, but she was still getting used to all the different odors and scents around us. Again, she was doing well.

She stepped closer to the water, stopped, and inhaled deeply. "I think I smell Peter and the other vampire." She dropped into a crouch. "Vampire!" She spun and her black eyes were boring into mine. Anger with just a small trace of fear radiated from her.

I raised my hands slowly toward her, palms outward, and spoke softly. "It's okay, Darlin'. He's not here. You don't need to be afraid." I took a step toward her. "What's wrong? Why are you angry?"

"He … he was …" She abruptly straightened, and her hands were clenched into fists. "This is ours! He was here. What was he doing here?" Her hands began to shake with her anger. "They're mine!"

What?

Possessiveness joined the rapidly spinning mix of emotions, and she stepped toward me, her fists drawing up in front of her chest. Her eyes began to get a wild look.

"Bella, what is yours? Who is yours?" I reached for her hands, hoping my touch would calm her.

"Peter is mine!"

What the fuck?

Bella was losing control of herself, and before I fucking lost it, I needed to find out what the hell she meant by that.

Keeping my voice low, I asked her, "What do you mean Peter is yours?"
"He's mine! Him and Charlotte! Emmett and Rose! They're mine, and we have to protect them!" Her hands clamped onto my forearms. "You're mine, and I won't let him near you."

I felt the slight pressure change of her shield going out and around us. I pulled her toward me. "Bella, he's not here." She wouldn't let go of my arms, but I reached to touch her upper arms. "We will protect them."

She released my arms. Then hers were wrapped tightly around my body, her face pressed into my chest. Through her panting breaths, she tried to speak. "They're my coven … my family. Jasper, I love you so much, and I love them. Peter's a bigger jerk than Emmett, but I love him anyway. Rose and Char … " Her voice cracked as she pushed against me.

Her arms released their tight hold, and she grabbed handfuls of my T-shirt, her fingers going through the material. She pulled it up to cover her face. "He can't take them," she mumbled into my chest. Her fear raced past her possessiveness and anger, and she began to tremble.

My arms went around her, and I curled my body over her. "He won't. We'll protect them. We'll all protect each other." I didn't understand why she was so upset. I stroked her hair, letting my hand slide down her back. I nuzzled her head and kissed her. "Why do you think he would try to take them?"

"I don't know!" she wailed. She snatched her hands from my shirt and then they were on either side of my face. "But he won't! They're mine! You're mine!" Her eyes were a fiery black and rage erupted from her.

I caught the hot rage and held it. Gathering all the protectiveness I felt, I let it drift over her as I placed my hands over hers. All the security and well-being I felt when I was in her arms, I shared with her. My love went out to her. She was my refuge, my sanctuary, and the comfort and reassurance that gave me filled me, and I let it flow to her.

As much as I had tried to reassure her, she still held the fear that those she loved would leave her or be taken from her.

"I am yours, and I won't leave you," I said, looking directly into her black eyes. "They won't abandon you."

After several minutes, her panicked breaths began to even out and her eyes began to lighten. Her tense grip on my face loosened and her fingers slid gently down my cheeks. "I love you. I don't know what happened."

Gripping her hands, I kissed the backs of her fingers. "It's okay. You did well. You didn't run." I kissed her fingers again. "You know I'm right here."

She nodded quickly and took a deep breath and let it out deliberately. "I know. You're right here." She squeezed my hands. "I'm better. It's okay. I don't know what happened. I just … I don't know."

Her response to the vampire's scent was nearly as volatile as when I had placed her in the middle of the werewolf stink in the Cullens' front yard. Yet she had hardly reacted at all to the sample of vampire scent that the wolves had brought to us.

It wasn't the same vampire. Because the places the strange Forks vampire had been were connected to Bella, I had been concerned that he would show up again. He might even have been the one that bit her first, but she'd had practically no reaction to that scent.

Peter had suggested that the current vampire was merely a nomad passing through. But if he was,
why did Bella become nearly hysterical? If he had been *just passing through*, why had he crossed our borders?

Keeping as much expression from my face as I could, I asked her, "Do you recognize the scent?"

"No. I don't know." She turned away from me and her hand went to her forehead. "I think I need more of it. I don't know."

I lightly touched her shoulder. "Then find more of it."

She turned and looked at me. "What do you want me to do?"

"Do whatever you want. Follow the scent. See if you can find a spot where it's stronger. Or see if you can tell which direction he came from."

She nodded and started following the trail the other vampire had left around the edge of the water. I followed her. When she entered the trees on the east side, she leaned in close to a few of the trunks and sniffed loudly.

I wasn't much calmer, but she was. She was focused and concentrating on her task.

"I think he touched a few of these trees. Should we mark them?"

"Yes. If he should come back this way, then our scent over his will tell him we know he's been here."

"Like the wolves. I can remember Jacob telling me they used to pee on trees when they were wolves." She rolled her eyes. "I would bet they peed on them when they weren't wolves, too." She shook her head. "They're gross."

I came up behind her and sniffed at a few other trees. "They are, but they're very like vampires in their need to mark their territory. I happen to know they *did* pee on trees when they were human."

"That is gross." She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"If vampires could pee, we'd do the same thing. Since we don't, we spit."

Bella almost touched the bark of the next tree with her nose. "You can't pee, but you can …" Her eyes flew open, and she slapped her hand over her mouth. Embarrassment radiated from her.

"We do that, too." I smirked at her. "Did you want to mark a few trees?"

"No!" She walked quickly away from me. "Jasper! Jeez! No!"

Always ready to have my mate in my arms, I caught up to her and pulled her into my chest. "You didn't mind marking trees, or anything else, this last week."

"Oh, my God! Is that … that's going to …" She gulped. "Our scent is going to be all over …" She tried to hide her face against my arm. "Oh, God."

"That's how it works, Darlin'." Feeling better with the contact and craving more, I ran my fingers down over her hair. "We touch things, rub against things …" I kissed the top of her head. "We come all over things. It's a very pleasurable way to spread our scent around. And …" I tipped her face up to mine and kissed her. "If any vampires come across our … mingled scents, it's a sign to them that we're together."
"I am so embarrassed. I never thought of it that way. I never realized …" Eyes closed, she brought her hand to her forehead, and stepped back from me.

"No need to be embarrassed, Bella. That's how vampires … and animals … are. It's a nearly perfect way to mark things and leave simple messages to others. Our message being: 'This is mine. Keep away.' It's not like we can put up signs." I waved my hand at the trees Bella had sniffed. "I think this vampire wanted us to know he was here."

"Why do you think that?" Her teeth worried at her bottom lip.

"He crossed our boundary lines and touched the trees. If he was just passing through, he wouldn't have taken time to hang out by this lake."

"Oh." She nodded. She stopped and sniffed again. "I think he stopped here. Or maybe he sat here?"

"Yes. His scent is stronger. He may have been here for a while."

"Why would he do that?"

"I have no clue. Maybe he just wanted to sit by the pond? But I don't think that's it. I do think he wanted us to know he had been in our territory." At her worried expression, I ran my fingers down the side of her face. "He hasn't come near the house, so he doesn't know where it is. We'll just have to pay attention. Continue the patrols. I think maybe nobody should go out alone."

She frowned and nodded. "Right. Buddy system."

"Yes, but we'll discuss it when we get back to the house." I leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "What do you smell?" I watched her face as she concentrated.

"Cedar, moss, old forest. Something crisp or green?" She frowned again and continued from beneath the cover of the trees and walked out into the moonlight. "I think he and Peter went around this whole lake. I think he and Peter went around this whole lake." She walked more slowly and was turning her head back and forth like a blood hound as she followed the trail. "I think the strange vamp was right next to the water, and Peter was close by, but outside of where the other vamp walked."

"Yes." I had already determined that and was gratified that Bella had also. I watched her closely. She was focusing very strongly on taking in the scents. When she reached the portion of the lake that came to a finger pointing west she stopped. "I think he came up the mountain from this direction."

"Yes." I had already determined that and was gratified that Bella had also. I watched her closely. She was focusing very strongly on taking in the scents. When she reached the portion of the lake that came to a finger pointing west she stopped. "I think he came up the mountain from this direction." She gestured downhill, a bit south of west. At my nod, she continued around the lake, moving north and east, until we reached the spot where we had started. "Well, what do you smell?"

"I smell the cedar and the moss, which could be part of the old forest you smell. Or maybe you just describe things differently? I don't get the crisp green you're talkin' about."

"Cucumbers!" she exclaimed, her finger raised to the darkening sky. "The crisp green is cucumbers! It's faint, but I think I got it because he brushed up against the trees and the ground is a little damp in spots. His scent is stronger there." She dropped her hands to her sides. "How do you tell a male from a female?"

"Full males have a harder or sharper scent than females. Or a female's scent seems softer. It's hard to describe. You learn to tell the difference. Like you can tell that a scent is a vampire and not some other creature. Then you might be able to tell whether it's a male or female." I crossed my arms as I stood in front of her. She was still concentrating and her emotions were beginning to pick up speed. Curiosity, alertness, a bit of puzzlement.
"Sounds kinda sexist to me. Full males?" she asked.

"Yes. On occasion, I've come across a male who could be called a … eunuch. Only a few. Their scent is softer than a full male's. Not as soft as a female's." I tilted my head to watch her reaction.

"Eunuchs? Oh! Oh, shit. Accident or revenge?"

"Yes."

"Oh." She blinked rapidly several times. "Oh." Her hands began tugging at the ends of her hair. "Vampires are vicious." She sat down Indian style and chewed at her bottom lip.

"They are, but really not much more vicious than many human cultures." I sat in front of her. "Generally, rather than being maimed, a miscreant will be killed. Ends the problem because he or she isn't around to try and get revenge."

She just nodded and stared down at the ground between us. I felt a shiver of nervousness and uncertainty from her. Then it grew to overtake her earlier curiosity.

"What is it, Darlin'?" I reached for her hands and brought them to my lips.

"Are you worried about having me with you and leaving my scent all over?"

"Yes. But the best way to teach you is to show you. I'm showing you what vampires do. We stake out an area and we claim it. Most vampires would smell it and go around." I kissed her knuckles. "My scent is all over you. Yours is on me. Our scents have blended enough that others should be able to tell we're mated. It should be obvious."

"But Emmett and Rose and Char and Peter don't smell that much alike. I mean, there's a touch of Emmett's apple on Rosalie. Peter and Char have a little bit of each other's scent. They both have a bit of your cinnamon. It's like at the bottom of their own scents." She shook her head. "It's so hard to explain. Like my cinnamon smells lighter than your cinnamon." She shook her head again.

"Maybe that's the difference that you notice between a male and a female? Maybe if you were human you could have worked at developing perfumes." I smiled at her. "Ahhhh, as far as I know, Rosalie and Charlotte have only bitten their mates once. You're quite a bit more aggressive than the average female."

"What?"

"Well, more sexually aggressive." The side of my mouth quirked up at her embarrassment. "It's okay. I like it. I really like it."

She dropped her forehead to our hands. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Like I said, I really like it." I licked and then kissed her fingers, then placed a kiss on the top of her head. "I love that our scents have blended together so much." I lightly squeezed her hands. "You have the strange vampire's scent now and you won't forget it. If you smell it again, you'll know."

Worry and nervousness pushed aside her embarrassment.

"What's the matter?"

She looked up at me. "The scent seems familiar. I … I don't know who it is. It seems like I should
know, but I just can't remember."

-oOoOo-

After Bella and I had circled the pond one last time to make sure we had not missed any areas where the unknown vampire may have lingered, we headed north to continue the circuit of our territory. Fortunately, we didn't have to pay a lot of attention to the rugged topography. We could run right up the sides of the mountains and buttes, though we did tend to use the cover of the trees as much as possible even though it was night.

My thoughts were … cautious. I was annoyed that Bella thought the unknown vampire's scent was familiar but she wasn't sure. There was the possibility that the reason it seemed familiar was because it reminded her of something besides a vampire, but I didn't think so. Her reaction to it had been too strong. I knew it wasn't her fault, but I couldn't help my frustration. Her memory of her human life had seemed so extensive it was almost hard to believe she couldn't recall who it was or where she had seen him before.

Nearly as soon as she had awakened as a vampire, she had said she recognized my scent. She had quickly remembered Edward's and Alice's, though she hadn't been sure of their names. Not long afterward, she had been exposed to the others and remembered them, after a tense moment when she had tried to attack Rosalie. Seeing them, and experiencing their scents had helped her to remember them, and more and more of her human life.

We had a strange scent but nothing else to connect it to. I didn't know if we would. My anxiety rose as I considered that the scent might belong to the vampire that had bitten her before I had.

I caught the growl before it began and suppressed it, but it didn't stop my thoughts from racing through my head. Was it the male that had bitten and left her? Had he come to collect her?

No!

She was mine!

I tried to squash my anxiety before she became aware of it.

Because Bella felt the scent was familiar in some way, I was sure it was someone she had met before.

Since she had become a vampire, she had only met two new ones — Peter and Charlotte. Because she couldn't bring the memory to the front of her mind, it meant it was a vampire she had been near when she was human. She had come in contact with several.

It wasn't Victoria. James and Laurent were nothing but ashes. That left the vampire that had come upon her broken, bleeding body when she had crashed, and the Volturi.

Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett had never met any of them. Alice and Edward had been with her in Italy. Carlisle had spent decades with them. I was going to have to call him.

As we ran, Bella was quiet, pensive — almost brooding. Her emotions almost seemed muffled, like Peter's.

We followed Peter's scent, and when we came upon a tree he had marked, we would brush against it then go another fifty feet and mark the next one. The enthusiasm with which Bella had been scenting trees previously was gone. She was so preoccupied, she didn't even want to explore the large crater lakes we passed by, and she leapt right over the creeks and streams instead of splashing through
Near the northwestern corner of our claimed lands, there was a small herd of elk by the oxbow creek in the valley. She barely showed even a passing interest in them as she clawed another tree.

She quietly picked up Peter's trail again and set off along it. I followed closely behind her, keeping her in my sights, watching her as she steadily ran, her hair bouncing on her back. As we neared the area where she had caught the bear, she slowed and came to a stop.

"I caught the bear down there," she said in a hushed voice. She pointed to the valley north of us.

"Yes." Remembering that brought back some very pleasant memories.

She turned to face me, and her eyes moved slowly up to mine. "Jasper, I'm sorry I can't remember who it is. I'm so sorry," she said, her voice breaking. Her hands rose to cover her face, and her shoulders shook as if she were crying.

Instantly, I had her in my arms. I bent to nuzzle her cheek and stroked her hair. Whispering in her ear, I tried to reassure her. "Bella, it's okay."

She sobbed against my chest, and her hands pulled at and gripped my T-shirt. "I know you're frustrated because I can't tell you who it is. I'm sorry. I would if I could."

I held her shaking body tightly to mine. "I know you would." I had tried to keep my emotions to myself, but we were so connected, she had sensed them anyway. 'Darlin', I am a little frustrated, but not by you! I am not upset with you." I tilted her face up to mine. "I love you. I know you would tell me if you remembered."

"I seem to remember so much, and I can't remember that!" She stepped back from me and her hands were clenched in fists in front of her. I felt her frustration. Anger began to build.

"You're lucky to have the memories that you do — so many of us remember so little of our human lives." I reached for her hands, but she pulled them away.

"I should remember! You, Emmett, and Peter don't know who it is. I must have met him when I was human! I haven't met anyone but Charlotte and Peter since I've become a vampire." Agitated, she turned quickly away from me, crossing her arms and bringing her fist to her mouth. Fear skittered around the edges of her anger. "What if it's the vampire that bit me first? What if he found out where we are?" She spun toward me, her hands open, palms up. "What if he came to get me, Jasper? What if he bit me to make me a vampire after I wrecked the truck and you interrupted him?" Her hands went to the sides of her head. "What if he tries to take me?" Her voice climbed higher in her desperation. "What if he tries to hurt you?"

Her fear was spinning out of control and overtaking the anger and frustration she had been feeling. Her hands were gripping her hair, and she was beginning to tremble.

"I'm right here." I reached toward her, placing my hands lightly over hers. "He won't take you from me. I won't let him." I drew my hands down the sides of her head and over her shoulders. "No one will take you from me. I will protect you." I spoke softly to her like I had when she was transforming, using the same words I had used then. "I've got you. I'm right here." I stepped closer to her.

"But Jasper, he could hurt you!" She threw her arms out, forcing mine away, and she stepped back from me. "You're mine!" She was suddenly furious, her hands curled into claws, and her eyes had darkened to a deep, shining black. "He won't hurt you! I won't let him!" She snarled and leapt at a
pine, ripping the bark from its trunk.

She hadn’t been that angry in a while, and I couldn't decide whether to let her destroy the tree or try to stop her.

I wasn't given a chance to decide. She roared and kicked the tree and then shoved it, forcing it to fall. She shrieked, raising her fists into the air, and then she bolted to the east.

I was momentarily stunned at the strength of the rage shooting out from her and startled by her running again. I sprinted after her, surprised at her speed. She was racing up the next mountain, still following our boundary line. The mountain was nearly bare of trees, so I could easily see that she was gradually pulling farther away from me.

She hadn't run like that since she had first awakened. She had been doing so well; it was easy to forget that it had only been two weeks. So much had happened.

I forced myself to run even faster to try and catch up with her. What had made her run? What had enflamed her rage?

Gradually, I was catching up to her. She was snarling and growling to herself as she ran.

She came to a skidding halt, her feet digging trenches in the rocky ground. She screeched into the air, shaking her fists at the moonlit sky. "That fucking Edward! If I ever see him again I will hold that fucker down and pluck every single, solitary, goddamn hair out of his whiny-ass sparkling self — one by one — and then I'm gonna rip out his fingernails and toenails." Her chest was heaving with her breaths. "Then … then …"

As I ran up to her, she spun to face me. Her eyes were practically glowing with her rage. She pointed her finger up toward my face, her hand shaking. "Then … I'm gonna break his teeth out one by one and crush them."

Sounded like a solid plan to me, but I wanted to know why. What was she thinking? Anger was better than fear, but what made her suddenly so pissed off?

"Bella," I said quietly, reaching cautiously for her hand. "Why? What is it?" I gently clasped her trembling hand. "It's not that I don't agree with you. It's a great idea, but why? What are you thinking?"

"I can't remember who it is because I was human when I smelled him! What vampires did I meet when I was human? The Volturi! And that's Edward's fucking fault. Alice said I was the only one who could save him, and like a fucking idiot, I went after his sorry ass! It has to be one of them — James and Laurent are dead. It's not Victoria! She had a sweet smell. But I can't remember! There were so many of them around." She jerked her hand from mine and stepped back, her hands clamping down on either side of her head. "There were so many! So many! I was so afraid! In that room …" She dropped to her knees. Her straining voice became a hoarse whisper. "The dining room. It was the room where they ate the people."

Her thoughts had been mirroring my own. It was no wonder her emotions were a whirlwind of fury, dread, and fear.

I went to my knees beside her and reached for her, my fingers brushing lightly over her hands. I needed to try and calm her down. "Bella, it's okay if you don't remember. You were human, you had nearly drowned, it was a long flight to Italy, and you were afraid you were going to die. I'm not surprised you don't remember."
"But it's in there!" she rasped out, leaning away from me and striking her own head. "It's in there! I know it is!"

I grabbed her hands. "Bella, please don't hit yourself." I couldn't stand to see her injure herself. I deliberately pulled her hands toward me. "Let me help you. I'm right here."

"Jasper, I know it's buried in there somewhere. Maybe if I smelled it again?" She looked up at me, beseechingly. "Maybe if it was fresher? I don't know."

I urged her to come to me, and I gently wrapped my arms around her shaking body, covering as much of her as I could. "You have the scent now. You'll remember it. We can't get a fresher scent, but maybe we could call Alice and Carlisle and describe the scent to them? They might be able to tell who it is from a description."

"Maybe." She was almost burrowing into my chest and breathing rapidly and deeply, struggling to calm herself. "Maybe," she repeated. Her fingers gathered my torn shirt and pulled it up around her face. "Alice would remember who was there," she said, her voice muffled by my shirt. "Would Alice help us?"

"Of course she would, Darlin'." I pressed my lips to her hair. "She would help us."

"Even though I tried to scratch her face off?" Bella asked as she looked up at me, worried. Remorse tainted the worry.

"Yes." I gave her a small smile and sent her as much reassurance as I could. "She would help."

"I'm sorry I got so upset and ran from you again. I … uh, my mind was overwhelmed. Or something. I was so pissed." She looked down. "I disappointed you, and I never want to disappoint you. I love you."

I ran my hand over her hair and cupped her cheek, only wanting to comfort her. "You did not disappoint me. You never could, Bella. I was frustrated at the situation, not at you." I drew her lips to mine. "You are my love." I kissed her again. "My lover, my mate." My tongue traced over her lips. "My demon, my angel. My woman." I deepened the kiss, feeling her respond to me, her tense body relaxing and then molding to mine. As my left hand slid down over her shoulder to the small of her back, her fingers spread over my chest.

Pleased that I had distracted her, I held her to me as I lowered us to the ground, turning so that I was beneath her. I was proud that she had calmed the storm of her fear and rage herself and hadn't needed for me to do it. Her skin glowed and the bright moonlight cast shining, silvery highlights through her hair. "You are so beautiful, Bella. My angel. I know it took some time to realize, but the moment that I saw you awaken, I knew inside my heart all my dreams would come true. I just had to listen."

Her soft tongue brushed over my lips, and I opened to her, tasting her, reveling in her scent and the feel of her body on mine. Her strong feelings of rage had shifted to desire, and I was more than willing to encourage those.

Her hands slid up my chest, and her right hand slid around my neck and into my hair. "Jasper, I love you so much." She nuzzled against my ear. "You're my lover, my mate. Mine." She shifted so that her right leg was between mine, and she pressed against my hardening dick.
I wanted her. It didn't matter that we were at the top of a mountain, exposed to the night sky. All that mattered was we were together. We were meant to be. No one would ever take her from me.

I gripped her head more tightly as I moaned her name and breathed in her warm cinnamon touched with my own scent of leather. I could not describe how thrilled it made me to have my scent blended so perfectly with hers.

She inhaled deeply and froze. She jerked her head away from mine and sniffed loudly. "Why is Peter's scent so strong here?"

"We're on the border of our territory. He's been marking it." I tried to pull her mouth back to mine.

"No, that's not it." She abruptly rolled out of my arms and was on her feet, walking slowly east, her head swinging left and right as she sniffed and tested the air. "His scent is really strong … right here. Something's different about it." She pointed down at the ground. "The ground looks … it's gouged and scuffed up here. All around here." She waved her hands in a wide circle.

I realized instantly what she had found. I also realized that, once again, my newborn mate was distracted, and not because of me.

I stood unhurriedly from the ground, brushing off the dirt and the stray pine needles. "When you caught the bear last night, and then we …"

Her eyes flew open and her hand went to cover her mouth. "And you said they not only heard us, they felt us?"

I nodded at her.

Alarm emanated out from her. "He … felt it." She looked down at the ground. "Ew!" She leapt toward me, staring accusingly back at the disturbed ground. "He … ew!" Her voice went up a couple of octaves as realization dawned. "What the hell?"

"Well, my angel, you know how you can feel me and how I can feel you and send it back to you? That's what Peter and Emmett felt. I expect with the strength of … what we feel for each other he probably came so hard he dropped like a fuckin' ton of bricks."

"Him and Emmett?" She was very alarmed, concerned, and a little fearful. "I didn't think Emmett would go for that," she mumbled. Both hands were covering her mouth and her eyes were even wider. "Rosalie's going to be so pissed."

"No, no, no," I said quickly to reassure her. "You don't smell Emmett right here do you?"

She shook her head.

I couldn't contain the smirk. "They don't appear to have been right next to each other when it hit them, or I'd think the ground would be a lot more torn up." I reached for her shoulders and ran my hands down her arms. "It's Peter's scent but it smells a little different because …"

"Stop!" She slapped her hands over her ears. "I don't need the details! Ew!"

I had to admit that I was relieved. I was also pleased, and grateful, that the scent of Peter's … happy moment didn't send her into a lustful frenzy. Being a vampire, if she had been sexually attracted to him, she would have begun looking for him.

"You mean you can …?" She looked up at me, her eyes growing wide again. "Er, you can make
somebody …?"

"Yes, my lover." My hands slipped around her, and I drew her to me. I buried my nose in her hair again and whispered, "I could make you come without even touching you, but I much prefer the touching part." I kissed the top of her shoulder. "If I push at someone enough, it can have quite an effect on me, too, since I have to remember the feelings. Remembering them can cause me to re-experience them if I don't maintain a firm grip on my control." I ran my nose up the side of her neck and kissed her beneath her ear. "Would you like to try it?

"Uh, Jasper, my lover, I don't think I could … um … do that right here. Okay?" Bella pushed against my chest with both hands. "Aren't we supposed to be marking the boundary lines?"

"Having sex is an excellent way to mark the boundary lines." I nuzzled against her ear. "As I'm sure you can tell. It takes longer, but …"

"But you have a one-track mind." She grumbled. She pushed against my chest again and tried to pull away.

"There are multiple tracks," I said against her neck, pressing her against me. "They all lead to you."

"Awwwww. That's so sweet." She smiled then quickly frowned at me. "Now, cut it out, Jasper! We need to finish up, and I'd prefer not to keep smelling … that. Okay?" She pushed my face away from her neck.

In just a year — a very long year — she wouldn't be stronger than me anymore. I sighed.

"Don't we have to get back to the house and call Carlisle?"

"I could call him right now, Darlin'."

"No. We should call when we get back to the house so everybody can hear what he says." She managed to wiggle out of my arms and started jogging toward the east.

When she squeaked and leapt for no apparent reason, I figured she had found where Emmett had … landed.

As I drew closer to her, I realized I had guessed rightly. Emmett had practically plowed up the area. "Darlin'?" I asked, chuckling.

"Not one word, Jasper! I'd prefer to forget about it, though I won't." She slowed down a bit, and I caught up to her. "I think, when you call Carlisle, you should ask him about the memorial and graduation first. Then find out where Edward is." She glanced over to me. "I mean, before you ask about the scent. Uh, if he knows who it might be, I could get upset." She sighed wearily. "If I get upset … well anyway, I want to find out how they're doing and stuff."

I reached over and drew her to me, causing us to slow to a walk. "I love you so much, Bella. Those are things I want to find out about, too." My mate was perfect. Without even realizing it, she was taking into consideration her own current … weakness, for lack of a better term, and thinking very strategically. If we learned the scent might be one of the Volturi, I thought Bella would get upset, and we wouldn't find out the other things we wanted to know. Not truly important in the grand scheme of things, but information her coven wanted to know and could benefit from.

"Let's run." I kissed the side of her head.

"Yes!"
And she was off.

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Chapter End Notes

Paraphrasing: "I know it took some time to realize, but the moment that I saw you, I knew inside my heart all my dreams would come true … We were meant to be." ~ "The Other Side" by Toto from the album Kingdom of Desire.
Chapter 48, I Track

Jasper's POV

We'd gotten back to the house about two o'clock in the morning. Emmett and Rosalie had been watching a movie and Peter and Charlotte were up in their room. I was only a little disappointed we hadn't interrupted anything.

After they had joined us, Bella and I had explained very quickly and briefly that Bella had become upset when she had smelled the strange vampire's scent.

Emmett had chuckled. "That explains why you're down another T-shirt."

I'd thought about changing it when we got back to the house but decided that could wait until after I spoke with Carlisle.

Bella glared at him but continued with our theory that the strange vampire's scent had seemed
familiar to her but she couldn't remember who it was because she must have smelled it when she was human. We would call Carlisle and describe the scent to him.

Oddly, it was Peter and Rosalie who looked the most thoughtful.

"Thoughts, Peter?" I asked him. I wondered if his intuition was telling him anything.

"No." He seemed puzzled by that. "But somethin' made me run the lines every night. I don't usually do that. I didn't find his scent anywhere else." Peter dropped into one of the new chairs Rosalie and Charlotte had bought and waved at Charlotte to sit in his lap. "Welp. We should make ourselves comfortable if you're goin' to call Carlisle. C'mere, sugar."

I'd shoved a chair and ottoman around so I could face the family room and living room and dug my phone out of my pocket as I sat down. Bella settled in beside me, running her hand over my chest.

Unfortunately, neither Carlisle nor Esme answered their phones. That left Alice. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk to her. She just got a little enthusiastic now and again.

"Alice, Alice, Alice. It's good to talk to you, too. Now slow down. Everybody wants to listen." I pulled the phone away from my ear and rolled my eyes at Bella who was curled up against my right side. I was sprawled over the chair, my left leg over the well-padded arm and my back braced against the right arm. Since I had a chance to finally sit on one, instead of being knocked over it, I found I actually liked it very much. The chairs were plenty big enough to hold two. Despite the empty one, I was glad they had bought four and the matching ottomans. The furniture was heavy, but we could easily move it to meet our needs at the time. If we didn't want to use the ottomans, we could just shove them to the side. It wasn't anything like what Esme would have picked out for any of her living rooms, but they suited me just fine.

Bella's legs were draped over my right that was propped on the large ottoman. She was smiling up at me and quietly picking at the frayed holes in my T-shirt.

"Sorry, Jasper. I'm just so happy to talk to you! Esme and Carlisle are out hunting. Esme said we couldn't call you because you needed some time, and well, I didn't want to bother you, but I've wanted to know how Bella has been doing. And how's the house? How are Rosalie and Emmett? How are Peter and Charlotte? Is everyone doing okay and getting along?" Alice's excited questions shot out one after another.

I glanced at Peter and Charlotte who were sitting in the chair closest to us. Emmett and Rosalie were farthest away—lounging in the chair at the front of the house near the bay window. They could all hear Alice very well even after she reined in her excitement.

"One thing at a time, Alice. Bella is doing very well. We've worked with her shield, and it seems to be stronger than it was at first. Everyone else is doin' good. The house is fine. Peter and Charlotte have kept it up well over the years. Everyone is getting along pretty well, too. Bella has only bitten Peter once."

As Alice's delighted laugh chimed through the phone, Bella thumped my chest, Charlotte and Peter chuckled, and Emmett snorted out a loud "That's my Belly-boo!"

I kissed Bella's forehead. "Alice, that's your summarized version. Now I want to know where Edward is."

Her laugh quieted, and she sighed. "Edward." She clucked her tongue. "Nearly as soon as he had his
diploma in his hand he took off for the Denalis'. I don't know why he didn't go to one of the other
houses we own."

Rosalie hissed with disgust. "Because Edward's misery isn't complete without an audience," she said
with a sneer. "Who better to listen to his self-incriminations and …"

"And all his pissin' and moanin' about what a monster he is, and how the love of his life was stolen
by a heathen," Emmett added, rolling his eyes.

"What's wrong with bein' a heathen?" Charlotte asked.

Peter's eyes flashed with ire. "Why are we even talkin' about that fuckin' useless piece of shit that
shoulda been lit on fire?"

It wasn't that I didn't agree with him, but Peter's sudden surge of anger seemed a little excessive. I
gave him a sharp look as Bella hissed at him.

Raising her hand toward him, she frowned. "Peter! We want to know where he is. And yeah, well,
we all know I wasn't the love of his life. I was just his la tua cantaloupe or whatever."

Emmett grinned. "More like la tua calamity."

"La tua catastrophe?" Rosalie snickered.

Charlotte started to giggle. "Then she had a la tua conniption."

"Coulda been a real la tua cataclysm." Emmett laughed, beaming at Bella.

Bella snorted and her hand went over her mouth as she started to laugh.

"You shoulda la tua cauterized him," Peter grumbled.

What was that weird power Emmett had over Bella? Almost no matter how pissed off she was he
could make her laugh. It had to be his gift.

A gift that only worked on Bella.

Through the phone, even Alice started to giggle.

As quickly as it rose, Peter's anger disappeared as his head swiveled to watch the snickering Emmett
and Bella.

Bella sat upright, holding both of her hands in the air. "Okay. Knock it off. That's enough." She tried
to keep the smile from her face. "We're trying to have a serious discussion here. Right, Emmett?"

Eyes still twinkling, he nodded as Bella settled into my side again.

I kissed the top of her head. "Yeah. Ya'll knock it off." I loved to hear Bella laugh, but we did need
to ask Alice a few more questions.

Bella peered up at me and cleared her throat. "We're good now, I think." She shrugged her shoulders
and looked back to Peter. "Peter, Edward needs to exist so he can remember what he did to me. So
he can remember what I showed him."

Still in his serious mood, he cocked his head at Bella. "Bubba, ya shoulda crushed his fuckin' head
and then danced around his pyre."
Bella started to get up from our chair and glared at me when I held her down. She huffed loudly and turned back to him. "Sometimes I think I should have ripped his head off, but he thinks our death is the end of us. I don't know if it is or not. Carlisle doesn't think so, but if it is, why let him off easy? Why put him out of his misery?"

"He has been miserable," Alice volunteered during the slight pause.

"He should be. The fucker should've at least had pieces removed." Peter grumbled.

I agreed with Peter, but I kept my mouth shut about it for the time being. "Everybody through? Goin' to be quiet now?" At their slightly guilty nods, I said into the phone, "Please continue, Alice."

"Yes. Um, he had a bag packed and in his car before we even went to the graduation. Carlisle called Tanya and told her Edward was on his way. He even told her why, and Tanya was not happy about that. We could hear her calling to her sisters and Eleazer and Carmen so they could hear everything. Kate could not wait for him to show up so she could zap him where it counts." Her tinkling laughter sounded through the phone again, and she finally took a breath. "Well, you know how Tanya has always felt about Edward, but she was very, very angry at him. They let him stay, but they wouldn't let him have a room in the house. He's in a room over the garage." Alice chuckled.

Bella looked up at me with a puzzled frown.

"Hang on, Alice. What's wrong, Darlin'?" My fingers brushed over her cheek.

"I don't remember the Denalis. How does Tanya feel about Edward?"

"Tanya has always been … interested in Edward." I smiled at her. "I think primarily because he's one of the few males who has spurned her advances."

"Along with Jasper and Emmett," Rosalie added from across the room.

"I wouldn't have spurned 'em," Peter began, "except I didn't want my honey-love here to dismember my member." He squeezed Charlotte to his chest, and she smacked his shoulder.

"Peter, you know you wouldn't have touched those succubae with a ten foot pole," Charlotte said with a huff.

"Sure I would've. It's just you were there when I met 'em."

Charlotte growled at him, and I gave them all a warning look.

Bella rolled her eyes. "Pffft! Tanya can have him, but why would she want him?" Then her finger trailed lightly over my chin. "You know, depending on the light, I can just make out that you have a five o'clock shadow." Surprised at herself, she shook her head. "Okay, never mind about that. Succubae?"

My lover had the most interesting scattered thoughts at times, though I agreed with her opinion about Edward. "The legend of the succubus originated with the Denali sisters. They would lure humans to them to have sex then end up killing most of them. Took 'em a while, but they became vegetarian vampires so they wouldn't kill them anymore."

"Oh." Bella picked lightly at my shirt again. "Well, they can have him."

"I agree, my angel. At least we know where he is." I turned back to the phone. "Alice, I want them to tell me if he leaves."
"Oh, Carlisle already told them that. They are to call us and you. None of us have talked to Edward because he won't answer his phone, but Carlisle calls Tanya every couple of days to see how he is. He hasn't left the room over the garage. Though I don't think that will last. Apparently, Tanya thought his new scars made him look rogue-ish." She sighed lightly. "We closed up the house in Forks, and we've moved back into the house in Alaska. So if you want to visit? There's plenty of room with just the three of us here."

Bella shook her head emphatically, and I grinned and kissed her nose. "Maybe when Bella's past her newborn year." Clearing my throat, I went on to the next topics. "Tell us about the memorial and the graduation."

"Oh, Jasper, are you sure you want me to tell you about it right now? Does Bella want to hear this?"

Gripping a handful of my T-shirt, Bella closed her eyes and nodded sadly. I shifted my position in the chair so I could wrap my arm around her and hold her closer to me. "Yes, Alice, we all want to hear."

Alice sighed sadly into the phone. "Okay, well the memorial was very sad. There was a parade of cars from the funeral home to the Forks Cemetery, though I don't know why there was a casket. Anyway, there were hundreds of people there. There were even police officers from a few of the surrounding states and even a couple from Canada. I heard that the police from Canada were there because Charlie had helped them on some case or other several years ago, but I don't know what it was." There was a slight catch in her voice. "Charlie let us stand near the front because of Edward. Edward said Charlie wasn't thinking very clearly, and he always had a hard time reading his thoughts, but he didn't blame Edward for the … accident." She sniffed lightly. "The wolves were there with several of their family members. A woman was sitting next to Charlie and holding his hand. I think that was Sue Clearwater. Billy Black was sitting on Charlie's other side. Five of the, er, boys were standing behind them. Jacob looked …"

Bella shivered against me, and I kissed her forehead. "How did Jacob Black look, Alice?" I could hear that she was pacing.

"Well, Jacob was standing right behind Charlie. Sam and Paul were holding his arms. He looked like he was vibrating, but I'm sure the humans couldn't tell. Edward said he was very close to phasing, and he was thinking constantly about killing Edward. He blames Edward for Bella wrecking her truck." She took in a quiet breath. "Then Seth was next to Paul, and Embry was next to Sam. There were others, but they were at the back of the crowd and spread out. Like sentries or guards. Several of the Quileute Elders were there also, but they were seated farther back. There were so many people it was hard to see specifically who was there. I think everyone from Forks High was there. You know how Edward always tries to pick up thoughts throughout a crowd, but he couldn't. He was paying very close attention to Jacob and the other wolves."

She paused, and I could hear papers shuffling. She was probably nervously straightening and flipping through her drawings.

"But nothing happened! If anything had happened, we would have called you right away. Edward said that Seth was a mess, Embry was in shock, and even Paul was thinking that he would miss Bella."

"Paul?" Bella asked, surprised. "He always hated me. I was nothing but the leech lover to him. I was a traitor."

"Bella, Edward had thought the same thing." Alice answered her in a gloomy voice. "But he said Paul was thinking he couldn't wait to kill some blood sucking leeches because he knew it was our
fault you were dead. He just wished he could kill us, but Sam wouldn't let him."

I heard Alice shudder at that.

I held Bella tightly to me. "Bella, you know the wolves liked you. Some of them even loved you. Alice, how is Chief Swan?"

"We left quickly after the service, but we heard that Sue and Billy and some of the others were going with Charlie back to his house. Edward was able to hear that Charlie and Sue had been spending a lot of time with each other. Even if we had wanted to, we weren't able to get near the house because the wolves have included it in their patrols. Carlisle didn't say anything to them about that, even though it's not part of their lands, but since that other vampire had been near Charlie's house … Well, anyway, Esme just wanted to leave and let them all grieve in peace but we had the graduation to go to." Alice's voice had become quieter, but we could all still hear her.

At Bella's sob, I told Alice to hang on. I shifted my position again and drew Bella onto my lap. "It's okay, Darlin'."

"I'm so glad they're with him, Jasper." She sniffed as she gripped my shirt and pulled it up to cover her face. "I know you said they would be there for him, but it's so good to hear it. Sue is so nice to be there for him. I know she must miss Harry, but maybe she and Leah and Seth can help him."

"I'm sure they will. He does have friends, Bella. He won't be completely alone." I was curious about why the wolves had continued their patrols around the Swan house, but maybe that was more to keep an eye on the Chief than for any other reason.

I tried to comfort Bella, but I knew she would miss her father. I just held her shaking body to mine, tucking her head under my chin. I began to wonder about her mother. Alice had not mentioned her. I didn't want to, but I thought I should ask. Get it all out there. Bella was strong and was controlling herself well, but if she lost it I was confident I could get her outside quickly.

Rosalie's and even Emmett's eyes shone with venom tears, and Charlotte had burrowed more deeply into Peter's arms. Surprisingly, even Peter looked unhappy and concerned.

After another moment or two, I picked up the phone again. "Alice?"

"Yes, Jasper? I'm still here. Tell Bella I am so sorry about Charlie."

"She can hear you, and she knows that, Alice. Thank you." I took in a steadying breath. "What about her mother?"

"Um, she wasn't there," Alice said hesitantly. Then she added in a rush, "But Edward heard from Charlie that she was pregnant and has been suffering badly from morning sickness. Uh, he was angry that she wasn't there, but he could remember the morning sickness that Renee had when she was pregnant with Bella. Apparently, it was really bad."

"She's pregnant?" Bella looked up at me with wide eyes. "A baby? She's going to have a baby? I hope Phil knows how to change diapers." She brought a hand up to cover her face. "I don't even know what to think about that. I hope the baby doesn't smell like me. But how could he … er, she? Whatever. Charlie's not her father. Whoa. Renee with a baby." She blinked rapidly. "Wow. That's … wow." Her fingers went to her mouth. "I won't ever be able to see my little brother or sister. I wouldn't want to get near him — it might draw in other vampires."

I didn't know what I could have said to that, but I thought she was probably right. "We can talk about it later, if you want."
Bella sighed and nodded and tucked her head back under my chin. She was feeling remorse and grief, but I could tell she was working to control it.

I turned my attention back to Alice. "Alice. Graduation?"

"You know how that goes, Jasper. It was just like every other graduation we've been to. Everyone lined up and walked onto the stage to get their diploma in those gowns. The principal did make a little speech about Bella, and the school decided to build a memorial garden behind the cafeteria. Of course, Esme donated quite a bit to that so it would be maintained." She hesitated again, and I heard a little cough. "I know it was wrong, but I broke into the office before graduation and stole Bella's diploma. I replaced it with a copy." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I thought Bella would like to have it."

Bella sobbed again and covered her face with her hands. "Thank you, Alice. I would like to have it," she cried. "Could … could you send it to me here?"

Her emotions were picking up speed as they began to whirl from one to another; gratitude and sorrow being the most dominant. I was grateful to Alice for doing that for Bella. We hadn't been able to get into her room to take any of her personal belongings.

"Yes. Thank you, Alice," I said softly to her. She didn't need to do that, but I knew she did it for Bella.

"Of course, I can send it to you, Bella! I still can't see anything of you and Jasper. I can't see Rose and Emmett now either. I think it's because they're near you. I never could see Peter and Charlotte. Well, anyway, I didn't want to just mail it without telling you first. I didn't want it to be a shock. I'll get it to the post office tomorrow."

I could hear the relief and happiness in Alice's voice. I knew she still wanted to be a friend to Bella, but I was reasonably sure we would have to wait through most of Bella's first year. I didn't know if she would still feel jealous over Alice.

The news from Alice was as I expected, though I was surprised to hear that Alice couldn't see Rosalie and Emmett anymore. I knew she hadn't been able to see Peter and Charlotte. I had always thought that was because of Peter, and where he went Charlotte went. I was sure that was why she hadn't ever been especially fond of them, though some of that could have been due to their scars. The sentiment had always been mutual.

I was relieved Edward was in Alaska, but I had a feeling that would be the end of the brief respite. We hadn't gotten to the most important question yet. Above Bella's head, I signaled Peter by raising a finger, wanting him to be alert. He looked directly into my eyes with curiosity, but he nodded. He kissed Charlotte's head and shifted her so that he could get up out of the chair quickly if he needed to.

I began to comb through Bella's hair with my fingers, drawing my fingers down her back, hoping to keep her calm, but prepared in case it didn't work.

"Alice, we have another question for you."

"What is it, Jasper? You sound serious."

"It could be." I glanced again at Peter and Charlotte then at Emmett and Rosalie. All four were alert and paying close attention, their eyes on Bella. "When you and Bella went to Volterra to get Edward, you came in contact with several vampires."
"Er, yes?"

I could hear the curiosity in her voice.

Alice cleared her throat nervously. "Um, yes. First, there was Felix and Demetri in the alley. Then Jane came to … collect us."

Even though I couldn't feel it, I knew by the sound of Alice's voice she was becoming anxious and probably tugging at her clothes.

"They eventually led us into a large circular chamber and Aro, Caius, Marcus, and Alec were there. There were quite a few vampires there. I don't know who they all were. I think the wives were there and some that I thought were bodyguards. Why, Jasper?"

Bella tensed in my arms, and she was holding her breath.

Continuing to run my fingers through her hair, I asked, "Which vampires came closest to Bella?"

Alice sounded puzzled. "We were in an elevator with Jane, Demetri, and Felix. When we entered the … the room, Alec walked up to Jane. Then Aro went up to Bella to hold her hand. Of course, he couldn't read her mind."

I steeled myself for the answer to my next question to Alice. Somehow I knew that the scent of the strange vampire who had crossed into our territory was one of the Volturi.

"Which one smelled like cedar and moss?"

"Demetri. Why?"

Instantly, Bella's emotions were cut off from me, and she began to tremble. Though I tightened my hold on her, she exploded out of my arms, knocking my phone across the room. I managed to grab her foot, but I only succeeded in keeping her from going through the ceiling. She slipped out of my grasp, rolled over the ottoman, and was on her feet in front of the fireplace.

At her first movement, Peter was up out of his chair and leaping for the sliding glass door.

As I scrambled toward Bella, her emotions broke loose. The blast of terror from her stunned me, hitting me so hard I dropped to the floor, my outstretched hand just missing her arm.

Panic and fear crashed over me, forcing me to curl instinctively into a fetal position. I tried to fight it and shove it away knowing it was Bella's and not mine. It didn't make any difference.

I heard a loud grunt and then glass shattering and wood splintering.

Someone grabbed my shoulder, and I spun away from them, colliding with someone else whose arms closed around me like a vice. I was lifted from the floor and the next instant was outside in the yard, lying on my back, staring up at the stars and the full moon.

I lurched to my feet, one hand going to my head, the other clutching at the ache that was constricting my chest. I tried to slam down the wall in my mind against Bella's terror. It wasn't gone, but it was reduced. I could handle it.

Emmett and Charlotte were between me and the house, watching me warily. The deck railing had been destroyed again. There was broken, pebbled glass strewn across the deck and into the yard.

"Bella?"
They both pointed behind me. I spun and ran into the forest, picking up Bella's, Peter's, and Rosalie's scents. I was grateful Peter and Rosalie had gone after her.

Finally, my brain began to recover from its shock at the assault. I thought I had been ready for whatever Bella might have put out. I was so wrong. Had it been that bad when she was in Volterra? It had to have been worse for her than I could imagine. She had been a pitifully weak human surrounded by vampires. How had she controlled herself and not been killed? I shuddered to think what could have happened there. We were so lucky the brothers had allowed her to leave.

I trained my eyes ahead, looking for some sign they had passed through; wanting some further confirmation I was going in the right direction.

Freshly broken tree branches, along with her scent, told me she was running directly east. She'd be down the side of the mountain and into a grassy area in no time — if she wasn't already. Again, I found myself grateful it was night. If she didn't run back into the forest, at least she wouldn't be a shining, shimmering streak across the open fields.

I didn't slow when I reached the tall grass; I just kept going, leaping over the dirt road that led to our house and continuing down the mountain. When I reached the level valley between the mountains, I soared over the meandering creeks and the deep green grass but came to a skidding stop when I reached the next mountain pushing out of the ground. As I searched for Bella's scent, I heard a terrified shriek up the mountain above me. She had gone straight up the barren, nearly vertical rise in front of me. I couldn't see them so I opened my senses just enough to try to feel her.

The piercing ache in my chest pulled me in the same direction as the sound of her cry. I started up the rise, not even needing to find any handholds to climb it to find my Bella. As I reached the first shelf, to the left I saw the beginnings of the next tract of forest.

Fortunately, she had continued east with a slight northerly curve and had taken to the trees instead of turning south and following the treeless valley.

I felt her. I heard her snarling and thought she was a little over half a mile away.

As I raced through the trees, I noted their scents were stronger. Finally, I heard Rosalie speaking Bella's name in a low monotone.

"Bella, it's okay. Peter's not going to hurt you. Jasper's coming. He'll be here soon. Oh!"

I blew past Rosalie kneeling on the ground with her hands raised toward Bella and Peter who were about thirty feet away. Peter had Bella caged in his arms and legs, much like I had done to her previously when she had run, and Peter's back was up against a boulder. The difference was her teeth were sunk into his left forearm, and she was snarling through a frenzied mix of fear and fury.

I kept enough of a wall up against her emotions so she wouldn't overtake me as I slowly crept toward her. "Rose. Maybe you should back up — get out of her line of sight. And thank you." My hands were out, palms facing Bella. "Bella, I'm right here. I'll help you."

When I reached them, I knelt down, relieved she hadn't put up her shield to keep me from getting near her. Peter's teeth were clenched as he was straining to hold her. His hands were gripping each of her wrists, and he had her arms crossed over her chest. His jaw was pressed tightly against the side of her head. His eyes were matte black with his pain.

"Is she hurt?"

"No. *She* broke my fuckin' ribs." He grimaced. "Whatever the fuck you're doin' … I feel both of ya.
Both of you together is—"

Bella's rippling snarl cut him off, and I reached to touch her forehead. "Bella, I'm right here." As soon as my skin came in contact with hers, the ache in my chest ceased. I leaned closer and breathed into her face. Her hands were opening and closing spasmodically.

"I'm here. I'll help you, Bella."

Finally, her flat black eyes showed a spark of recognition as they jerked up to mine. She let out another muffled snarl and renewed her struggles.

I backed away from her and Peter and slowly stood up. "Ready to let her go?"

"Sure. Soon as she pulls her teeth out of my arm."

I opened my arms to catch her. He released her wrists. As she yanked her head back from his arm, he grabbed her shoulders and shoved her at me as he tried to roll away from her. She still planted her feet on his hip and side to launch herself away from him, forcing a wheezing grunt out of him.

Even though I was ready for her, she crashed into me hard enough to knock me to the ground. We just missed hitting one of the tall pines. She was all over me, sniffing, running her hands over my shoulders and arms then checking down my legs. She was back at my face, studying me and growling. I couldn't get a handle on her emotions. They were spinning faster than I could identify them, but I thought there was concern and possessiveness, fear and rage. Suddenly, her face snapped up, her nostrils flaring and her eyes darting back and forth like she was searching for something. I hoped it wasn't Rosalie and that she had moved away or at least hidden herself.

Bella looked back down at me and her anxiety flared. She grabbed my right hand and began examining it and my forearm. When she was satisfied, she grabbed the other and repeated the process, growling the entire time.

"Bella, I'm okay. I'm not hurt."

Crouching next to me, her eyes glanced to mine then she ripped my shirt off and studied my torso, running her fingers over my chest and down over my ribs. "Bella, I'm okay."

I was concerned. In fact, I was alarmed. She was feral, wild, and she wasn't responding to me as quickly as she had before. She was checking me for injuries or damage — why?

Demetri's name had set her off. Had something else happened to her in Volterra that Edward and Alice hadn't told us about?

In a flash, she spun around and went after Peter. She was so fast I didn't have time to stop her.

He had stood up and was stepping away from the boulder, but he hadn't gotten very far. He heard her movement, and as he turned and his arms came up to either defend himself from Bella or catch her, she plowed into him, knocking him past the boulder and to the ground.

"Oh, fuck!" he shouted in pain, drawing his legs up as he hit the ground.

He caught her right hand with his left and held it away from him as he laid there, but her left ripped his T-shirt away and ran across and over his chest until she reached his ribs on his right side. The volume of her growl lowered, and she jerked her hand from his skin. Kneeling at his left side, she turned slightly, her back to me, and her left hand clamped on his arm just above his left elbow. She
began licking the deep bite on his arm.

"Shit. Jasper, I didn’t … I don’t know … what the fuck is she doin’?" Peter had let go of her fist and tried to scramble away from her, but she grabbed his wrist and held him. He was panting with the pain in his ribs, and his right arm dropped to the ground beside him.

I knew he could break away from her, but he would have to hurt her to do it. He either didn't want to hit her, or he didn't want to do it in front of me. He was fucking trapped and he knew it.

I almost couldn't bear seeing my mate licking another male, even if it was just his fucking arm. I stalked toward them, a growl building in my chest. Before I lost my shit, I tried to tell myself that Bella wasn't in control of herself, and maybe she was trying to help him since she had bitten him. I had no fucking clue. I paused enough to test her emotions again, and she was radiating protection. If I made any moves she thought were threatening, she might put up her shield, and I wouldn't be able to reach them at all.

"Peter, tell her to stop. Tell her you're okay." My eyes drilled into his, and I could barely contain the jealousy boiling through my heart.

"What is she doin' besides actin' like a fuckin' crazy newborn!?"

"Protecting you. Maybe trying to help you. Tell her!"

"Bubba, uh, Bella," he said quietly. "You can stop now. I'm okay. It's okay. It's better." He started to reach for her with his right hand and halted, his eyes back on me.

I could see dread in his black eyes. I reminded myself that what Bella was doing wasn't his fault — she was a panicked newborn — but my instincts were screaming at me to rip her away from him and finish crushing his chest. I ground my teeth and clenched my fists as I sucked in a deep breath. "Do what you were going to do," I growled out.

Watching me, he slowly reached for her head and stroked her hair. "Bella, I'm fine now. It's okay. It's healed up. Let go."

Seeing him touching her like that, I couldn't contain the snarl that ripped through me. Thankfully, she stopped licking his arm and turned to look at him. I couldn't see her face, but I could feel her curiosity flash through the storm.

Just the corners of his mouth turned up in a slight smile. "Yes, Bella, it's okay," he said in a soft voice. He reached for her left hand and lifted her fingers from his arm. "I'm fine now. You did a good job. Thank you." His eyes flicked to me and back to her. "Jasper. Go see Jasper." He slowly reached for her hand that was gripping his wrist. "I know you want to see Jasper."

Longing burst from her. She rose from her crouch as she turned toward me, maintaining her grip on his wrist. Her dull black eyes weren't as wild, but her emotions were still jagged and rough, tumbling out of her.

She stepped toward me, and her left hand reached out. "He'll find us." In a blur, she was on me, dragging Peter with her. Her left arm shot around me, and she was sobbing into my chest. "He found us!" Panic overrode the longing and she trembled against me.

I held her, one hand to her head, the other going around her waist, and I glared at Peter as he groaned and struggled to stand. He didn't want to be anywhere near me, but Bella wouldn't let go of his arm.

As she pressed her head against mine and whimpered into my ear, all I wanted to do was take my
mate away from everyone, especially Peter, and comfort her.

"Bella." I said her name firmly, trying to make her focus on me and my voice. "He can't track you. He can't track any of us. He's never gotten close enough to any of us." I had no idea why Demetri would be in the States, unless he had been sent to check up on Bella. He would know her human scent, but he wouldn't know her scent as a vampire. We hadn't run to Wyoming; we had driven. We wouldn't have left a trail.

If he had been to see the Cullens, Alice would have said so — but only if he had knocked on the fucking door. He could have gone through their territory and picked up all of our scents, including Bella's. They would never have known unless they happened across his scent while hunting. They didn't make perimeter checks. I hadn't even done it after the first few years I had been with them. That shit had to change. I'd been a fucking fool. Demetri could have picked up Emmett's, Rosalie's, and my scents back in Forks. If he had been there, he would have smelled the wolves, too.

My hate for Edward Cullen grew. The Volturi wouldn't have found out about Bella if it hadn't been for him. When they had returned from Italy, he had told us that Aro had not been able to read Bella's mind, and Demetri had been astonished when he had not been able to sense that spark in Bella that would enable him to find her anywhere. But he was a tracker. Apparently the best in the world, or the Volturi wouldn't have compelled him to join them. If he couldn't use his gift to find vampires, he could always do it the old fashioned way.

"Then how did he find us?" Bella and Peter were looking at something behind me. "Charlotte! Where's Rose? She was here! Where is she?"

"Right here, Bella," Rosalie answered from somewhere above us.

I turned and saw Rosalie drop from a tree and join Charlotte as they came cautiously toward us. Bella tried to pull away from me to reach them. She would probably drag that fucking Peter with her.

"Come here!" I barked at them. I was incapable of letting her out of my arms. Everything in me was demanding I keep her next to me. I didn't want any of them near us; I wanted my mate to myself, but she wanted them. They would have to come to us.

Though they were afraid, they were instantly beside us. Charlotte gently touched Peter's ribs and then her arms were around him. Rose went to my right side, putting an arm around me and running her fingers over Bella's hair.

Bella was sniffing at all of them. "Emmett?" Her voice had climbed higher.

Charlotte's forehead was against Peter's, and her hands were holding either side of his face. "Emmett circled around," she answered.

"Jazz," Emmett whispered from behind us.

"Emmett!" Bella's head jerked away from Rosalie and me to search for Emmett as he came toward us.

He wrapped one arm around Rosalie from behind and put his huge paw of a hand on top of Bella's head.

"More group hugs, Bells? We never used to do this shit before you became a vamp." Emmett ruffled her hair.

She glanced up at him timidly and a little embarrassed. "I … uh, it's just …" She ducked her head to
my chest and peered at him with one eye. "It's just that you're mine, and I don't want him to take you. That sounds crazy, right?"

"No, Bella." Rosalie stroked her hair. "You sound just like a vampire. The difference is you say it." Rosalie continued combing her fingers through Bella's hair. "It's okay for you to feel that way. Are you sure that it's Demetri's scent?"

"Yes." Bella nodded. The frantic spin of her emotions was slowing, and she finally let go of Peter's wrist. She turned slightly to face Charlotte and grasped her shoulder as if she had to be in contact with each of them. "The more Alice talked about what happened in Volterra, the more memories came up. Surfaced. Whatever." She rubbed her face against my shirt. "I remember being in the elevator with them. He was right beside us the whole time we were in that room. Then when Aro and Caius said we could go, he led Edward, Alice, and me back to the reception area and said we couldn't leave until sunset."

She shuddered, and I tightened my hold around her. She patted Charlotte's shoulder and then her arm was around me.

"We should head back to the house, Bella," I whispered in her ear. The thought of the Volturi's best tracker anywhere near her set loose my own sense of protection and possessiveness.

She nodded and looked up at me, fear still showing in her eyes. "Okay, Jasper."

-oOoOo-

"Shhhhh, Bella. He can't track you," I said into her ear, wondering why I would trust anything that Edward had told us. At the time, I didn't have a reason to not trust him, and he had been pleased the Volturi's powers could not touch her. More than pleased, he had been smug. "Shhhh, Bella." I forced down my anger and jealousy and reached for the serenity I felt when I came in contact with her. The spin of her emotions had slowed to near normal, but she still clung to me.

Peter had said he could feel both of us. Could all of them or was it just him? I had not been projecting to him on purpose.

When we had reached the house, Bella hadn't wanted to go upstairs to our room. She had planted herself in the chair we had been sitting in earlier and raised her arms up to me. I had sat next to her and pulled her into my arms, tucking her head under my chin.

Peter had found my phone over by the front door and tossed it to me. There were five missed calls from Alice. As the other four settled themselves in their chairs, I called her back.

"Jasper! What happened? I tried to call you!"

"I know, Alice." I sighed and squeezed Bella to my chest. "Bella got a little upset when you said Demetri's name. We just got back to the house." It had taken an hour and-a-half to walk back.

"Alice, we're all fine. Do you know if Demetri had been near Forks or the house there?" I hoped to hell she didn't.

"No, Jasper! If we had noticed any other vampires around, we would have told you. Esme, Carlisle, and I left Forks just a few days after graduation. There was no reason to stay any longer. We just packed a few things and left. We can go back and check on the house any time. We only brought Carlisle's car with us. My Porsche wouldn't be very practical here in Alaska."

She was nervously rambling, and I wanted to be off the phone and concentrate on Bella. "Alice, we're fine. If you should happen to hear or see anything, please let me know. Ask Carlisle to give me
a call when he gets back."

"I will, Jasper. I promise. But what's going on?"

"We found a strange scent and think Demetri has been near our territory here. We haven't seen him. Just have Carlisle give me a call. I should go now, Alice. Bella is still a little upset. I appreciate you fillin' us in."

"Oh, no! I wonder if he came to check up on Bella? If we hear anything at all, we will call you!" She drew in a breath. "I'll tell Carlisle as soon as he gets back. We'll talk to you soon, okay?"

"Yes, and don't worry, Alice. We'll be fine. Thank you."

"Okay, Jasper. Bye."

I snapped my phone shut and looked to the others, capturing their eyes. "We'll continue running the perimeter every night, varying the time and direction so we don't create a pattern. If we get a rainy or cloudy day, we'll take advantage of it. It might be a risk having all of our scents out there, but I think it would be better to let any stray vampires know there are six of us in this coven." I gently tilted Bella's face up to mine. "Darlin', as much as I don't like it, vacation is over. We start training you to fight. It'll be good for all of us."

"But my shield …"

"Is a good defense, but you should also know how to defend yourself without it. We all know gifts can be blocked or worked around." I kissed her forehead. "You blocked Aro and Jane. You'd probably be able to block Jane's brother Alec, but you never know what you may come up against. You still need to know how to fight."

I looked up at my coven-mates — my brothers and sisters. We were all in agreement.

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Chapter End Notes

"la tua cantaloupe" from Supercharged by Sinvisigoth on FFN.
I Train

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Beta services provided by ElleCC and Jcat5507 of Project Team Beta. You can find them both on FanFiction.

A/N: Probably two weeks "ish" until the next update.

Did I mention I signed up for Project Team Beta's Smut University 2013? I believe that I have. First two homework assignments have been posted, and I'm working on the third. It's growing and growing. I'll have to take a machete to it.

Thanks to creative consultant Siobhan Whitlock.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS), and A Different Forest (ADF) — feed a tree!

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Okay, the story I was looking for I can't seem to find, so I'll plug me again.

I Live side shot Jasper and Peter by GeezerWench. Posted on FFN, AO3, and TWCS.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 49, I Train

Jasper's POV

Bella stood on the boulder above me, her red Converse-clad feet a shoulder's width apart, shoulders back, and her chest out. Her deep brown hair was lifted gently in the light breeze that meandered between the trees. In the filtered, soft morning light, she was a goddess in a red T-shirt and blue jeans. I couldn't take my eyes from her.

Raising her chin, she turned her head to gaze regally at Peter stationed about twenty feet to her right. Then her eyes swept to Emmett crouched about twenty feet to her left. She slowly raised her right hand, index finger extended.

"Two men enter. One man leaves." She snapped her hand toward Peter and said, "Engage."

Instead of sprinting toward Peter to demonstrate to Bella how a newborn would directly attack another vampire, Emmett burst into laughter, grabbing his stomach with one hand and pointing at Bella with the other.
She held her arrogant pose for only a moment before she erupted in delighted cackles.

I sighed wearily and dragged my hand down over my face. Our first training session was not going as planned, and it didn't help that Rosalie and Charlotte kept tittering at all the stupid shit Bella and Emmett were doing.

The only saving grace was Peter. He had quickly become fed up with their antics. He was standing with his arms crossed over his chest, one eyebrow raised and a frown on his face.

"Look, Bubba, you need to cut the shit and pay attention," he said in a disgruntled voice. "If you don't straighten up, Emmett's gettin' sent back to the house."

"Aw! But that's bullshit, Peter!" Bella exclaimed. "You're gonna make Emmett sit in time-out in the house? I need him to help me."

"He's right, Bella," Rosalie said, trying to maintain a serious expression and moving toward her from behind Emmett. "If you can't behave, we'll hide the Mad Max movies, and there won't be any more Star Trek marathons, either."

"And we'll take away your Lincoln Logs," Charlotte added.

Bella spun toward them, flinging her arms out. "Hide the ... Hey! You guys suck! I only broke half the Lincoln Logs, and I love the Star Trek marathons. I wore the red shirt in honor of Jean-Luc!"

After I had ended the call with Alice, Rosalie had suggested we should do something to lighten the mood before beginning any sort of training. My mind had immediately gone to sharing a private moment with my lover in our bedroom, but Emmett had suggested Mel Gibson movies or Star Trek, and Charlotte had grabbing the container of Lincoln Logs.

Of course, the Enterprise and a can of little pieces of wood and plastic would be more interesting than the man who loved her beyond all reason and who desperately wanted to show her how much. Bella had clambered out of my arms and skipped over to Emmett.

While he had flipped on the TV, and Charlotte had dumped the Lincoln Logs on the floor in front of it, Peter and I grabbed clean, unripped shirts to put on.

Bella had only pulverized the miniature notched logs when Captain Picard was engaged in battle or somebody was fighting — which was pretty good, I had thought.

Shaking my head, I turned my attention back to Bella.

Her back was to Peter as she glared at us. I signaled him with a quick flick of my fingers, and he leapt at her. He flung his arms around her, capturing hers against her sides, and they both sailed over the boulder. As Bella squawked in indignation, Peter managed to twist enough in the air that they landed on their sides instead of Peter crushing her underneath him. Immediately, she began to struggle against his hold.

I was instantly in front of them both and squatted down to look into her face. "And you know what happens to the red shirts." I gently caught her chin. "Bella, be still. This is serious. If he had been an enemy, he could have ripped your head off."

"But I was trying — "

"Do, or do not. There is no try." I continued looking steadily into her eyes and pushed a bit of humor at her swiftly followed by a sense of caution, letting her know I wasn't angry with her, but it was
She held still and smiled apologetically up at me. "Peter could have ripped my head off. I know this is serious, and I'll try to behave." She sighed lightly. "When I was human, I was always the weakest one. I … I don't want to be the weakest one anymore. Now, could you tell him to quit squishing me?"

Trailing my fingers over her smooth skin, I stood up as Peter let go of her. She was instantly on her feet, and before she could reach to dust herself off, I caught her hands. "I'll help you, Darlin'." I didn't want her ripping any of her clothes off in front of Peter. She had been getting better at handling clothing, but I wasn't in the mood to chance it right then. I quickly brushed the pine needles off her as Peter hopped to his feet and stood quietly behind her.

"We'll start with defensive moves. You've used some of them already without even thinking about it." I turned her to face Peter. I didn't particularly want him putting his hands all over her, but in the interest of her safety, I thought I could set my jealousy aside — maybe. "We'll take the moves you've already used and build on them. He'll move slowly to start and pick up speed as we go." I glared at Peter to make sure he understood me, and he nodded. "Peter will swing at you. Slowly. You block the swing."

"But why doesn't he just try to punch me?"

I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath. "Because I don't think I could stand to watch him hit you." Opening my eyes, I placed two fingers under her chin to lift her beautiful face. "And he would hit you.

Peter just grinned.

I stepped back away from them both, raised my hand, and waved him toward Bella.

He cocked his head and smiled maliciously at her as he crouched slightly and lifted his fists. "Now, Bubba-san, show me wax on, wax off."

-oOoOo-

It turned out that Bella was a quick study once she had finally convinced herself to settle down and pay attention. I controlled myself the best I could while watching Peter gradually increase the speed of his punches and kicks. I never realized how difficult it would be to stand by and watch while someone else was trying to hit my mate. Of course, it had never bothered me when Peter and I were training Maria's newborns. The more pain we inflicted on them, the quicker they learned.

I just couldn't do that to Bella. Or let anyone else do it either.

Bella was ready to keep going, but I couldn't take it anymore when Peter's teeth were at her throat, making her instantly stop trying to kick him. He had caught both of her hands in his right and held the back of her neck with the left. He had lifted her high enough so that only her toes were touching the ground. She wasn't afraid, but her eyes were wide, and she held her arched body rigidly still so she wouldn't move and end up slitting her own throat.

I clenched my teeth and shoved down the flare of jealousy. His mouth on her looked entirely too intimate to me. I suppressed the urge to attack him, but I thought that my shaking fists might have given me away. The twinkle in his eyes, and the flutter of mischief I felt from him, told me he knew I was pissed off.

He lowered her so that her feet were flat on the ground, and he lifted his teeth from her skin, and then
the fucker winked at me. "Well, Bubba, looks like I won. Again. You need to work on sand the floor and paint the fence some more, but you're doin' good. I think it's time for a little break." He drew his hand from around her neck, her hair sliding through his fingers, and he let go of her hands. He kept his eyes on her in case she decided to claw him. Then he bent to whisper in her ear, "I think Jasper needs a little break. Go get 'im."

She smiled up at him, and as she punched him in the arm and turned away, he swatted her ass.

I nearly fucking lost it, but then she was in my arms. I clutched her to me and buried my nose in her hair, trying to ignore the traces of Peter's scent on her. That fucking asshole just laughed at me.

Her hands slid firmly up my back, and she whispered to me, "Jasper, take it easy. I can feel you're upset, but you don't need to be. He didn't hurt me."

Even when I tried to keep my feelings from her, she still caught a sense of them. "I know, but … I smell him on you, and …"

"And you're not going to carry me off and rub yourself all over me are you?" She pulled back from me and smiled knowingly, one eyebrow raised.

Rubbing my body all over hers sounded like an excellent idea. "Now that you mention it …"

Peter clapped his hands together loudly. "Break's over — before Jasper runs off with our student. I know what you were thinkin'." He wagged his finger at me in admonishment. "We got some stuff to work on. Bubba and Rose — I want you two to work together for now. Em and Char — come on over here. Jazz and I will observe for a while then you'll switch."

Things weren't going too badly, though with each blow that landed on Bella, I grew more stressed and edgy. I tried to suck it up while Peter and I stood back out of the way until we needed to adjust a stance or make a suggestion as they all practiced throwing punches and blocking. It gave me a strange sense of déjà vu — standing next to Peter, watching our charges lunging and snarling at each other. Difference was no one had had an arm ripped off yet.

It was going well until they traded partners. Of course, when it was his turn at Bella, Emmett had to piss her off by grabbing her hair and throwing her to the ground or yanking her to his chest. Several times. My mate being manhandled, even by Emmett, was setting my teeth on edge, and I had to keep reminding myself that he wasn't really hurting her, and the practice was good for her.

"Dammitt, Emmett! I am gonna kick your ass!" she shrieked after he had tossed her into some low shrubs. She burst through the bushes and sprang toward him.

He whooped at her, and with the speed of a snake striking, he knocked her hands aside with his right while with his left he slapped her to the ground. Then he fell on her to keep her from trying to attack him again. "Ha ha, Bells! I just got you twice with paint the fence!"

She was screaming bloody murder and managed to throw him off. Before he had a chance to completely regain his feet, she was on his back, her arms around his ribs and her teeth at his throat.

"Oh, shit," Emmett gasped, eyes wide.

It was good to know that move worked on him, though I didn't know how many more little discoveries like that I could take.

"Well, that escalated quickly," Rosalie said disdainfully. Then she and Peter were laughing at them, but Charlotte was fuming.
"That's what ya get for slingin' her around by her hair, Emmett." Charlotte pressed her lips together in a straight line, fists planted on her hips. 

"Hang on, Char," I said, walking over to my growling mate. "It would be a rare vampire that didn't use every advantage he could even if it was grabbin' a handful of hair — you'd be crazy not to use it against her. She's gotta learn to watch for that, too."

I'd used the tactic more times than I could count against vampires — male and female — who had hair long enough to grab, including Charlotte when she was a newborn.

Charlotte ran her fingers through her own pale blonde hair. "I remember." She narrowed her eyes at me. "That's why I'm a bit irked." She inhaled deeply. "You do need to watch for that, too, Bella. Your hair is beautiful, but that won't keep vamps from tryin' to get a handful and use it against ya."

Bella jumped down from Emmett's back and shoved him away from her. "Well, getting my ass kicked over and over again was getting boring. Maybe we should — "

At the word "boring," Emmett launched himself at Bella, and I automatically went for him. I didn't get a chance to get my hands on him though. Peter knocked me to the side and shouted, "Stop!"

Everyone froze, staring at us.

He hissed and grabbed my arm. "You all carry on. Me and the Major gotta discuss strategies." He dragged me away while Emmett and Bella proceeded to drop into a crouch and begin to circle each other, Emmett rotating his shoulders and Bella flexing her fingers and baring her teeth at him.

"Look at me, Major." Peter yanked me around so I couldn't see what Emmett and Bella were doing to each other while Rosalie and Charlotte cheered them on. "You need to stop your fuckin' growlin'. I know how goddamn hard it is to see your mate get beaten and thrown around. Stop!" He jerked me back again as I started to twist around toward Bella. "Look at me! And they aren't even hittin' her that hard." He let go of my arm and stepped back. "You've been growlin' for the past hour-and-a-half, and you're distractin' Bubba. They keep gettin' hits in because she keeps lookin' at you."

"Peter, I can't — "

"You can. I know how hard it is."

I studied his hard gaze and knew I was being an overprotective, hovering asshole. Peter did know how difficult it was. He'd had to stand aside while Charlotte got beaten, bitten, and dismembered for a year before they ran to escape Maria. "I have no fuckin' idea how you did it. I have no idea how you kept Charlotte bein' your mate from me."

"It wasn't fuckin' easy," he said, shaking his head slightly. "I did everything I could to keep it from you and Maria because I knew Maria would have killed us both. Or had you do it. I had to let the other newborns — and you — abuse her to save her. It's just a good damn thing she can fight like a fuckin' tiger. That kept her from being shit on as much. Hell, she gave better than she got." He blew out a breath and ran his hand through his hair. "Jasper, you know as well as I do that Bubba needs to learn this shit. Maybe if she can fight, she'll quit runnin' when she gets upset." He shook his head. "If you can't take watchin' it, then maybe you shouldn't. Hell, I don't even like it, but you know I can do it."

He could. That was why he had always been my second-in-command. He had trained the newborns with me. "I know you can. I just don't think I can handle watchin' it."

"You have to, Major. You have to separate yourself from it just like you did when we were with
Maria. You can't look at her as your mate right now. She's just a newborn." He cocked his head and lowered his voice. "Just like I was just another of Maria's minions." He placed a hand on my shoulder. "You know we're going to have to go over holds some more and how to break out of them, and I don't want ya rippin' parts off me when I do it. How 'bout you go back to the house? Maybe we'll do better without you here."

Be away from Bella? That shit wasn't going to happen. Growling at him, my first instinct was to punch him. I stopped myself and took in a deep breath. Bella had to learn how to defend herself without the use of her shield. My holding back was causing them all to hold back. It wouldn't do her any good.

I knew going in that in order for her to learn, we would have to hit her, but Peter was right: I hated to do it, but it was necessary. I'd just had no fucking idea how seeing her being struck would affect me. I was going crazy, while she was having a great time. But there was nobody who could train and teach her better than I could.

Once I got my head out of my ass.

"I'm not goin' back to the house. Nobody's trainin' her without me." I turned back to my mate and our coven.

-oOoOo-

After Peter's little pep talk, training went fairly smoothly. I got a grip on myself and stopped growling every time Bella was hit, slapped, or punched because she didn't get her hands up fast enough. Fortunately, she learned very quickly and could soon block or side-step almost anything we threw at her.

At first it was maddening to see Bella and Emmett pound the living daylights out of each other, but as time went on, she bested him more and more often, and she kept him from dragging her around by her hair.

It was absolutely infuriating that Peter seemed to take advantage of the fact that he could catch her in holds more often than anyone except me. Then there was that last one which had me ready to snap his damn hands off. Bella escaped from Emmett, ran up the trunk of a tree, and leapt at Peter while he was fending off Rosalie. He shoved Rosalie away, spun, and caught Bella in his arms. That, in and of itself, wasn't so bad. It was when he crushed her to his chest with one hand at the back of her head and the other at the small of her back, and his teeth at her throat again, that I nearly lost it. From my position, it looked as though he was embracing her and kissing her neck, and I just could not take that shit.

As soon as I snarled, he released her. Sneaky little demon that she is, she kneed him in the ribs. He fell over, gasping and clutching at his side, while she landed on her feet, spun to face me and drew her fists up with her hair swirling around her.

"Don't kill him." She glared at me, and then her eyes quickly scanned everyone else.

Their wide eyes were on me, their faces frozen in varying degrees of fear and concern.

That effectively ended our first session.

Because Bella said I had scared them, throughout the remainder of the night, Bella kept me away from Peter and everyone else by reminding me I had some online business to attend to. She sat quietly, curled up in the old blue recliner that had been moved into the main floor library, carefully
turning the pages of the little books that Charlotte had brought her, while I added her name to several accounts and holdings.

Typing "Isabella Marie Whitlock" over and over again into the different accounts made me feel so proud and warmed my still heart.

She was right in front of me, and I was having a difficult time keeping my eyes on the laptop. When I suggested we go upstairs, she just looked over the top of her book and told me to buy us some more clothes, and that she wanted a pair of cowboy boots and a pair of purple Converse.

Immediately, my mind imagined her wearing nothing but a pair of cowboy boots. Add a nice Stetson to that, and she could ride …

*Oh, my fucking God.*

My mouth watered at the thought of her sinking down onto my lap, and if I didn't let go of the arms of the chair, I'd crush them.

Swallowing quickly, I said, "Uh … but I don't know what size boots, Darlin'."

Holding the book up in front of her face, she looked at me from the corner of her eye. "Buy three pairs of brown ones in different sizes. What doesn't fit we'll send back."

Hearing two sets of feet coming down the stairs, we paused to listen.

The front door swung open and we heard Peter's voice. "Me and Char are gonna run the lines."

"Right," I answered him quietly.

After they had gone, I turned back to Bella. "Are you sure you don't want to go upstairs?"

"I'm pretty sure," she said without even bothering to move the book from in front of her face.

"Are you mad at me?"

She peeked over the book. "You know I'm not. It's just that I know you were thinking about killing Peter again." She rolled her eyes and sighed. "You're always thinking about killing him. How can we practice fighting if every time he gets his hands on me you snarl, want to kill him, and scare the shit out of everybody?"

Blinking a few times, I really didn't have an answer to that. "I'll try not to kill Peter."

She wrinkled her nose at me. "Besides, there's things to do. When you're finished there, we'll go out back and clean up all the glass and broken deck rail pieces. Probably about time to fix that door, too. Maybe Emmett can fix it tomorrow … er, later today." She frowned slightly. "That's the second time I've broken that railing. Maybe we should just put some stairs there instead."

"Yes, my love." I grinned up at her.

She grinned saucily back. "After we clean that up, then I think there's some laundry to do. Folding clothes is good practice for me." She promptly stuck her nose back in her cardboard book. It had a puppy on the cover. "We should change the sheets on our bed, too."

"But I like our scents on the bed." I lowered my voice and purred. "We could go put some more of our scent on the sheets right now."
She peeked over the top of her book again and loudly cleared her throat. "We need to run the vacuum, too. I think I can do that without breaking it. Er, maybe." Her eyes dropped back to the book. "After we do all that, we can go weed the gardens and maybe clear out a spot so Emmett has a place to make fire before we go back out to train some more. Maybe later we could burn the broken pickets and boards."

"They're pressure treated — poison, but we could burn them. The smoke won't hurt us."

"Oh. I didn't know they were poisonous. Never mind. We'll put them wherever Emmett put the other ones. We'll have to take them to the landfill. Is there a landfill around here?"

"I imagine there is," I said, sighing in disappointment.

My woman was a cruel slave driver. Evidently, she was going to keep me busy with everything except going upstairs and re-scenting the sheets.

-oOoOo-

The next training session went without incident until we were a few hours in. We'd gone a few miles northeast to take advantage of a treeless area. I had thought it would be good to work out in different types of terrain. Scrambling across dusty, rock-strewn cliffs would be quite a bit different from leaping through pine trees.

Once again, the stony, dry environment stirred memories of my time with Maria. I forced them away.

Bella was enjoying hopping around the craggy cliffs, if the volume of her gloating hoots was any indication, until Charlotte caught me staring dazedly at Bella in the moonlight. Bella broke Rosalie's hold, tossed her away, and bounded gracefully over a crevasse. To say I was merely distracted by her graceful form would have been an understatement. With deadly silence, Charlotte was on my back, her legs locked around my waist, hands gripping either side of my head, and her teeth at the back of my neck. She could have easily torn my head off.

I was twisting around, reaching to grab her forearms, when I felt a blast of furious jealousy from Bella. All I managed to get out was, "Char, look out. Here she — "

Bella struck before I could turn back to face her.

All three of us tumbled across the ground, churning up a huge cloud of dust. The next thing I knew, Charlotte was gone from my back, and I heard her hissing. Bella was growling, and Peter was yelling from somewhere up the hill, "Dammit, Bubba!"

After rolling to my feet and crouching beside Bella and Charlotte, I realized I couldn't feel Bella's anger or jealousy anymore.

I had to admit, Bella had Charlotte in a good hold. They were on their knees, and Bella was behind Charlotte, her lower legs holding Charlotte's calves down to the ground. Her teeth were sunk into Charlotte's arm just below the curve of her right shoulder so Charlotte couldn't reach to bite her. Bella had hold of each of her wrists and was holding her arms out away from her body. With Bella's superior newborn strength, there was no way Charlotte could get out of that. I didn't think Emmett would have been able to — though he probably would have fallen over backwards on her. I wondered why Charlotte hadn't.

I tried to hit them with a cocktail of apathy, utter boredom, and a sense of aversion, but it bounced right back to me. Bella had made her shield strong enough to block any influence from me.
Peter suddenly drew even with my right side, and I threw my arm out to stop him from trying to grab either one of them.

"What the fuck, Jasper? She's bitin' my mate. Knock 'em the fuck out."

"I can't." I knelt in front of them and spoke softly but firmly. "Bella, look. I'm fine. Charlotte didn't hurt me or anything else. Let her go."

They were both growling.

"What the hell do ya mean, 'or anything else'?' Peter had crouched down beside me.

I glanced at Peter from the corner of my eye. "She was jealous."

Emmett walked up slowly on my left. "Our Belly-welly seems a little fussy."

"Fussy?" Charlotte exclaimed. "She's bein' downright cranky!" She snapped her teeth together and hissed again. "It hurts like a bitch, Jasper! I can feel her venom goin' up into my shoulder."

"Yeah," Emmett added. "It's runnin' down your arm, too. She's droolin' like a dog at a butcher shop." Then he crossed his arms and propped his chin in his right hand. "Well, look at the bright side, Bells ..." He extended his hand, fingers spread wide. "You got a full set now. You've bitten everybody here. Though maybe you oughta bite us all in the same place so we match. It'd be like our club symbol."

Rosalie had joined us. "Emmett!"

Bella snatched her teeth from Charlotte's arm. "Shut the hell up, Emmett, or I'll — "

My left hand shot forward, and I grabbed her jaw, thankful her shield wasn't at full strength, or I wouldn't have been able to touch her. I spoke to her in a low, smooth voice. "Darlin', please let Charlotte go. I think we need to go hunt."

As soon as Charlotte was free of Bella, Peter snatched up his mate and pushed her ragged sleeve up over her shoulder to examine the fresh bite. He wiped away the superfluous venom and began kissing her arm. "You're okay, sugar. It's not too bad. It's just that venom pours outta Bubba like a fountain. She slimed ya." He rolled his eyes at Bella while he dragged his hand across his jeans to remove the excess. He licked over the bite, kissed Charlotte's cheek and repeated his actions.

I started to stand up, gently urging Bella to follow me. "It's all right." I looked into her deep black eyes. Even wildly jealous, she was beautiful. Maybe even more so with her tangled hair and shining eyes. She looked fierce. It was entrancing.

Her breaths were slowing as she watched me, and the shining black in her eyes was gradually lightening. The agitated whirl of her emotions had nearly settled into their usual soft hum, when guilt bubbled up over the edges.

"Charlotte, I'm so sorry!" Bella was filled with remorse.
I took my hands from her face and pulled her into my chest, kissing the top of her head. "Bella …" I began, but she interrupted me.

"I was jealous, but that's no excuse for biting her! I was fine, and then I … wasn't," she finished weakly. She leaned into me. "I saw Charlotte on you, and it … it just went blam in my head, and I had to get her off you." She turned toward Charlotte. "I am sorry, Charlotte. I didn't even think about biting you — it just happened."

Charlotte peeked around Peter's arm. "Bella, I know how it is. I do understand. I was a newborn once. It's a wonder we don't go crazy with all the … turmoil in our heads." She nodded slightly as she said, "Sometimes I forget you're still a brand new vampire and … well, things are so different here than they were the last time I dealt with 'em." Charlotte gave Bella a small smile. "But I'm thinkin' maybe ya'll should go catch ya some Bambi."

Bella stepped back from me, lowered her head, and looked up at Charlotte. Embarrassment joined her guilt. "I … I am a little thirsty. I should have noticed. I should have realized … I mean, I know you're mated to Peter, and you wouldn't … You were on Jasper's back, and I just thought … Well, I wasn't thinking." Bella backed farther from me and squeezed her eyes closed. Her hands formed into fists, and she held them rigidly at her sides.

"Bella," Charlotte said softly. "Don't be mad at yourself. It's not your fault. The first time you attacked Peter … or was that the second time?" She brought a finger to her mouth in thought. "No, I think that was all part of the same time, but anyway, when you bit Peter the first time, I was so mad I coulda eaten you up and spit you out."

Peter's chuckle rumbled low in his chest, and he wrapped his arms more tightly around Charlotte. "She woulda done it, too."

Bella just nodded her head in agreement and glanced up, her eyes moving over everyone. "I keep trying to control myself." Her fists uncurled, and she roughly brushed her hair out of her face. "I am thirsty."

I reached for her and slid my fingertips down her arm. "Yes, Darlin', we should hunt."

Her eyes snapped up to my face, and as I watched them, the dark red filled again with the shining, liquid black. She took another step away from me. "Yes." Her eyes met mine. "Hunt."

The very corners of her lips turned upward, and she took yet another step back, holding my gaze with hers. A low, throbbing purr began in her chest, and she took another step.

The shift in Bella's moods from enraged jealousy, to mortification, to coquettish was dizzying.

But I liked it.

From the corner of my eye, I took note that Peter and Charlotte started moving away. On my left, I heard Emmett and Rosalie shuffling quietly back away from us.

"What the hell do you call that noise?" Emmett asked, clearly puzzled.

"Foreplay?" Rosalie said innocently.


"Yeah. They're still a newly mated pair." Charlotte's voice sounded distant.
I was barely aware of the words they spoke, because Bella's crooning purr pulsedated into my center — calling to me, urging me, enticing me. I'd never heard a sound like it before. It vibrated through my skin and down through my bones. It pulled and tugged at me. I took a step toward her and saw the deep black of her eyes shift to a glittering obsidian. Like Pavlov's dog salivating at the chime of a bell, when I saw Bella's eyes harden, venom pooled in my mouth and a blazing heat spread through my groin; which, when I thought about it, was odd because we were the epitome of cold-blooded creatures; but … who fucking cared?

Bella dipped her head, keeping her eyes on me. "Jassssper," she hissed. "Hunt?"

Almost faster than I could detect, Bella spun and disappeared into the night. Some part of my mind registered the fact that the rest of them had gone, but I couldn't recall exactly when it was they had left. I really didn't give a shit. I just wanted my mate.

I took off, following her to the west.

-oOoOo-

After re-entering the forest, Bella had scented and silently tracked a small herd of whitetails through the dark forest. I trailed after her. Like before, her emotions were whirling, but instead of anger and jealousy, there was need and there was anticipation. She was on the hunt, she was focused, and she needed. She disappeared over a small ridge, and by the time I caught up with her, she had waylaid four young bucks, scattering the rest of the herd.

I stood, transfixed, watching my savage mate drain her first kill, my dick growing harder with each of her swallows. When she couldn't pull any more blood from him, she angrily threw his limp body aside and eagerly snatched up the second, still ravenously thirsty. She growled in warning when she spotted me, but when I returned her growl, hers shifted back into that bewitching purr.

All I desired was to get my hands on her smooth skin, rip her clothes off, and fuck her, but I still didn't approach her, wanting her to drink her fill. She soon finished with the second deer and tossed him aside. She jumped toward the last two young bucks and cocked her head as she studied them. She hefted one and darted toward me, offering him to me, purring seductively and at the same time feeling a mix of care and concern. She wanted to provide for me. Though normally, I could have waited another couple of weeks to feed, it was unheard of for a newborn to share. There was no way I would turn her down. Not even if I had just fed on an entire herd.

Bella's thirst surged into me, setting my throat aflame. Battling to control the speed of my movements, I reached cautiously forward to take the deer. She had brought one that still had a sluggish heartbeat.

As I lowered my mouth to his throat, Bella felt a small thrill of accomplishment and turned away to the last remaining buck. Had she projected a sense of thirst to me on purpose?

She clutched the deer to her chest and snarled as she bit into him and drank greedily. She finished before I did and then was behind me, her hands flat on my back. Her firm touch slid down from my shoulders and around my waist. Her trills grew louder and then modulated into a deep growl. I drained the deer and shoved him from me, but before I could turn around to capture her in my arms, she pressed her body to my back and her hands worked their way under my shirt.

I sighed in pleasure, at last feeling her hands on my skin, but I had to make sure she was satisfied. "Did you want to hunt some more?" I asked quietly over my shoulder.

"No." Her hands advanced up my stomach. "I like this shirt. I like black on you. Take it off."
I quickly obeyed while she stayed behind me. As soon as the shirt was gone, she was pressed up against my back again, her lips drawing scorching trails over my skin. "I love you, Jasper. I want you."

Hearing that, another surge of sensuous need coursed through me, and I started to turn toward her again, but she held me still. "Bella, I want to touch you." I put my hands over hers.

She purred again, her lips pressed against my shoulder blade, and her hands started to slide down my stomach. My breath caught as they rippled over my belt and down. I could feel the throb of those erotic sounds though my back.

"Bella …" I ached to pull her body to mine. Why was she behind me, teasing me?

"I love the way you smell," she whispered, and her breath tickled my skin. Her tongue was on my back, licking over one of the many scars there. "You taste even better than you smell."

Then, with my hands over hers, her fingers ghosted lightly over the bulge of my hard dick in my jeans, and I gasped. When she squeezed, I groaned and my grip tightened over hers. I pushed against her hand. "Bella, please."

She nipped me, and then her lust flowed over and through me, sending my own even higher. She must have been holding back from me. More teasing?

As I moaned, she squeezed my dick again, and her hand slid up its length. "Now, I want …"

"What?" My chin dropped to my chest, which was heaving with my slow, deep breaths, pulling in as much of the scent of my mate as possible. The sight of her hands on me was so erotic. "What do you want? You know I'll do it."

"I want you to … catch me!" She yanked her hands from my body, and she was gone, leaving me gasping at the loss of her touch.

My little hellcat was not only cruel, she was pure evil.

-oOoOo-

With a raging hard-on, it wasn't easy running and trying to catch a newborn, but I did it. I finally caught her at the edge of the clearing around our house.

She shrieked as I yanked her to me and held her arms down across her chest. "Why must you run?" My dick had calmed down during the chase, but it was back at full mast, and I shoved it against her ass. My nose was buried in her hair at the back of her neck so I could breathe in more of her scent. The aroma of her arousal was already driving me insane.

"You like it." She forced her head back against my shoulder. "Did you bring your shirt?"

"Nope." I released her arms. I slid my left hand up her stomach to massage her breast. "What I like is the catchin' part. Do you want me to make love to you here or in our room?" My right hand traveled down and slid to her heat. I didn't care where we were; all I cared about was getting rid of her clothes.

She moaned and squirmed against me, her ass pressing deliciously against my dick. I unbuttoned her jeans and slid down the zipper. I worked my hand under the waistband of her panties and slid my fingers home. She was so ready for me, I started drooling again. I needed to be inside her. I needed to taste her.
"We don't know where everybody is," she said, panting. "They might come outside."

"Doesn't matter where they are. They won't be in our room." I scooped her up in my arms and ran for the house. I did stop just long enough to open the door, step inside, and close it gently. Then I bolted up the stairs to our room and kicked the door shut. I couldn't sense Emmett and Rosalie, but Peter and Charlotte seemed to be watching TV.

I had her clothes off in an instant, and then had her on her back on our bed.

"But I'm dirty," she complained as she tried to scoot away from me.

"I fuckin' hope so." I held her down and dove for the soft curls of her sex. One long, slow lick, and she was squirming again, her hands reaching for my head.

"Oh … oh, yes." Her hands fist ed in my hair and tried to pull me even closer.

I kicked off my boots and peeled off my jeans one handed. It wasn't easy.

Her legs drew up, and she started squeezing my head with her thighs.

"Darlin', you're gonna crush me. Put this leg down." I pushed down on her left knee and began licking and nibbling the silky skin of her thigh.

"Don't stop. Why'd you stop?" she whined.

"I just got started."

-oOoOo-

I had to admit it: I was pouting. Along about sunup, Bella had decided it was time for a bath, but she still wouldn't let me in the tub with her. She said we would break it.

She had a point.

We would have to remodel that bathroom as soon as possible to put in a bigger bathtub. Esme would love to help with that. I could send her the measurements and a sketch of a floor plan, and she could get started on a design. The bathroom was a lot wider than it was deep, but I wouldn't mind losing the closet on the right.

While Bella was in the tub listening to the iPod, I decided it would be a good time to finally change the sheets on the bed. They were thoroughly saturated with our scents and venom, which I fucking loved, but the smears of deer blood and the dirt and pine needles had to go.

I was studying the sheets, relieved we hadn't ripped them, but trying to decide if it was worth attempting to get the blood out, when the front door opened and slammed shut.

Emmett and Rosalie must have come home.

"Bella, Emmett's home. I'm gonna go talk to him and Rose for a bit, okay?"

"Okay. I'll just be here in the tub!" she chuckled.

"I know." I couldn't help smiling. "If you need anything, just yell." I yanked on a clean pair of jeans and pulled on a grey T-shirt, gathered up our dirty clothes that had been thrown all over the room, and headed downstairs.
Rosalie and Emmett were in the family room.

"Jazz, it's just beautiful here. I hadn't seen the whole territory yet, and running through last night was really something." Rosalie smiled at me as I walked through to head for the laundry room past the kitchen. "One of these days, you'll have to show me where the actual property lines are."

Emmett followed me through the kitchen. "What's with the blood on the sheets, Jazz? Gettin' a little kinky with Bells?" He waggled his eyebrows at me.

"No." In the laundry room, I spread the bottom sheet out over the washer and dryer and started spraying it with the pre-treatment. "When we got back last night, we still had blood on us. We're gonna need some more of this shit." I shook the nearly empty bottle.

Emmett was leaning against the doorframe. "Yeah, we go through a lot more of that since Bella became a vampire. Should buy it by the fifty-five-gallon drum."

Rosalie came up behind him. "And that's even after we've thrown away the clothes she's destroyed."

I had to agree with them. "So, how's it look out there?"

"Just beautiful, like I said." Rosalie leaned against Emmett's arm. "It's been nice not being rained on all the time, though I've caught myself missing the clouds. It would also be nice to go to town once in a while."

I stuffed the sheets in the washer, turned it on, and followed Rosalie and Emmett to the kitchen. Peter had appeared and was sitting at the island, playing with the Tinker Toys.

Emmett pulled out a stool and dropped his bulk onto it. "Besides all that natural beauty and shit, we didn't see or smell any sign of any other vamps." He grabbed a handful of the brightly colored sticks and wheels and started putting them together.

"Good." I sat down next to him. "I can't figure out why Demetri would be here. I can see that he might show up in Forks to check up on the Cullens, but we drove here. We didn't leave a trail."

Peter was adding more pieces to what looked like a spider. "You know that sumbitch crossed over the line to let us know he'd been around. The Volturi are arrogant bastards." He added a few more sticks to lengthen the legs. "Are ya sure he hasn't been close enough to any of ya to get a fix on ya?"

Rosalie walked around the island and sat next to Peter. "Emmett and I haven't ever met him. Only Carlisle, Edward, and Alice have been near him." She frowned as she looked over Peter's creation. "What is that?"

"It's the spider thing they rode on in the Wild Wild West movie."

I shook my head and looked at Emmett's … I didn't know what it was. "We'd always heard that the Volturi kept an eye on Mexico after they cleaned it out, but I never caught a whiff of them while I was with Maria. If he didn't come within my range, he wouldn't have been close enough to me, Peter, or Char." I realized she was missing. "Where is Charlotte?"

Peter started taking apart his not-quite-steampunk spider-mobile. "She went to see Bubba. Girl talk and shit." He dropped the pieces back into the can. "Char feels bad because she made Bella bite her."

I blew out a breath in exasperation. "She didn't make Bella bite her, for Christ's sake. She knows how newborns are. Like she said, at times it's easy to forget Bella is still a brand new vampire. She's
a lot calmer than the ones we had to deal with."

"Calmer? Are you kiddin'?" Emmett added a few pieces to his whatever it was. "She's bitten the shit out of everybody that's gotten near her." He rolled his eyes. "Except Carlisle."

Rosalie leaned forward over the countertop. "Em, she didn't exactly bite Alice."

"You're right. She didn't bite 'er, she clawed 'er up."

Bella had managed to mark everybody; it couldn't be denied. I shrugged and looked again at the thing Emmett was fooling with. I just could not figure out what the hell it was supposed to be. "What is that?"

"Fred Flintstone's car."

It was about that time that we heard mischievous giggles and chuckles from upstairs.

Peter looked up toward the ceiling in the family room. "Ahhhhh. See? All kissed and made up."

I could feel Charlotte's and Bella's relieved and happy emotions, but the conspiratorial laughter made me wonder what else was going on. Hovering underneath, there was a definite seed of familial love very like what Bella felt for Rosalie. I found I was pleased that all of our coven-mates got along, seemed to fit together, and in Bella's case, loved everyone. I wasn't sure what Peter's feelings were for everyone. He played those cards very close to his vest, but I knew he didn't hate them. He and Emmett got along well and even seemed to like each other, though Emmett was a lot like Bella in that he was usually willing to give everyone a chance. Emmett had always liked Peter. I turned toward him, "Compared to the newborns I dealt with, she's quite a bit calmer and much better controlled. It helps a lot to keep her busy and fed."

Peter winked at me. "I know you'd like to keep her busier."

I just raised one eyebrow at him. Keeping my beautiful, sexy mate as busy as possible was a goal.

Peter turned to look over his shoulder out the shiny, new sliding glass door. The sun was breaking over the treetops. "Me and Em ordered materials for Bubba's greenhouse, and I ordered some parts for my truck. We gotta go to Casper to pick it all up. Take about three hours to get over there, so it'll take all day." He turned back to me. "Tomorrow good? Supposed to be cloudy, though we won't be gettin' any rain."

"Tomorrow's good with me. Rose, are you goin'?"

"No, actually, I thought I would start painting my room. Peter bought plenty of paint." She smiled at him. "But if you and Bella want to train some more, that would be fine."

"Since it'll be cloudy tomorrow, we might patrol the perimeter during the day. She'll probably want to mess around in her gardens. They'll need water."

We heard Charlotte coming down the stairs, and when she came through the doorway to the kitchen, she had the biggest shit-eatin' grin on her face.

"Jasper, Bella's out of the tub," she said in a sing-song voice. She patted my shoulder as she went past me to go to Peter.

She was definitely up to something. Then I heard a thump upstairs, and Bella called to me.
Not wanting to make her wait any longer than she had to, I bolted for the stairs.

"He is so whipped," I heard Emmett say through a laugh.

I heard what sounded like Peter slapping his hands together. "Let's go ride the ATVs through the woods. We won't be seein' either one of them for the rest of the day. Or night."

I was curious, but not enough to go back and ask them what they were talking about.

I rounded the wall at the top of the stairs and headed for our room. I wondered if there was something in particular that Bella would like to do.

"Bella," I called to her before opening the door to our room. I stepped inside and looked for her.

She took a hesitant step out of the short hallway to the bathroom, and my jaw just about fell to the floor. My stunning mate was dressed in only a sage green towel and my tan cowboy hat, and that was so fucking sexy I could have just died — again — right there.

I was struck stupid and dumb, and stood there staring at her for so long she became uncomfortable and started to fidget.

She dipped her head and was picking at her fingers. "Um, Char said she would let you help me get dressed, though I'm getting a lot better at it, and then she said I should try on your hat. She thought it was really cute and said I should show you." She glanced up at me and back down to her hands. "But if you don't want me to wear it, that's okay. I'll just put it back in the closet."

"N-no," I managed to choke out as I raised a hand toward her. "I don't mind. I, uh, don't mind at all." I pushed the door closed behind me and took a step toward her. "I like it. I fuckin' love it." It was a little big for her, but she was so fucking adorable and sexy, and … I'd have to tell Peter to pick up a few when he went over to Casper.

And boots. She had to have boots.

"You do?" She gave me a tentative smile.

"Fuck, yes," I growled out. I grabbed her and crushed her body to mine. "Little girl, you can ride me all day and all night." I darted to the bed and growled again as I pulled the towel from her. "Leave your hat on."

Chapter End Notes

"Two men enter. One man leaves." ~ Aunty Entity in Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome.


"Do, or do not. There is no try." ~ Yoda in The Empire Strikes Back.

"Show me … wax on, wax off." ~ Mr. Miyagi to Daniel in The Karate Kid with Pat
Morita and Ralph Macchio.

"Leave your hat on." – from the song "You Can Leave Your Hat On" by Joe Cocker from the album Cocker.

"…sand the floor" and "…paint the fence" from the Karate Kid with Pat Morita and Ralph Macchio.
Chapter 50, I Discover

Jasper's POV

I fucking loved my Stetson on Bella. I loved when she wasn't wearing it, and I loved it when she was wearing it and it fell off. Or I knocked it off her.

Hours of moans and gasps, growls and purrs; soaring to mind-numbing bliss and back — all because of a little thing like a hat.

I had never seen anything more erotic than my beautiful mate wearing my hat. Of course, I'd seen women wearing cowboy hats. I'd seen female vampires wearing them. None of them had ever affected me like Bella. Even if that was only due to our mating bond, I didn't care. I fucking loved it.

In Bella's arms, in our bed, I was in Heaven. Her feminine form was curled over my body, cradling me in her love, contentment, and happiness.

In my century-and-a-half of existence, I had never known such peace, such satisfaction.

Such love.

She was nestled under my arm, her head resting on my chest, with a single finger tracing one of the thick scars down my abdomen.

"Why is this one so thick?" She turned her head just enough to look up at me. "Peter has scars like it." Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. "I mean, uh, if you … um, if you don't want to tell me,
that's okay." Embarrassed, she closed her eyes. "Probably not a good time to bring up Peter. Why can't I keep my mouth shut?" She groaned.

Hugging her to me and kissing her forehead, I pushed myself up a little higher against the pillows propped against the headboard. "It's okay. Don't be embarrassed. You can ask me anything." I kissed her forehead again. "He does have scars like mine." Steeling myself against the memories that threatened to intrude on our tranquility, I breathed in her soothing scent. No one calmed and centered me like Bella. "Maria. She cut us with her teeth. Over and over again to make it thicker and wider."

"Oh," Bella sat up, her long hair falling over her shoulders, and her face displaying her instant distress and anguish. Her left hand was braced against the mattress, and her right spread over my stomach, trying to cover the scar.

It was too long and ragged for her small hand to cover.

"I'm sorry, Jasper. I didn't mean to bring that up. I mean, I didn't mean to remind you about … uh, I'm really sorry." She dropped her head, feeling shame and at the same time sorrow. "I just wasn't thinking. Of course, every scar would be a bad memory for you and … God, I'm such a jerk!"

She started to turn away from me, and I caught her hand and brought it to my lips. "Pretty girl, don't turn away from me. Like I said, you can ask me anything. Never be afraid to ask. You're not a jerk." I kissed the palm of her hand. "Not every scar has a bad memory attached." I slowly moved her hand to place it over the scars of her claiming bites on my neck and shoulder. "These represent the happiest moment of my entire existence — when you made me yours. These show that you accept and love me, regardless of the things I've done. In spite of the things I've done."

Her bright red eyes sparkled with remorse and unshed tears as they peered into mine.

"Bella." I slid my hand up her back and pulled her toward me. My lips brushed over hers. "Before, I was always ashamed of them because I thought they showed everyone what a depraved monster I was, though it didn't keep me from using them to intimidate others. But then I found you, and you saw them. You weren't afraid. You know what they mean, and you love me anyway."

"I do. I do love you. So much." She kissed the corner of my mouth and her arm went around my chest. "Why did she do that?"

"To keep us in line. Show her power over us."

"Why didn't you fight her?"

"Her first words to me were 'You belong to me now.' She told me that's how it was, and I believed her. I was going crazy feeling all those emotions around me. I didn't understand anything that was going on, and I didn't know any different." I sighed and held Bella to me. "Because I thought I deserved it."

"You, er, I …" Bella's mouth opened and closed several times as she stammered. "You never deserved that!" Her arm tightened around me. "I can't know, but I think I have an idea. It's not nearly the same, but Edward treated me like … Everything he did made me feel smaller and smaller and worth less and less. I felt privileged to be in his presence. I never thought I was good enough because he kept trying to change me, and …" Indignation welled up. "How could she do that to you?"

Then her love poured into me; drenching me, filling me, and I gasped at the strength of it.

She cupped my jaw, and her eyes looked steadily into mine. "Jasper, they were never good enough. They made us feel small so that they could feel big. We were vulnerable and overwhelmed, and they
took advantage and manipulated us." She quickly kissed me. "They found us at weak moments, but something in us was stronger than them, and we fought back."

"Bella — "

"Jasper, I'm proud of your mating bites on me, and I want everybody to see them. To me, my mating bites on you are beautiful. All of you is beautiful to me." Her hand caressed my cheek and slid down my neck and across my chest to my shoulder. "Every mark on you shows how strong you are. How hard you fought to stay alive and win. If you hadn't, I wouldn't have found you." Both hands were gripping my shoulders, and she threw her right leg over me to straddle my thighs. "We made it … you made it through all that to me, and I love you so much! No one will ever do that to you again!"

She had been getting more excited and speaking more quickly, and then her mouth crashed onto mine. I was lost in her again as her tongue slipped between my lips, and I tasted our combined essences of cinnamon, pipe tobacco, nutmeg, and leather. Our scents had been so intertwined it would be difficult to tell one from the other.

My arms went around her, and I held the back of her head as I rolled so that I was on top of her. Her legs slipped urgently over my hips and down each of my thighs, and she pushed her hips to mine. Her desire for me radiated out and warmed me to the center of my body, and I instantly needed to connect with her, join with her.

I slid the head of my dick along her sex, feeling how very ready for me she was; how much she wanted me. No one had ever expressed that depth of want and need for me, and I loved her more than I could even verbalize.

"I love you — my woman, my mate." My right hand glided down her side to her hip, and I held her as I slowly entered her, sinking into her slick heat. I marveled again at how warm she would feel to me whenever we made love. I pulled my lips from her and guided my tongue along her ear. "I made it to you. I survived Maria so that I could find you." I breathed across her ear. "Every cut and slice — everything that I've been through brought me that much closer to you." I pulled back from her and thrust deeply into her, making us both gasp with the exquisite sensations. "Everything that has ever been done to me has made me appreciate you. Only you, Bella. Only you. Always you." I was so swept up in the feelings of being inside her, her hands on my body, her lips on my skin, her love flowing through me, I could barely speak, but I had to try and tell her how much I needed her — how much I loved her for who she was. How much I loved the way she wanted to protect me and care for me. No one had ever felt that way about me, and it seemed as though my heart melted then, and I fell in love with her again. I was with her and would do anything to always be with her.

She moaned against my throat as I slid into her again and again. "Jasper, I'm so glad you fought to live. I'm so glad you found me." Her soft lips trailed up the side of my neck. "I love you. So much."

And I knew she loved me. She filled me. She fulfilled me. All the years I'd lived, all the miles I'd walked; they all led to her. It had all been worth it.

-oOoOo-

We'd heard Peter and Emmett leave in my truck about seven o'clock, and a while later Bella had suggested that we had been in bed long enough.

"Why? Don't you like being in bed with me?" I asked. She was draped across my body, and I
brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Though I might have to hunt again."

Her fingers trailed down over my chest and down the center of my stomach. "Yes, I do like being in bed with you." Her fingers stopped at my belly button. "Why would you need to hunt again? We just did yesterday, right?"

"I guess, technically, it was yesterday, but it was about midnight on Monday. Today is Wednesday, Darlin'."

"It is?" Bewildered, she sat up. "When the hell am I going to get the time sense like you guys have? I never know what day it is!" She frowned. "Hell! You always know what time it is without even looking. What time is it?" She looked around the room. "I never noticed there aren't any clocks in here."

"It's about nine o'clock. Peter and Emmett left about seven. Rose started painting the trim in her room about seven thirty, and Char started workin' on her jewelry stuff about the same time." I brushed my fingers over her cheek. "Peter should reach Casper in about another hour if they follow the speed limit. Otherwise, they might be there already."

"I heard all that. You know, I haven't even looked at Char's jewelry yet." She leaned over and kissed my belly button, sending a pleasurable shiver through me. "Why would you need to hunt again? Didn't you say you could go like three to four weeks?"

"Massive loss of venom." I smirked at her.

"Loss of venom? How did you lose …" Her eyes opened wide, and she stared at me, embarrassed. I quirked an eyebrow at her. "That's right, my lover." I moved the tips of my fingers under her chin. "Every time I come, it's a loss of venom." I grasped her jaw and drew her to me. "Nobody does to me what you do. I come so much and so hard," I kissed her sweet lips, "I've needed to hunt a bit more to replace the venom I've lost." I captured her face and kissed her. "Where's the hat?"

"Uh, hat?" She backed away from me. "I don't know where the hat is?"

I slid my hand down her arm and wrapped my fingers around her wrist. "I like that hat on you. I should have told Peter to pick up a few for you in Casper." I lifted her hand and licked her fingers. "I'm ready to lose some more venom."

"Um, we should take advantage of the cloudy day and run the perimeter," she said matter-of-factly, reminding me of my own words. She slid her free hand over my hip and down my thigh. As her palm reached my knee, she bent over and kissed my hip, her deep red eyes watching me.

My breath caught with the sight of her lips so close to my rapidly stiffening dick. Her pale pink tongue flicked out and touched the skin over my hipbone, sending a jolt of electricity through me. As I sucked in a breath, she yanked her hand from mine and scrambled from the bed, heading for the closets, a definite sense of mischief left in her wake.

"Oh, little girl." I inhaled deeply and blew it out. "That was … just downright mean." I leapt off the bed, and she squealed when I cornered her in her closet. "Bella, that was uncalled for." I stepped closer to her, my eyes traveling over her naked curves and her breasts hidden by her hair. Her eyes dropped to my hard dick, and she gulped. Her eyes flicked back up to mine. "We need to run the perimeter, Major." She cleared her throat and reached for a T-shirt on the shelf to her side, then reached slowly for a pair of those boy shorts I liked so well. "We have responsibilities, you know." She turned her back to me. "We need to get dressed."
I darted forward, caught her around her waist and pressed my aching dick against her ass. My right hand slid up her belly to her right breast and squeezed it gently, teasing her stiffening nipple with my fingertips. I pressed my jaw against hers, forcing her head to my shoulder. "Maybe we *should* get dressed." I placed my teeth over my mating bite, and slid my left hand down to her slick folds. "Yessssss." I kissed her by her ear. "We really should get some clothes on."

My fingers slid to her clitoris, and I gently circled it while I kissed and sucked at her neck.

She dropped the clothes she was holding and was panting and pushing her ass against me. I shifted my position enough to slide my dick in between her legs, and she groaned with her increasing lust, her eyes closing.

"What do you want, my cruel, cruel demon lover?" I slid my right hand to her left breast, holding her against me.

"Jasssssp," she hissed, arching her back and reaching forward to grab hold of a shelf.

The pace of my own breath was picking up as she responded to me. "Do you want to feel my dick inside you?" I rubbed her clitoris more quickly. She was so fucking wet. "Do you want me to fuck you until you come?"

She crushed the shelf she was holding into dust, groaned again, and pushed back against me.

I took that as a "yes."

I stooped just enough to ease the head of my dick to her entrance. "Bend over," I said, thickly.

When she did, I slid my dick into her, watching it disappear inside her, and she broke the next shelf down. She snatched her hands away and braced her hands against her knees.

Gentleman that I was, I moved her hair out of the way and clamped my right hand down over her shoulder to hold her as I began to thrust into her, curling over her back. "Oh, fuck. You are so good. So fuckin' good."

"F-faster," she said, panting. "Please, faster."

I couldn't form words; I could only moan against her neck, but I moved my fingers more quickly, bringing her closer to her orgasm as I pumped into her.

When I felt her muscles spasm and begin to tighten, I moaned into her ear. "I know you're gonna come. I can feel it. Come for me. I want to feel you tighten around my dick when you come. I love it when you come all over me."

And she did.

I grabbed her hips and shoved my dick into her as she moaned and groaned and squirmed against me. Her back arched, and she reached out to grab hold of something and broke out two more shelves.

The bursts of sensation from her ignited my own orgasm. My mind was stunned by the force of it — I couldn't even fucking see — and I threw my head back and growled as my balls pumped my venom into her.

"Oh, oh, oh, my God, Bella," I gasped out as I bent forward over her, wrapping my arms around her and holding her to my body. "Oh, fuck, I love you."
Her hands slid over my arms, giving them a gentle squeeze before pushing them away. She wiggled away from me, my dick slid out of her, and the shock of pleasure I felt from that made my legs go weak.

She pushed me upright and was holding me and kissing my throat. "Oh, Jasper. You … I love you. You make me feel so good. Every time, you make me feel so good." She kissed my lips. "But maybe we shouldn't do this in the closet."

-oOoOo-

We'd finally gotten dressed — I'd put on another black V-neck T-shirt because she liked them — and run the perimeter, leaving the clean-up of the broken shelves until we got back. Bella had done very well handling her clothing and not ripping anything, though it had taken her a while. She had to concentrate on her hands, but she had done it. She was improving quickly.

As we made our way counterclockwise around the boundary lines, Bella had kept a steady pace and every time I tried to distract her, she brushed my hands away. When I had trapped her against a rocky outcropping, she deftly broke my hold and raced away, laughing her ass off.

I had to admit, I was proud of my mate for learning how to block and escape a hold so well. The pride was mixed with no small amount of consternation, however. I couldn't seem to keep my hands off her, and she didn't have too much trouble removing them.

Though if she had brought the hat, I might have tried harder.

It was probably a good thing she'd left it at the house. We might not have made it all the way around in less than a day. Or two.

In spite of Bella having fun at my expense, it had been nice to see our territory in the daylight for a change. I had found myself missing the cloud cover of Forks for a few moments — being restricted to running the lines at night had been a bit of an inconvenience. But I couldn't deny I loved seeing my shimmering, gleaming mate in the bright sunlight. I'd never seen a more beautiful woman.

Even in the diffused light of the cloudy day, she had a soft glow that captivated me. Her deep purple T-shirt seemed to bring out the pink of her soft lips. Well, I thought any color looked good on her.

"C'mon, Jasper. Quit dawdling. We have to get back and clean up all those shelves I broke." She ran up to me and grabbed my hand. "Or you made me break." She smiled up at me.

I brought her hand to my lips. "I'd be happy to make you break the rest of the shelves."

"No, ya don't. We have to clean that up and measure for new ones. And isn't there some laundry in the dryer?" She sighed lightly. "Think I'd like to try reading a real book. I miss it."

"Yes, Darlin'." I kissed her hand again. "Try reading the comics. You haven't done that yet."

"Yeah, you're right! Let's go!"

With that, she was gone again.

-oOoOo-

After Bella had cleaned out the larger broken pieces of the shelves and run them out to the new fire
pit over toward the barn, she sat on the floor in the closet busily picking out every splinter, chip, and bit of wood she could find and dropping them in the little trash can from the bathroom. She was moving slowly so she wouldn't tear the carpet apart.

"I hate that I keep breaking things."

She looked up at me as I joined her from the other closet. Shelves from it would fit in hers. "Darlin', you really have nothing to worry about. You are doing so well." I knelt down beside her, took her right hand and kissed her knuckles. "You're doin' much better than any other newborn I've seen."

"But I have to concentrate so hard on my hands not to smash things. It's a wonder I haven't broken the bed!" She flung her left hand out.

I had to smile at her. "You haven't broken the bed or ripped the sheets because your hands have been on me." Trailing my fingers up her arm, I leaned closer to her. "You could put your hands on me now."

She snatched her hand away. "Would you stop? Jeez, Jasper. Weren't you talking about sending measurements to Esme? Go back in that other closet and measure it. Besides, I'm almost finished here and then I want to go look at Charlotte's jewelry. I haven't seen any yet." Bella leaned forward and picked some more tiny bits of wood out of the carpet. "She's been tapping and hammering since this morning."

From down the hall came Charlotte's voice. "You can come and look any time, Bella. Peter took some orders to mail out, but I've got plenty more I've been workin' on."

"Okay, Char!"

Chuckling, I kissed the top of Bella's head and stood up. As I turned away from her, my phone vibrated. I took it out of my pocket and flipped it open.

It was Peter. Since it was about one o'clock, they should have been on their way back, if they weren't already. I wondered if his truck had broken down. "Captain."

"Major, you're gonna have company."

I stiffened. "Human or vampire? How many?" Immediately, I wondered where Rosalie was. I needed to have her with Bella, Charlotte, and I. I sent my senses out, hoping she wasn't too far away. I thought she was near the barn.

"I don't know. Not many. Maybe one. Vampire."

"Hold." Pulling the phone away from my mouth, I called to Charlotte. "Charlotte, get Rose back here. She's at the barn, I think."

Hearing my tone of voice, she knew there wasn't time to ask questions. She barely made a sound as she dropped her tools and darted outside.

Bella was on her feet, her hands at her mouth, and her worried eyes on mine. I slid my arm around her, pulling her trembling body into my side, and asked Peter, "When?"

"Soon. Emmett and I can't get there before he shows up. Even if we left Casper right this second and ran, we wouldn't be able to intercept him. I think he'll be comin' in from the northwest."

"He? A male? A lone male?"
"All I can tell ya, Major, is I think it has somethin' to do with Bubba." He paused for a second. "Me and Em are runnin' back. It'll be a bitch because there's no trees to speak of. We'll leave the truck for now." Another pause and his voice dropped to a raspy whisper. "Jasper — my girls …"

"I'll take care of our girls. We'll stay inside for now. When you get here, you and Emmett split and come at the house from two different directions."

"Check."

"Right." I snapped my phone shut.

"Peter said he's looking for me?"

I couldn't help but see the fear in her eyes. I placed my hands on either side of my mate's face. "Bella, you have to stay as calm as you can. Remember there are four of us here. This is why we've worked with your shield and why we've been training. We'll shut the windows and close the curtains so he can't see in, then we'll go downstairs." I darted through the upstairs, checking windows and closing the curtains, then Bella and I went through the first floor, and I did the same.

As I drew her back into the family room, Charlotte and Rosalie returned.

"What's going on, Jasper?" Rosalie had a few grease smudges on her T-shirt and jeans, and was busily wiping her hands with an old towel.

I looked into each of their eyes. "Peter called and said we were going to have company. He didn't know when, but he and Emmett wouldn't be able to get here before the visitor arrived. They're running back. Probably take them two hours or a little less. He didn't know how many, but he said 'not many'. For now, we'll stay in the house. I'll try to feel them and determine how many there are."

"What if there's more than four?" Bella clutched at my shirt. "What are we going to do if there's more than that? What if they break into the house?"

"Bella, listen to me." I took hold of her chin and made her look into my eyes. "Darlin', I won't let anything happen to you. It could be just curious nomads passing through, but we've been that route before."

Rosalie gave me a rather sardonic look.

"That James nomad?" Charlotte asked. At my nod, she patted Bella's shoulder. "Bella, Carlisle isn't here to try and talk us into just talkin' if they seem like a threat. They can lie with their mouths, but they can't lie with their feelin's. And remember, you aren't a little human anymore."

"Right." I looked into Bella's eyes. "If I feel even a hint of any danger, I will drop him."

"But Jasper, what if …?"

"I can control up to about twenty-five. Probably more. In Maria's army, we never had more newborns than that at any one time. We didn't need them. Most other covens had up to about twenty. They're too hard to control." I hugged her to me. "You need to stay calm. You cannot run."

She nodded and leaned into my chest.

Charlotte peered up into my face. "Jasper, are you gonna show your scars? I could put on a tank top."
"No. The T-shirts show enough."

"What do you mean?" Rosalie asked.

"I used to take my shirt off so the other vampires would see more of my scars."

"It would scare the hell out of them," Charlotte said, nodding. "Half the time the battle was won before it even began."

"Sometimes," I admitted. "It was a good way to fuck with them. I didn't want to admit that, quite often, I used the scars to terrorize my enemies instead of my talent so that I could beat and tear at them. I'd been filled with so much anger and hate then, I wanted to fight and feel my hands on them, ripping them apart. I'd had nothing to lose so it hadn't mattered if I let them in close to me. It was more of a challenge if they fought back. It was part of the reason I had so many scars. But now I had something to fight for and protect — something to live for. I hugged Bella more tightly and kissed the top of her head.

Rosalie just nodded and looked anxiously toward the curtained windows.

"We don't know who it might be. It could be Demetri — it could be someone we've never met before. As soon as I sense him, I'll let you know." I took hold of Bella's arms and pushed her back far enough so that I could look into her eyes. "Bella, we'll go out onto the porch before he gets here. I want you on my left side." I turned to Charlotte. "I want you on Bella's left. Rosalie, I want you on my right. I want you all to stay close to me. He'll know how many of us are here, so there's no reason to try and hide anyone inside, though he might think the other male members of our coven are hiding."

"He'll probably think we can't fight at all," Rosalie interjected.

"Ah!" Charlotte raised her hand, pointing her finger upward. "We could do the harem thing. That throws 'em off."

"Harem? What are you talking about?" Bella's eyebrows drew together, and she was staring at Charlotte. "If it's Demetri, he knows who I am."

"But the Volturi think you're Edward's mate, so what are you doing with Jasper, right? It might not be him. If a strange male or two comes up to the house and sees Jasper with three females, it makes him look even more like a strong male. They'll think we're all Jasper's. That's where most male vamps' brains go anyway." A smirk spread across Charlotte's pretty face. "Won't even enter their minds that we can kick their asses."

Her cursing showed that Charlotte was getting into the fight and protect mindset.

"Wait a minute!" Bella threw her hands up and backed away from us. "Won't he smell Emmett and Peter?"

Charlotte planted her hand on her hip. "You haven't met many vampires, Bella. We're a big coven, and we're all mated. You don't know how unusual that is. Findin' a mate isn't exactly rare, but not every vamp has one. The strange vamp won't automatically think we have mates. Most males wouldn't leave their females behind with a male like Jasper, so he or they will think we belong to Jasper even though they smell other males. They might think Jasper sent the other ones away for a while."

"But …"
"It could work, Charlotte," I said, watching Bella. "Darlin', it would give me a reason to be touching Rosalie and Charlotte. That would keep them both in contact with your shield — if it's Demetri. We know he can't track you. Edward couldn't hear me, but we don't know if your shield will block Demetri from sensing me, and it'll protect Rosalie and Charlotte."

"Okay." Bella looked back and forth between all of us. "If it *is* Demetri, I don't want him to get his radar on you. What do you mean 'a male like Jasper'?"

"Well, look at him, Bella." Charlotte extended her hand toward me. "He's big and tall, he's good lookin', and the scars make him look like a badass. Remember how you reacted to my and Peter's scars?"

Huffing, Bella glanced up at me and then to Charlotte. "Jasper, you know I think you're beautiful, but … uh, aren't *all* vampires gorgeous?"

Rosalie cocked her head at Bella. "Like Charlotte said, you haven't seen a lot of vampires. Even though our looks can draw in practically any human, not all vampires are gorgeous. Even among us, Jasper is exceptionally handsome."

I was starting to get embarrassed, but before I could say anything, Rosalie sighed very loudly. She crossed her arms. "That harem idea would work better if Jasper's scent was on us."

Bella's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What do you mean?"

Charlotte grinned at her. "He has to rub his scent all over us and breathe on us. It would be even better if his venom was on us."

"Wha..? What the hell? Jasper!"

Bella looked up at me, and even if I wasn't able to feel it, it wasn't hard to tell she was starting to get mad. At least she wasn't scared anymore.

I held my hands up to her. "Darlin', I don't have to kiss 'em or lick 'em. I can lick my hands and wipe it on their clothes when I, uh … hug them."

"There's plenty of his venom on you," Rosalie said, just one corner of her mouth curving upward. "And don't think I *like* the idea of his venom on me. He's my brother. Besides that, it'll upset Emmett."

"It's better if it's on our skin." Charlotte volunteered, tapping her chin with a finger.

It was a good idea, and I didn't want Bella pissed off at me, but Charlotte was right. It would be better if my venom was on their skin.

Bella was getting annoyed and a sliver of jealousy was working its way through. "Are you guys screwing with me? Are you doing this to piss me off so I won't be scared?" Her hands had closed into fists. "Because if this is a joke …"

Charlotte placed her hand on Bella's trembling shoulder. "Bella, you know what a good sense of smell we have. It's not a joke — it would be more convincin' if Jasper's venom was directly on our skin. He can put it on our arms while he hugs us and breathes in our hair."

She held her hands rigidly at her sides, shut her eyes, and clenched her teeth. "I don't want him hugging you."
"It would be more like rubbing himself on us." Charlotte offered helpfully. Which really wasn't helping because Bella's anger was beginning to pulse off her even though she was struggling to control it.

It was not a good time for her to be getting possessive, jealous, and violent.

I caught hold of her chin with my left hand and forced her face up to mine. "Bella," I said firmly. Her eyes snapped open, and I could see they were darkening. "I'll use any advantage I have to keep you all safe." I stepped closer to her. "We can't assume the vampire coming here is Demetri. We can't assume he is friendly. We can't assume he is dangerous. We can't even assume there is only one. Like Charlotte said, you haven't met many vampires at all, and you don't understand how they are. You've known the Cullens, but they are unusual. Whoever it is will automatically think I'm the coven leader because I'm the male and because all of you defer to me whether you realize you're doing it or not." I took another small step toward her. "Since I am here alone with three females, most males will assume they are mine, and we don't want any strange males thinking I'll share. Putting my scent on Rosalie and Charlotte will help to protect them."

I could eliminate her objections by knocking her out while I put my scent all over Rosalie and Charlotte, but I didn't want to resort to that. I could appeal to the protectiveness she felt over them, and I wasn't above using what charm I could on her. Drawing her to me and keeping my eyes on hers, I slid my hand gently down her throat and over her shoulder. "This is what we are going to do. We'll put my scent on them both. Their scent will be on me. If you don't think you can stand to watch without getting upset, go in the kitchen where you can't see us."

Her eyes had widened and her emotions had calmed, though the jealousy and anger were still there. "But can't we go find him in the woods?"

Reaching for the sense of protection and responsibility I felt for her and all of them, I let it flow to her. "No. We don't know how many there are. We don't know where he or they are. We'll wait together for them to come here. I don't want any of us separated from the other. If it's Demetri, I want Charlotte, Rosalie, and I to be shielded from his gift for as long as possible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Jasper," she said in a breathy voice.

"Our coven is safer here, Bella." I slid the fingers of my right hand through her hair and tilted her head up. "We will work together to keep Charlotte and Rosalie safe for Peter and Emmett. We will do whatever we need to do." I kissed her, holding her lips to mine until she responded to me, and her arms went around my waist.

She ended our kiss and whispered against my lips, "Did you just dazzle me?"

"No, Darlin'. You would feel the difference. I'm your sire, your mate, and your coven leader. It was the tone of voice." I ran my fingers through her hair and down her back. "We've been given a warning about this visitor. Next time we may not have any. We'll handle whatever comes up."

"I'll, uh, go in the kitchen and straighten up the toys." She kissed me lightly and stepped back from me as I let her hair fall through my fingers.

Her emotions were smooth, and she was annoyed, but her jealousy had dropped down considerably. A feeling of possession and protectiveness were hovering over it all.

When I heard the first can rattle in the kitchen, I licked my hands and smirked at Rosalie, opening my arms wide.
She squeezed her eyes shut, grimaced, and stepped toward me. "Just get it over with you ass."

As I pulled her to me, applied my venom to her arms, and then hugged her tightly, I said, "it's not that bad, Rose. At least I smell good." I exhaled into her hair. "Put your arms around me. Rub my back. It's a hug, for Christ's sake."

I licked my fingers and smeared them across the back of her neck.

"Jasper!" she hissed.

"We must be thorough," I whispered into her ear. "Don't go in the kitchen. Bella's still agitated. She's doing well, but …"

A cupboard door slammed, and we could hear her grumbling.

"See? She didn't rip it off and throw it across the family room." I released Rosalie and turned to Charlotte.

She grinned up at me, her arms extended and fingers wiggling. "C'mere, oh exalted coven leader."

There was one in every crowd. I sighed heavily into Charlotte's hair as I slid my hands down her back.

-oOoOo-

Bella had pouted for a while and wouldn't look directly at me, but she wouldn't let go of me either. She kept sniffing me and rubbing her face against my chest as I stood in the middle of the living room.

"Darlin', of course their scents are on me." I ran my hand down over her head and back.

"You know I love them, but I don't like their scent on you."

"Bella, you don't have anything to worry about. How do you think Rose feels when your scent is all over Emmett?" I whispered in her ear.

"But that's different. He's like my brother. You know that." Then she ducked her head. "And Rose and Char are like your sisters." Her embarrassment trickled through. "I feel like such a jerk being jealous all the time. I can't help it."

"I know. It'll get better." I kissed her head. "Eventually."

"You're jealous of Peter a lot." She peeked up at me finally.

"And I can't help it. I expect it'll get better. Eventually." Then I stiffened as I felt another consciousness at the very edges of my range.

"What is it?" Bella clutched me more tightly.

Rosalie and Charlotte jumped up from their chairs, their eyes on me.

"He's coming. From the northwest like Peter said. I only feel one. He's curious. He's feeling anticipation, confidence." I kissed Bella's forehead and stepped toward the front door. "We'll wait for him on the porch."
They followed behind me, Bella's hand on my belt. Charlotte, as my strongest fighter, was bringing up the rear.

I pulled Bella to my left side. As Charlotte moved in beside her, Rosalie moved into my right side, and I wrapped my arm around her, pulling her against me. "Remember, Bella, for the time being we are pretending that you are all my women. Try not to get upset at anything the vampire might say. Don't react to what I might say or do." I knew he wasn't close yet, but I couldn't keep myself from testing the air and trying to pull his scent to me.

I could feel the tension building within me. An unknown male had come into my territory — was coming near my mate and my coven — and I definitely did not like it. Generally, vampires would go around such well-marked boundaries unless they were looking for news or gossip. They might even have news to share, but I didn't think that was it. The sound of Peter's voice when he had said "Jasper … my girls" told me he was worried. That could have been because he was away from his mate. But he had said "girls." Evidently, he felt more strongly for all of them than he had let on or I had been able to pick up on.

Rosalie was nervous, and Charlotte was determined. Bella began trembling again, and her fear and worry were working its way through to me.

I spoke very softly to her. "Bella, try not to be afraid. We are together, and we are all strong. I still feel only one."

"But what if there's another one that has a shield, and he's blocking you?"

Charlotte slipped her arm in between Bella and me and hugged her. "Bella, listen to me. Vampires with gifts are rare. The Cullens havin' so many in one coven is really unusual. Though ya gotta admit you all seem to draw 'em like flies." She chuckled and squeezed her. "Don't borrow trouble, sugar. If there was another vamp, and he had a shield of some sort, he would be hidin' the other guy, too."

"That's right, Darlin'." I kissed her head again. "Mostly, we'll play it by ear, but we'll appear to be all together. He'll see that you're a newborn, but I want you to act … confident, like Rose."

"Like the first time I met her and she was being all Ice Queen Head Bitch?" Bella whispered into my side.

"Hey! Thanks a lot, Bella." Rosalie complained, laughing. "I'm just very self-assured, like Jasper said." She reached around in front of me and smacked Bella on the shoulder.

When Bella started to reach for her, I tightened my grip on them both. "Cut it out. Confidence is good. Don't get cocky."

That bit of tension had been broken and Bella had been distracted from her fear, giving her a chance to contain it. She was doing well.

Having fought with Charlotte before, I wouldn't have to give her a pep talk — she was wary and vigilant, but not afraid. I thought Bella and Rosalie might benefit from hearing my voice.

Keeping my voice low, I whispered to them, "He's coming closer, but not moving quickly. Bella, shield us from him, but I need to feel him. Like when we were playing war in the woods. Remember?"

She nodded her head against my side.

"You're doing fine. I still feel one. He's not afraid, but he is guarded, cautious. He's curious."
The vampire's wariness and guardedness increased as he came closer. A flutter of appreciation arced through it all. Our scents were all through the woods around the house. Which one had caught his attention?

"We may not be able to hear him, but see the pine tree that has the big knot about ten feet up?" They nodded. "He's coming from that direction."

Then I heard him coming through the woods. It was interesting that he would make enough noise to alert us to his presence. I knew when Bella, Rosalie, and Charlotte heard him because Bella twitched and Rosalie and Charlotte stood straighter.

"He's near the edge of the trees. Remember, there's only one of him — there are four of us. He's hiding well, but we'll see him soon."

He stepped cautiously from between the trees and stood still. Like Peter had said, the Volturi were arrogant. The tall male was wearing boots, blue jeans, and a charcoal grey T-shirt that was printed with a large, distressed version of the Volturi crest.

I raised one eyebrow at him. I was a little surprised to see a member of the Volturi guard in a T-shirt and jeans. I had expected one of the infamous cloaks.

I wasn't sure which one, but from the descriptions I'd heard of them, I could guess. He was about my height and had a slimmer build. He was about fifty feet away. I would be able to drop him, and Bella would be able to hold him with her shield, but he didn't know that.

Bella gasped and pressed more firmly against my side.

Speaking to her quietly so the vampire wouldn't hear me, I asked her, "Shielding us?" She nodded. "I can still feel him. Remember how this feels. Remember, you can hold him with your shield at this distance. Do you recognize him?"

"I … I think maybe it's Demetri. He looks different to me. It's not Felix. Felix is as big as Emmett."

"Oh, shit." Rosalie hissed. "Boy, it sure would be nice if we had some grenades, don't you think?"

Bella snorted, and I covered her mouth with my hand. I dipped my head down toward her and kissed her forehead, never taking my eyes from Demetri. "Shhhhhhh. Don't lose focus. He's the only one I sense. Shield us. Tilt your head up. He'll be able to see that you're a newborn, but show him you belong to me." Being faced with a strange male made me want to show him who Bella belonged to.

Her right arm went around my waist underneath Rosalie's. She brought her left hand to my stomach and spread her fingers.

I had thought Demetri's gift of feeling the tenor of a mind was closer in than fifty feet, but I didn't want to take any chances if I didn't have to. "Yes, Darlin'. I can feel your shield, but I don't see it. Very good."

Speaking to calm and reassure my newborn would not seem unusual. "I love you. You're doing so well," I murmured to her.

Rosalie leaned against me. "Bella, remember — you are a fucking vampire."

Almost chuckling at Rosalie reminding Bella of her own words soon after she awoke as a vampire, I could feel Bella's confidence grow.

"Yeah, and we're the Whitlock Coven." Though she was nervous, her pride swelled and her love
flowed out and around us.

My own heart nearly burst with love for her. It was difficult to maintain a merely cautious look on my face. I had worried a bit that her fear would overtake her, and I would have to subdue her while I fought off the strange vampire, but my mate had astonished me again.

I drew my left hand slowly down Bella's throat, gathered her hair so that my mating bites would show, and placed her hair down her back over Charlotte's arm around her waist. I moved my hand over her shoulder to Charlotte's, then ran my fingers through Charlotte's hair and down her back. I brought my hand back up to cup Charlotte's neck. I slid my right hand down Rosalie's side to her hip and pulled her a little closer to my side. Those were blatantly possessive gestures that any male would understand, and having my arms behind them would hide the scars on my arms, but the scars on my neck would practically glow like neon signs. The scars on Charlotte would do the same. He would know he was facing two experienced fighters.

I decided I would wait for him to speak first.

The vampire's eyes moved over all of us and stopped on Bella as expected before flicking back to me. A newborn would bear watching. The vivid, bright red of her eyes would give it away, but even her moment of humor was not a bad thing. As it should, it would make it look like she was anxious, though she was controlling that very well also.

Demetri studied us quietly and took two steps away from the trees. He was testing the air and listening. He would already know that there would be six of us. He was watching for the other males to show themselves. He moved slowly forward another two paces and raised his chin.

"Major Jasper Whitlock. It is a distinct pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. We've heard so much about you."

He took quite a chance saying my name. He could have been wrong. I wasn't surprised he would be aware of who I was. The Volturi would have descriptions and possibly even photographs or sketches of vampires involved in the Southern Vampire Wars; probably even the known members of the Cullen coven.

It wasn't the usual greeting one vampire would give to another. Especially when encroaching on another's territory. Perhaps he was attempting to disconcert me with his subtle challenge.

Bella twitched against me. Ducking my head toward hers, I whispered, "It's okay, Darlin'. You're doing fine. Remember, stay calm just like you are now, no matter what he says." She shifted slightly against me.

Demetri projected an instant of disappointment and decided to change his tactics. "Major Whitlock, your … companions are exceptional." He moved forward another step.

I tenderly stroked Charlotte's neck and, turning toward Rosalie, I kissed her temple and slid my hand up to her waist while looking at Demetri from the corner of my eye. "Yes, they are," I answered him in a low voice.

Demetri sighed and with her left hand reached for Bella's left shoulder and slid her hand down her arm to her elbow. Rosalie hummed lightly and snuggled against me, sliding her right hand over my stomach. I almost wished I could have a photograph of our positions. We could hardly be closer to each other, and it would make great ammunition to use against Peter later.

Demetri's eyebrows rose slightly and the very corners of his mouth curved upward. Curiosity and
puzzlement flowed from him. A touch of envy colored his emotions. "Indeed. Most especially the exquisite Isabella. She had been attractive for a human, but she is an extraordinarily lovely vampire." Demetri's deep red eyes studied Bella again as he stepped closer, and the appreciation I had felt from him earlier came to the forefront. A tendril of desire curled around his emotions.

That answered one question.

He must have noticed the bites on her neck, and I thought he was trying to get a reaction out of me. It wasn't going to work. Instead, he got one from Bella.

She tensed, and I felt just the beginnings of anger from her.

I bent my head toward her. "Why are you angry?" I had to admit a little anger was better than fear.

She raised her head to speak into my ear, keeping an eye on Demetri. "He's fucking with us, and trying to make us nervous and shit. Why is he looking at me like that? Why doesn't he just say whatever he really wants to say?"

I moved my lips to her ear. "Because he's fucking with us. You see the game he's playing. Why don't you ask him? It would probably surprise him. Keep in mind that the longer it takes him to say whatever is on his mind, the more time we give Peter and Emmett to get here."

She nodded and turned her head to face our guest. She lowered her head and raised her eyes to his. It was a look that had quite an effect on me. I wondered what it would do to our guest.

Unfortunately, he liked it quite a lot. Brushing my chin over the crown of her head, I inhaled the scent that was more like mine every day, but was still so uniquely her.

"Demetri, I remember you," Bella said at the slow human speed. "Why are you here?"

I kissed her temple and said, "I think he can't sense any of us, so he'll try to get closer. I'll have to kiss Charlotte and Rosalie to tell them." I felt the barest increase in pressure from her fingers on my stomach, and she sent me a little shot of acceptance. I let my gratitude and pride flow over her.

Flexing my fingers on Charlotte's neck, I reached around Bella and kissed Charlotte right in front of her ear to repeat my message to her, then turned to Rosalie to tell her as I nuzzled her ear. I gave them all a quick dose of the pride I felt in them.

Moving closer, Demetri was about forty feet away. "I came at Aro's request to see if the Olympic Coven had abided by the agreement Edward had made with the kings. I arrived in America several weeks ago. Seattle is a lovely city, by the way." He took another step toward us, bringing his hand up and placing a finger over his mouth. "But I detected quite a bit of vampire activity there. Before making my report to Aro, I watched them, of course." He turned to the side and took several steps before turning back, pacing unhurriedly. "It seems a vampire was making newborns at an alarming rate, yet she left a youngling male to watch over them. The female who changed them had no contact with any but the youngling. She had told him he was her mate. All a ploy to control him." He flicked his fingers at the air. He turned back, bringing himself a bit closer. "The female sent the young male on several excursions to a small town called Forks and to a nearby Indian reservation."

The intensity of Demetri's gaze increased. "The male was named Riley. He seemed quite interested in a human's home. Intriguingly, the home of Isabella Swan. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that she had died in a tragic automobile wreck. Memorials for young persons are so ... sorrowful."

Bella gasped, and I clutched her more tightly to me, sending her my reassurance. I whispered quickly to her, "The wolves will keep Charlie safe. Bella, stay strong for me. We have to let him talk. He'll
I had suspected heavy newborn activity in Seattle. Demetri was implying it had something to do with Bella. Could the male he was speaking of be the same one that had been all over Forks? Letting just the corners of my mouth raise in a barely-there smile, I raised an eyebrow, encouraging him to continue. He seemed eager to talk. Or maybe it was an eagerness to try and goad us into some action.

Demetri seemed pleased at the reaction from Bella as he continued his measured steps, bringing him closer. "It wasn’t difficult to observe the guests at the memorial for young Isabella. There were some unusual native youths in attendance also. I’d be curious to hear more about them." He glanced up at us and his gaze returned to the ground as he walked. "Only four of the Cullens were there. I had been through their territory earlier and found the scent of eight vampires. It seemed Aro’s old friend Carlisle had added a new female."

His eyes shifted to Bella, and he smiled faintly. "Lovely." He gestured imperiously in the air. "That is neither here nor there, as I’ve discovered who the new vampire is." He turned and moved a bit closer. "It was easy enough to elude the young male as I followed him back to Seattle where he reported his findings to the female. Interesting conversation they had. She’d had a rather elaborate plan for revenge and was unhappy with his report of Isabella’s death. She tore him apart and burned him. Then she set the abandoned warehouse on fire. She took a human right off the street and threw him into another large building where her newborns were kept. As several fought each other for the human, she quickly disabled the rest. She was quite meticulous in her planning. She had fuel cans stored throughout the buildings. It was a spectacular fire. There were several detonations and fires from gas lines. In fact, that's what the humans thought it was — gas line explosions. It saved me from having to do it to eliminate that small problem. It was on the thirty-first — the same day as the lovely Isabella's funeral. Perhaps you were aware of it."

Rosalie stiffened against me and Bella began to tremble. That was the day we had left Forks. Bella had spotted the large plumes of black smoke in Seattle as we had driven around the city. We had seen an explosion and the flaming column of burning gas. I held them both to me and stroked their backs, trying to calm them. Charlotte pushed against Bella, holding her more tightly into my side.

Demetri was again pleased and stopped as his eyes rose to take in Bella's and Rosalie's reactions. His anticipation grew and it made me wonder what else he might have to reveal. The group of newborns I had been concerned about had been destroyed, according to him. I wondered why he was telling us about it. They were somehow connected to Bella or Edward, or the male — Riley — would not have been roaming through Forks. The sample of vampire scent the wolves had brought to us must have been that male. None of us had recognized his scent. He had been scouting for the female. Who was the female? What revenge?

"The female was too thorough. She was caught by her own handiwork, but she did manage to escape. There may be burns on her arms where her clothing had ignited, though the worst damage was to her hair." Demetri raised his head and his eyes went to Bella. "Her beautiful … red … hair."

Red hair? I only knew of one female vampire with red hair who might have any interest in Bella. As Victoria's name and an image of her face flashed through my mind, Bella's entire body jolted against me, she gasped loudly, and terror exploded from her, slamming into me. I had almost been ready for it. As I stumbled against Rosalie, hot rage burst from Bella, she snarled and leapt toward Demetri. My fingers missed her by only a half-inch. I aimed my leap for Demetri, my own rage boiling through me.

He snapped around to face us, his teeth bared. His hands moved in a blur, raising up to catch Bella. If he caught her, he would try to use her as leverage for … I had no idea what. Or had he come to
America to take her? No one would ever take her from me.

His arrogance would be his downfall. He didn't know me or my mate at all. He would be expecting a typical newborn. Bella was anything but typical.

He had been aware of her mental shield as a human, but he was woefully unaware of her physical shield. He was utterly astonished as he was slammed to the ground on his back, and Bella's teeth were in his throat, her rippling snarls muffled.

Chapter End Notes

"Boy, it sure would be nice if we had some grenades, don't you think?" Jayne Cobb in the Firefly movie "Serenity."
I Talk

Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by Shinrai and Nlr287bells of Project Team Beta. You can find them both on FanFiction.

A/N: Not quite finished with chapter 52 yet, of course, but I think it's pretty good. There's some action! There could possibly be some body part removals, too.


I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), and The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS)! I took it off of ADF. So much aggravation when trying to upload there. Egads and un-stinkin'-believable.

Here's a couple of stories I've really been enjoying. They seem to like mine, too!

Independence Day by CayStar on FFN

Doritos by happyghost on FFN

And that story I wanted to recommend but couldn't freakin' find? Found it.

Do What It Takes by JaspersStoryAlter on FFN

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Ch 51, I Talk

Jasper's POV

Instinct and love demanded I protect my mate — even if it was from herself.

Goddamn, I loved my Isabella so fucking much, but I really wished she hadn't gone after Demetri. If the stories were true, he was a thousand years old. Vampires didn't live that long if they were fucking stupid.

Icy fear for her crackled through me, instantly replaced with boiling rage. He would not touch her.

During my leap to attack Demetri, it occurred to me that Bella could have her shield up, and I would crash right into it. It didn't matter.
I was less than an instant behind her. Landing heavily on the left side of Demetri's prone body, relieved she had collapsed her physical shield, my arms were spread wide to catch his if he swung them up to grab her.

Rosalie and Charlotte thudded to the ground behind me; each one bearing down on one of his legs.

As I assessed the situation, my rage began to drain away. He hadn't moved.

He was spread-eagled and helpless on the ground. I wondered how long it had been since he had been put in such a position. With the powers of the Volturi's Jane and Alec, it was conceivable he had never been in such a position.

Bella was crouched at his right side, her right hand had a crushing grip on his left wrist and was holding it up and away from her, and her left was clamped around his right arm just below his elbow, forcing it to the ground. Her teeth were imbedded in the left side of his throat, and her right knee was planted firmly in his belly.

Like when she had bitten Peter, if she had been trying to drain a human, it would have been a perfect bite.

We would have to work on her approach. Aiming for the jugular was instinctive, but biting a vampire there wasn't always the best idea. They could get their hands on you. That, and I was sure her venom was pumping into him. That thought sent a jagged arc of jealousy through me, but I immediately squashed it.

Assured he wasn't able to put his hands on my mate, I couldn't stop the smirk from forming on my face as I rose up and sat back on my left heel, my right elbow propped on my knee. Enjoying the panic, shock, and pain that showed on Demetri's face and colored his emotions, it was good to see that even as old as he was rumored to be, teeth at his throat held him motionless.

By a vampire that was only sixteen days old.

There weren't any other obvious scars around his neck. Bella would certainly leave her mark. I wasn't happy about the placement, and I wished again she hadn't attacked him, but I was proud of my newborn mate. She had controlled her shield with almost surgical precision. She had used it to knock his ass to the ground and then pulled it back so that Charlotte, Rosalie, and I could assist her.

Regrettably, it also showed Demetri some of what she was capable of.

For a change, I was the only one who wasn't growling. Though Bella was the loudest, Rosalie and Charlotte had low growls thrumming through their chests. I turned to check on them. They were both furious, but were pleased, and I felt some pride from them also. Proud of Bella or of the fact that we had one of the most notorious Volturi guards at our mercy? I gave them a nod and turned back to Bella. Reaching for Demetri's left arm, I took hold of it beneath Bella's hand. She was feeling protective, but her anger was racing ahead of it.

"Darlin', I have his arm. You got him good. He's not moving. We're all fine."

The volume of her growls lowered, but she didn't pull her teeth from his throat. She let go of his left arm and slapped her hand down on his chest, making him grunt. He was not a happy camper. And why would he be? A newborn female who was much smaller than him had flattened him.

Sensing others, I sent my awareness out as far as it would go. It was easy enough to recognize them. Peter was coming in from the south and Emmett from the north. Both of them were projecting some fear, agitation, and a massive amount of protectiveness. I'd have to say they were both right pissed
I stroked Bella's hair, gathered it from around her neck and laid it down her back. "Bella, it'll be okay. He won't move. Hold his arm."

The moment her head was clear, the fingers of my left hand were around his throat just under his jaw, ready to crush it. I gave him just enough room to breathe because I wanted him to be able to speak. Then Demetri's dull black eyes grew wide, and I felt a hefty wave of wonder and then relief from him. He would still be experiencing the burn of Bella's venom spreading through him. The relief he felt was mystifying.

Bella wiped the excess venom from her mouth, clamped both of her hands onto his right arm, and looked up to me. "Jasper, I …"

"You're fine. Hold him." Her remorse told me she was going to apologize. For losing control and attacking him? It was not the time to discuss it. I could still feel the slight pressure of her shield, but wanted to remind her of it. "Shielding?" At her nod, I sent a small burst of my love and pride to her, tempered with caution. "Our coven-mates will be here soon."

She nodded again and turned her own black eyes to Demetri's face.

"Demetri, what was the red-head's plan for revenge?" I flexed my fingers on his neck and sent him a dose of compliance and submission to spur him to answer.

His eyes narrowed and flicked between Bella and me. He swallowed. "She was creating a newborn army. Her eventual plan was to use them to hold off the Cullens while she tortured and then drained Isabella in front of Edward. A mate for a mate because Edward had killed her James." His eyes returned to Bella. "She had told the young Riley that she was going to use you as bait to draw out the Cullens so that they could be killed. I did not hear what she may have told Riley as to why she wanted the Cullens dead."

Bella hissed and bared her teeth at him in indignation. "Edward didn't kill James — Jasper and Emmett did."

A new flood of rage shot though me. Victoria would burn.

I shook Demetri to draw his eyes from Bella and back to me. "Are all those newborns ashes?"

"Yes."

Behind me, Rosalie hissed her own anger and suspicion. "How do we know he's telling the truth?"

"I feel no deception from him." I tilted my head and studied him. There was no deception at all. In fact, he seemed almost eager to answer my questions. More eager than that bit of tractability I had sent him could account for. "Why didn't you kill Victoria?"

"She escaped the fires and disappeared. I've been tracking the titian-haired wench for weeks. She has been rather … elusive." That obviously annoyed him. His eyes darted again between Bella and me. "Initially, I had no difficulty at all finding her. After the fire … I don't know what changed. I believe she is insane. She seems to … become blank to me at times."

Peter and Emmett were nearby and listening. I had expected Emmett to come charging in, but I was glad he decided to hang back and listen. I wasn't sure if Demetri would keep answering questions if they showed themselves. Of course, I could always encourage him to keep talking.
I adjusted my grip on his neck. "Is she here? Did you follow her here?"

"Her course has been erratic and directionless. I followed her to Utah. Then she was gone. She must have been going through rivers and creeks, as I lost her scent, and her mental signature disappears periodically. I have no explanation for that as I've not had trouble tracking anyone else. Except for …" His eyes went to Bella, and I could see them traveling over her face and neck. He would clearly see my claiming marks on her so I allowed him to get a good look.

"I detected her again in Montana. As I went north, I came across vampire scent I did not recognize. While I was … in the area, I thought I would investigate. I stayed outside of your boundaries except for that one jaunt to a lake west of here." His eyes snapped up to mine, and the corners of his mouth twitched. "That worked to draw the rest of you out to mark your territory and then I had your scents. Imagine my surprise when I realized I had found the rest of the Cullens." He raised his eyebrows. "And others." He pressed his lips into a straight line. "I have your scents, but I cannot detect your minds." His eyes moved back to Bella. "It seems the exquisite Isabella Swan is not only remarkably beautiful — she is quite gifted."

That moment of wistful desire he had felt earlier returned, and I grabbed his jaw and forced his eyes to meet mine. "She. Is. Mine," I said with a deep growl. "We are not part of the Cullens. This is my coven."

"I see. As I have said, your companions are … quite enticing. You are most fortunate to have them," he said with envy in his voice.

All three of them growled, and Demetri grimaced in pain. Either Charlotte or Rosalie had done something to him. Her feeling of smug satisfaction led me to think it was Charlotte. She always had been a good soldier.

My fingers were back around his throat. "Where is Victoria?"

"Currently, she seems to be in Billings, Montana." He swallowed again, the muscles of his neck moving sluggishly under my grip.

"Did she run by my territory?" There were miles and miles of wilderness around us, but she could have passed close enough to our boundaries to detect our marks.

"I don't know. I told you I had lost her scent trail."

"Who did you bring with you? Why did you come here alone?"

"Who said I was alone?"

Bella's ire flared, and her protectiveness came rushing back. She snarled and bit him again, snatching his arm from the ground and sinking her teeth into his forearm.

His entire body seized at her bite, his eyes squeezed shut, and he hissed loudly through his teeth. "Felix went to the east, while I came out to the west. No others came with us."

Peter appeared at our left and stood rigidly, his jaw clenched, and his hands propped on his belt. Emmett was walking out of the tree line to my right. I'd rarely seen that look of focused determination and wrath on his face.

They were taking a chance coming in close enough for Demetri to catch their mental signatures. Either Peter knew something I didn't or he wasn't concerned about it any longer.
Demetri inhaled deeply and gradually opened his eyes. They went immediately to Peter standing over Bella, widening with alarm as he took in Peter's scars. His eyes snapped toward Emmett as he strode up next to me and crossed his thickly muscled arms over his chest.

"The other members of your coven, I presume?" Demetri asked with a strained voice.

I just cocked an eyebrow at him. There was no need to give an answer to something so obvious. It was gratifying to see that Bella's second bite was causing him pain, though I wasn't thrilled about her getting more venom into him.

Peter sent me a shot of curiosity, and I knew he wanted to ask his own question. He crouched down beside Bella, and his eyes met mine. "It's clear around us," he said quietly.

I gave him a short nod and dipped my head to catch Bella's attention. "Bella."

"Ahhhh, newborns. Always so … contumacious." Demetri murmured.

Perversely, he seemed delighted.

Bella yanked her teeth from Demetri's arm, swiped the venom from her mouth, and smeared it on the leg that was still kneeling on his stomach. "What did you call me?"

Peter's hard gaze caught Bella's. "Pigheaded and stubborn, Bubba."

She took in a breath to make some retort, thought better of it, and snapped her mouth shut.

I didn't get that same sense of relief from him as the first time Bella stopped biting him.

Peter's darkened eyes slid down to stare coldly into Demetri's face. "What the hell's up, Demetri?"

He grabbed Demetri's wrist. "You're singin' like a bird — answerin' questions, volunteerin' information. All because a little newborn took you down?"

Demetri inhaled deeply and seemed a little confused as he looked from me to Bella and then to Peter, taking in our scents. Mine and Bella's were so intertwined it should be obvious we were mates. Bella had bitten Peter and gotten enough venom into him that he would also carry her scent. Demetri had been under the impression that Bella, Rosalie, and Charlotte were mine. Then another male, marked by newborn Bella, arrived. It would confuse any vampire.

It would make most of them envious as hell, too.

It annoyed me to think that Bella's rich spice would be part of his cedar and moss.

He was taking too long to answer and Peter increased the pressure on his wrist. Fine cracks radiated up his forearm and across his hand.

Demetri's eyes jerked to Peter's. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing under my hand again, and he asked, "Do you know of Chelsea's power?"

Peter inclined his head, blinking slowly.

Demetri's eyes moved to mine. "Many years ago, Aro asked me to join him — become one of his guard. I declined as I was content enough with Amun in Egypt. Aro does not take kindly to disappointment. He had Chelsea bind me to him so that I would join them. Most are under the impression I joined him of my own free will." He gazed at Bella with no small amount of admiration.
"Being one of the Volturi guard has had its benefits, but to be initially coerced … Your captivating Isabella has broken that artificial bond."

I was stunned and took in Bella's bewildered face.

Her mouth was working but nothing was coming out.

Emmett blew out a disgusted snort and threw his hands up in the air. "Jesus H. Christ! See? She bites fuckin' everybody and see what happens? So, Demetri's in the club now, too?"

After Emmett's frustrated exclamation, Bella abruptly sat back on her ass and asked us to let go of him and let him up off the ground.

I refused. He was a member of the Volturi, he was the enemy, he was a strange male, and he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off my mate. I hadn't decided yet whether I was going to kill him or not. If I killed him, the rest of the Volturi would look for him. If I didn't, even if he didn't tell Aro what he knew of Bella's shield, Aro would see it in his mind.

Bella jumped to her feet and stood just beyond Demetri's head with her hands on her hips, giving us all her famous quit-being-assholes look. "Don't kill him."

"Thank you, Isabella," Demetri said softly. His admiration of Bella was quickly becoming tinged with adoration, and it was pissing me off.

Then he hissed loudly when Peter and I tightened our grips on him, sending new cracks through both arms and his neck. I didn't know what Charlotte and Rosalie had done to him.

"Please don't kill him, Jasper." Suddenly afraid, Bella extended her hands toward us, palms up, her eyes pleading with me. "Aro stole him from his home and made him work for him. So, I still can't figure out why Aro let Alice, Edward, and me go — he wants Alice really bad. He could have kept us." Her hands flew together, and she started pulling at her fingers. "Aro would know from Edward's mind that he never wanted to change me, but Alice said she still saw me as a vampire, and he believed her, I guess, but he knew what Edward was thinking. That's probably why they sent Demetri over here to check." Her hand gripped her own fingers. "Demetri didn't hurt us when we were there. I mean, he was really creepy and shit, but he didn't do anything to us." She went back to pulling at her fingers. "I know he's not going to hurt me."

"Bells, you say that about everybody. Do you realize who he is?" Emmett stepped closer and was only inches away from my right shoulder. He pointed one large finger down at Demetri's face. "He's a tracker like James was, only he's better! He's got that GPS in his head. He's been trackin' humans and vampires for a thousand years and draggin' them back to the Volturi so they could kill 'em."

"But Em—"

Emmett brought a hand up to stop her. "I'm sure some of them deserved it because when vampires go nuts they get really fucked up, but you haven't heard the shit me and Rose have heard about them. If covens get too big, they break them up. Or if they heard about a gifted vampire somewhere, they'd use Chelsea to break their bonds, and then take the one they wanted. If any got away, they'd send Demetri to hunt 'em down. He's probably killed hundreds of vampires."

Bella did not look at me when Emmett said that, and I knew she did that to protect me, knowing I had killed as many as Demetri — if not more — during a much shorter lifespan. She looked down at her fingers as they twisted themselves together. Only her loving, compassionate heart would even consider not condemning Demetri for the wrongs he had committed over his long life, just as she did
not condemn me. That was one of the many reasons I loved her. I just didn't think she understood the
danger that he posed to her, and the rest of us, if he was allowed to report his findings.

Ordering Demetri to the States told me the three brothers had taken quite an interest in Bella, and I
knew Aro would want to add her to his collection. I wasn't stupid enough to think they wouldn't be
interested in me and my empathic ability. I could instantly terrorize or subdue entire groups while I'd
heard Jane could only torture one at a time, and her brother Alec's talent took time to work.

They wouldn't be above trying to use me to control Bella.

"He won't do anything to hurt me," she said softly. "And hurting any of you would hurt me."

"How do you know that, Bella?" Rosalie asked from behind me, the anxiety clearly showing in her
voice. "He could be lying about how many of them are here. What makes you think they won't send
Chelsea over here to break our bonds and tear us apart so they can take you and Jasper, and then go
after Alice and Edward?"

"I don't give a shit about Edward. They can have him," she blurted out, frowning. Her eyes flew
open, and she slapped her hand over her mouth. She squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and
slowly opened them, looking directly at me. She pointed at her head.

Was she trying to tell me she thought her shield would protect us? It would be that very thing that
made her so valuable to them.

"Um, I, uh, I just …" Her hands clenched into fists and she held them stiffly at her sides. "I know he
won't hurt me like I knew you guys wouldn't. Well, except Rose made me a little nervous." Her eyes
darted to Rosalie. "But only at first, Rose!"

I had to know what she was thinking. She needed to know what was at stake. Glancing up at
Emmett, I barked out, "Watch him." My eyes dropped to Demetri's. "Good night." I hit him with a
deluge of lethargy and indifference, and yanked my hands from him. His tense body went limp, and
his eyes closed.

I would have preferred that he was standing when I hit him so that I could have watched him drop to
the ground.

Peter, Charlotte, and Rosalie all jumped away from him so they wouldn't be affected.

My gaze swept over Charlotte, Rosalie, and Emmett. "Search him. Empty his pockets. Check his
boots. If he should even twitch, rip his legs off." I turned away from them and started toward the
barn. "Bella, Peter."

When we were far enough away, I did an about face to keep an eye on our prisoner and looked
down at Bella. Peter moved to my right, forming a triangle and keeping the others in his sights also.

"Please don't kill him, Jasper. He was used like—"

"Bella. I wish you hadn't attacked him because now he knows you have a physical shield, and he
knows that, even as young as you are, you can control it. But what's done is done. Depending on
where his bullshit led, I expect he would have found out about it anyway. He was trying to bait us." I
watched Charlotte and Rosalie yank his boots and socks off as Emmett went through his front
pockets and quickly flipped him over. Emmett knew not to stay in contact with him very long. They
all did.

Returning my gaze to my mate, I knew I couldn't allow her pleading voice and anxious eyes to sway
me. I would do anything for her, give her anything she wanted, but I didn't think I could give her that.

"Bella, he is even more dangerous to you, and to all of us, than Victoria could ever be. He knows about your physical shield now, and it won't be long before Aro knows about it — if we don't kill him. Things haven't changed since we talked about this in Forks — except your shield has grown stronger, has more range, and you can control it even better than you did there. Your control will only improve. That would make you an even more desirable acquisition for the Volturi. Did you want to work for them?"

"No!"

"That makes you dangerous to them. Do you realize how dangerous we are to them? I don't think the gifts they have would work on us, and they would feel threatened and fear us. They destroy what they fear." I reached to brush my fingertips over the curve of her jaw. "I will never give them the chance to hurt you." Tilting her head up, I ran my thumb over her chin. "They've always been envious of the gifts that Carlisle seemed to attract. You know Aro wants Alice and Edward, maybe even me. Though I wouldn't be quite as useful, with you I am stronger. Peter's felt it." I glanced at Peter's still face. He was watching Bella and looking beyond her to his mate standing over the Volturi guard.

"You heard Demetri say that Aro doesn't take kindly to disappointment. They would kill me to get to you or try to hold me and the rest of our coven hostage to make you do their bidding. Having you would make them practically invincible. They do serve a purpose keeping vampires in check, and they are strong, but they also have vulnerabilities. All the vampires in the world help to control them to an extent. It's why they rarely leave Italy. Even with their powers, they still need protection. With you, they would overrun everyone."

Venom tears welled up in her eyes, and she whimpered as she raised her arms toward me. I couldn't resist her, but I had to. Instead of drawing her into my arms as I longed to do, I merely held her hand, still needing to be in contact with her as she needed to be with me. "We can't allow Demetri to tell them what you can do or have Aro read his thoughts." I ground my teeth together. "The other problem is they know he's over here. He's probably kept in regular contact with them. If he doesn't make his next scheduled call or return to Volterra, they would send others to look for him. He is the best tracker or they wouldn't have taken him. If they had found a better one, he would have been replaced." I gently squeezed her hand. "It doesn't mean there aren't other skilled trackers out there that would work for them. They just wouldn't have Demetri's … built-in GPS."

In my peripheral vision, I saw Emmett quickly flip Demetri's limp body onto his back and they surrounded him, Emmett taking his position a couple yards beyond his feet. Charlotte was to Demetri's left, and Rosalie completed the triangle standing just beyond his right.

Peter took in a small breath. "So, Bubba, in a nutshell, if we kill him, they don't find out about your shield, but the fuckers come lookin', and then they find out about your shield. If we don't kill him, the fuckers come lookin'. Either way, we're kinda fucked. It's not like we couldn't take 'em, but who needs the goddamn hassle?" He raised his hands up. "And one of us could get hurt in the meantime. Eventually, they'll probably find out about your shield. Jasper's right — the threat of the Volturi makes most vamps kinda behave themselves. Everybody knows we all get along great as long as we stay the hell away from each other. Except …" He propped his hands on his belt, trailed off, and stared into space.

Peter was thinking in much the same way I was. Whether we killed Demetri or not, I thought the Volturi would eventually come. "Except what?" I asked him.
Bella exuded a trickle of hope as she stared up at Peter.

"He said he couldn't feel your minds, or whatever he does. I know he didn't get a ping off me and Em. Is Bubba automatically shieldin' us without even thinkin' about it? Maybe she's shieldin' him and Aro won't be able to read him. He said she broke his bond to Aro. Maybe we could use that. She did bite the piss out of him."

"Peter, that has nothin' to do with it. She didn't bite Rose like she's bitten the rest of us." I ran my hand through my hair. "There's no way to know if she's shieldin' Demetri unless he goes back to Italy and then it's too late. It might only be because he's near her. I won't take that kind of chance."

"You saw how he's been lookin' at her. He likes her. I think she's got another vamp ready to fall at her feet."

What the fuck? Did Bella have some sort of power that drew vampires to her? Male vampires?

Peter flinched when I snarled at him. "I don't need this shit, Peter."

"Maybe we can use it," Peter repeated. "Besides, if any of those fuckers come after us — we kill 'em." Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"We won't always be together. Em and Rose like to take their three-month vacations now and then. Bella might want to go to —"

"Scotland and Ireland." Bella tossed out. "Jasper, please don't kill him." She grabbed both of my hands, and her venom-wet eyes looked up at me imploringly.

I pulled my right hand free of hers and gently took hold of her chin. "I will not risk you, Bella. You are what I live for." I pressed my lips to hers. "Why don't you want me to kill him?"

She looked down, over at Peter, and back to me uncertainly. "Um, because … because I like him."

She liked him? I felt my eyebrows going up. I also felt my simmering anger heating up again, and I looked past her to that too-cocky bastard lying sprawled out on the ground surrounded by the rest of our coven. "Darlin', I'd say every vampire you're ever goin' to meet was stolen from his life and family when he was bitten and changed. You can't feel sorry for all of them. We'll never know, but Demetri might have gotten bored in Egypt and gone to the Volturi anyway. Besides, you like everybody."

"I don't like Edward." She grabbed my hand with both of hers and kissed my knuckles.

"Nobody likes Edward except Carlisle, Esme, and Alice," Peter muttered.

"I can think of a few other people I don't like." Bella pulled my hand to her chest, and her eyes dropped. "Um, speaking of Edward …" she mumbled.

I wasn't pleased that she liked Demetri, and I had a feeling I wasn't going to like the next thing out of her mouth either. "What about Edward?"

"Uh, we could test Demetri with him. Demetri could go see him. Isn't he like 3000 miles away? Maybe Demetri could scare the shit out of him while he's at it. Or …" She paused and sighed heavily. "Edward could come here." She winced, closed her eyes, and pressed her lips to my fingers.

I knew I wasn't going to like it.
Taking in a deep breath, I studied the woman who would hold my heart for eternity and tried not to dismiss her idea out of hand. I wanted to give her what she asked for, but needing to protect her overrode that.

Demetri had said Bella broke his bond to Aro. Was it truly broken or was it because he was near her? If he went back to Italy, would Chelsea be able to bond him to Aro again? I knew he could feel my influence. Would he be shielded from Edward like I was? In Forks, Edward could still read everyone's mind unless they were touching me. Was Bella shielding everyone in our coven like that? We had no way to really know. But Demetri had said he couldn't sense any of us. Was it just because we were near Bella or had she somehow managed to affect some change within us?

We really had no idea how vampire gifts worked.

Peter was right: whether we killed him or not, we should expect a visit from the Italian vampires.

I didn't trust Demetri, but maybe I could use his gratitude — his growing adoration of Bella. That feeling was real.

Just thinking about that sent a sharp stab of jealousy into me. But would that adoration make him loyal to her, and by extension, the rest of us? I already knew any one of our coven would fight to the end for the others.

If I let him live, and he went to Edward, that would test whether Bella had a shield around his mind or if it was his proximity to her. If we sent him to Edward, would he actually head for Italy? There were too many variables. Too many things could go wrong. Bella would be in danger.

But what else was new? She drew supernatural creatures like bees to honey.

It would be simpler to just kill him.

Peter cocked his head to the side. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Was Peter suggesting we let him live, or was he playing devil's advocate?

Running the fingers of my left hand down over Bella's silky hair, I said softly, "I will question him."

She sprang at me, threw her arms around me, and her lips were at my neck. "Oh, thank you, Jasper!"

"Don't thank him yet, Bubba." Peter placed a hand on her back. "You've never seen him question anyone."

"Jasper or Demetri?"

"Yes."

"But nothin'," Peter said seriously, his tone deep. "You watch, you listen. Hear every word he says." His black eyes glinted like cracked obsidian as they looked into hers.

"I'll do whatever I think is necessary to protect you." I pulled her arms from around me and held her hands between us. "That includes knocking you out. If you put your shield up so I can't influence
you or reach you, Peter will push you away and guard you. That physical shield works both ways."

She began to tremble and her wide, fearful eyes moved slowly up my face. "Like a hamster ball." She blinked rapidly several times. "Real vampires." Her eyes flicked to Peter. "Not like the nice Cullens."

"Nothin' like the tame Cullens, Bubba."

With my left hand, I cupped her face as I brought both of her hands to rest over my heart. "Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of me. I love you, and I would never hurt you, but others would. I won't let that happen."

"I … I understand, Jasper."

I wasn't sure she did. I moved closer to her and whispered, "Remember when we were at the river and you were mad at Edward for attacking me?"

Anger instantly replaced the fear and trepidation she had been feeling. "Yeah! I jumped his ass and knocked him and Carlisle right into the water …" She snatched her hands away and backed up, her hands curling into fists, her eyes bright. "I bit the shit out of him for touching you and ripped his goddamn arm off …" She took another step back and her left fist shot into the air the same way she had raised Edward's forearm. "… and then I jumped up out of the water and then … well, then you grabbed me, but I would do anything —"

I caught her hands before she became any more excited and brought them to my lips. "I would do anything to protect you."

She froze and looked up at me, startled, the dawning light of realization glowing in her eyes. "Yes." She nodded. "I see." Suddenly still, her protectiveness and sense of ownership grew, and her resolve solidified. She pulled her left hand away and took hold of Peter's fingers. "Yes, I really see. I love you, Jasper. We'll protect our coven."

"We will." Peter grinned at her. "Why don't ya go see what they found in ol' Demetri's pockets? Remember, don't touch him."

"I was kind of wondering what a Volturi guard would carry around." She squeezed Peter's fingers and focused her thoughtful gaze on me. "I do understand. I love you."

"And I love you." I kissed her hand and released it.

She gave me a small smile and darted toward the others.

"Might not be a good idea to kill him. Let's see how it plays out." Peter sighed. "I thought she was goin' to keep fightin' you, but you found just the thing she needed to hear."

"I'm still learning."

"I'm still tryin' to figure out Charlotte." He shook his head as we started back toward the rest of them. "Like Emmett said, Bubba's gonna be a fuckin' awesome vampire."

"She already is."

When we reached the others, I asked Charlotte, "What did you find?"

"Cell phone, wallet, car keys, and some money. Nothin' excitin', except he's traveling as Jareth"
Charlotte rolled her eyes in disgust and handed the wallet to me.

Emmett snorted, and Rosalie crossed her arms, cocked her hip, and stared down at the unmoving Demetri like he was something nasty stuck to her shoe.

"What? He has to have some kind of name." Bella looked around at all of them, bewildered.

I flipped through his wallet, saw the Pennsylvania driver's license and handed it back to Charlotte. "Darlin', remember David Bowie? He played Jareth the Goblin King in the movie *Labyrinth*. Jareth was in love with the human girl Sara and stole her baby brother. If she could find her way through the labyrinth in the kingdom, she could have her brother back."

"So, what happened?"

"I can't believe you haven't seen that movie, Bells," Emmett said incredulously.

"If I did, I don't remember." She turned to me. "What happened?"

I stared down at the motionless Demetri and wondered if there was some hidden meaning behind his choice of name or if he just thought it was humorous. "Sara found her way through the labyrinth to the Goblin King's throne room. He asked her to stay with him forever. She refused. She and her baby brother got to go back home."

"Oh." Bella still looked puzzled. "We'll have to watch it."

I turned toward Emmett. "Emmett, get behind him. I'll release him. Then you and Rosalie put him on his knees, then you move back out, Rosalie. Emmett, hold his hands behind his back." When Emmett and Rosalie were in position and nodded, I pulled back the steady stream of emotions I had been sending to Demetri and stood about ten feet away from them.

They quickly jerked Demetri from the ground and propped him on his knees. Emmett held his neck with his left hand, clamped his fingers around both of Demetri's overlapped wrists, and settled himself down on one knee. Charlotte darted in, crossed Demetri's left bare foot over his right, and dashed away again. As I walked slowly to stand in front of the Volturi tracker, I directed Charlotte to stand to Emmett's left, about six feet away, and a little behind. I motioned at Rosalie to move a little farther from Emmett's right.

I had Bella shift to stand to my right. Peter moved in to close the circle to my left. As my two best fighters, I wanted Peter and Charlotte on opposite sides of the ring we had formed. They would be able to see each other to coordinate movements if needed, though I wasn't worried about Emmett being able to hold him.

I felt it as Demetri's full awareness returned, though he was still confused. He didn't lift his head from his chest. I knew he was taking inventory of himself and trying to determine where everyone was before he took a breath or lifted his head.

"Demetri, we have you surrounded. You will not escape."

He finally inhaled and lifted his head, his eyes on me. "Major Whitlock, your gift is quite impressive. I believe you could have ripped off one of my arms, and I wouldn't have cared in the least."

Lifting my chin, I looked down my nose at him. "Have you made any reports back to the Volturi?"

"None after the first report of suspicious vampire activity in Seattle."
"What have you told them about Bella?"

"Nothing."

"Explain your mission."

"Though Aro believed the seer Alice when she said she saw Isabella as a vampire, he did not trust your mind reader to follow through. He sent me to check on Isabella's status and perhaps encourage the Cullens to make haste if she had not been turned." His eyes went to Bella and moved slowly over her. "If she was a newborn, I was to determine if she had any abilities. Aro was confident the stunning Isabella would be quite gifted."

He was hiding something and when his admiration shifted to desire and want, I sent a small shot of warning and caution to him. Emmett's eyes were on me and when I narrowed mine, he increased the pressure of his grip on Demetri's neck, sending jagged cracks over his skin.

His eyes slammed shut, he hissed, and tried to force his head back, but he wasn't able to move in Emmett's hold.

Peering at me through slatted eyes, Demetri gasped out, "Extraordinary. I felt your warning and your compatriot —"

I was in front of him, the fingers of my left hand gripping his jaw. I couldn't stop the low growl. "I told you she was mine. Now I will tell you she is my mate."

His eyes flew open. I decided to use a technique I learned from my resourceful mate.

After licking the index finger of my right hand, I placed the tip against his cheek bone beneath his temple and pushed until my nail cut into the surface of his skin. I drew a venom-tainted line down his cheek to his jawbone. He hissed with the burn.

The trickle of fear from him was quite satisfying.

"I never saw you move, Major—"

"Why would Aro even care about one little human girl?"

"I am not privy to what Aro is thinking."

Was he fucking with me or just speaking the truth? Licking my finger again, I touched his throat at his jugular. If needed, losing enough venom would weaken him. "Then please share with me your learned opinion."

His respect grew, and he stared intently at me. "Aro seemed rather intrigued with Isabella Swan. He spoke of her and her potential quite frequently. In fact, nearly to the exclusion of other topics, and I found that to be very … unusual. I hadn't seen Aro that enthused in centuries."

Emmett's icy glare focused on the back of Demetri's head and from my peripheral vision, I saw both Charlotte and Rosalie shift uncomfortably.

"How were you going to encourage the Cullens if Bella had not been changed?"

"A phone call to Aro in their presence. We expected resistance from Edward, but thought Carlisle would acquiesce in order to save his mate and preserve his coven." He swallowed. "Due to Edward's proclivity for evading his difficulties, we expected he might abscond with Isabella. If he did so, I
would be able to find him, of course, and take Isabella. We are well aware of his less than stellar tracking abilities. I was to hide Isabella until Felix could join us. Traveling with a human has its inconveniences, but that's what private jets are for. I was to take her to Volterra."

The snarl ripped through me. "You will never take her." Rather than bite him, I cut a new slice down the side of his throat.

"Major." Demetri hissed and tried to jerk away. "We were unaware that she was your mate. Edward told us —"

I contained my fury, but barely. "I know what he told you," I said through my teeth. "But we know that hardly matters to the Volturi." I ground my teeth together and took a slow breath to calm myself. It wouldn't be a good idea to kill him before I got as much information as I could.

Bella's love and encouragement flowed over me, helping me to control my rage.

"Major," he whispered, hardly moving his lips. "I swear on my own life I would not harm Isabella."

He said that with such honesty and sincerity, I couldn't help but believe him, though it was a declaration I didn't need to hear. His … feelings for her seemed to be escalating and it was pissing me off, and I fucking hated the way he said her name.

Pushing aside my current animosity, I asked, "Can you sense any of us here?"

"No."

"Can you detect where the Cullens are?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes. They are in Alaska, near the Denali National Park. Edward does not appear to be with Carlisle, though the seer, Alice, is near him. Edward is near Eleazer, Carmen, and the succubae." His eyes were just black slits. "I've not ever met Carlisle's mate, Esme." His glance moved quickly between Peter and Bella. "In order to more precisely pinpoint their locations, I would have to be closer to them."

He could have listened in on the Cullens and heard their plans.

I was curious about him saying Bella had broken his bond to Aro. I still didn't know if it was proximity to Bella's shield or something else.

"You said your bond to Aro is broken. Why do you say that? What is different?"

"My connection to Aro is difficult to explain. It was a sense of belonging to him. I experienced a feeling of weight in my mind, though there wasn't any." He glanced at Bella again. "That … weight was gone and replaced with a light — a warmth — I am unable to explain."

He was almost describing what I felt with Bella. Inhaling slowly, I asked, "Where is Felix?"

A small smile played over his lips. "He is in New York City. I cannot determine where Victoria is at this time." His eyelids lowered as he looked at me. "Your sire Maria appears to be in northern Mexico. Perhaps Tijuana. There is always good and plentiful hunting there."

Bella took in a sharp breath at his announcement about Maria. She had been doing well, but her emotions were beginning to whirl and were picking up speed, annoyance being at the forefront.

Turning slightly to look at her over my shoulder, I urged caution toward her and murmured, "It's
okay, Darlin'."

Then she was just two feet away from me. "Did he say that just to fuck with you?"

"Yes."

A spark of anger flashed through her narrowed eyes, and she glared at Demetri. "Listen up, Pookie."
She pointed her finger at him. "Quit trying to fuck with my Jasper or we're going to fuck you up, and
you know we can do it."

Charlotte's eyes flicked from me to Bella and back. She was ready to restrain Bella if needed.

"Bella, please move back." I spoke softly to her.

"Um, okay. It's just ... he's pissing me off, Jasper." She backed away, but pointed her finger at him
again. "And my name is Bella Whitlock."

Pleased that she corrected him about her name, I sent her my love. She was pissed, but she still liked
him. I would have almost preferred it if she was still afraid of him.

Unfortunately, his admiration for her swelled, and he was looking at her with devotion in his eyes.
"Remarkable," he said breathily. "Do you mind if I ask how old she is? I witnessed her memorial,
and assumed she was changed then, but her control is extraordinary."

I couldn't help the swell of pride in my mate, and felt similar impressions from Emmett and Peter, but
tempered it with a reminder to myself that Demetri might only be trying to distract or flatter me.

"Sixteen days," I answered him in a low voice.

He was impressed. "Absolutely remarkable. Who is her sire?"

Tightening my grip on his jaw, I eyed him closely. "I am."

His eyes snapped back to mine. "You would be called bonded mates by some. I'd heard the legends
of the skills and abilities of the terrible God of War and assumed they were greatly embellished, as
most legends are. I've since learned they are not exaggerations."

"Suckin' up ain't gonna work on him, Pookie," Charlotte said with a derisive growl as she moved
closer to Bella, putting her more directly in Demetri's field of view. She was very distrustful of him.

She sniffed and then gasped, her eyes nearly bugging out. "Oh, shit. Human."

How could a human have approached without me noticing? "Let him go," I barked at Emmett, as I
yanked Demetri from his grasp and up. Before he could even react, I tore his left leg from his body,
and when he started to scream, I hit him with a blast of terror so acute he dropped to the ground, still
screaming, and curled into a fetal position, his hands over his head.

I spun and leapt toward Bella who had inhaled, catching the scent when Charlotte had exclaimed. I
tackled her, rolling across the ground as she snarled and fought against me. I finally caught the odor
of the human and realized it was dead. The human, a male, was dead, but Bella didn't know that. It
wouldn't make any difference. She would still try to drain any blood from him that she could if she
reached him. Her overwhelming thirst blasted against me, as she flung her arms out at the same time
she kicked me in the thigh, breaking my hold. She twisted away from me and was off the ground,
racing toward the forest.
Peter or Emmett would guard Demetri and make sure he didn't escape. The terror I hit him with, and
dismembering him, would certainly slow him down if he tried to get away.

Bella had already disappeared. I bolted for the trees, smelling the dead human and Bella's scent as I
started up the mountain. There was a scream and fear squeezed my heart. It wasn't Bella's voice — it
was Charlotte's. She must have run up the mountain to find the human. Maybe she had tried to stop
Bella? She was too good of a fighter. What had Bella done to her?
Chapter 52, I Rip

Jasper's POV

Over the next bench, through the trees, I came upon a sight my mind just could not wrap around. I caught the other vampire's sweet scent of licorice and cherries under the odor of dead human and blood. How had she found us? How had she gotten so close without me sensing her?

Bella was just beyond me and to the right, falling to her knees, her fists pressed to the side of her head as she fought her terror, her thirst forgotten. "No, no, no, no," she was mumbling to herself through her clenched teeth.

Above her, Charlotte was writhing on the ground, hissing in agony; her left leg torn off at the knee, and her right arm missing below her elbow.

Standing farther up the incline was the nomad. Her left arm gone at the shoulder, her remaining hand forming a claw, her teeth bared, and half her hair and her ear burned away from the left side of her head. There were rough, flaking, blackened areas along her face and neck above the dirty, blood-soaked black T-shirt she wore. Her left eye was white with scarring, and weeping venom.

I couldn't allow her to hurt my brother's mate anymore or get near my mate. I bombarded her with terror and panic as I ran, but it had no effect. I suddenly realized I couldn't sense her. She snarled as her single, wild black eye stared into mine, and she crouched and sprang to attack Charlotte again.

"No!" Bella shouted in rage and warning, extending her hands up and out.

Victoria crashed into Bella's shield covering Charlotte and ricocheted away, immediately gaining her
feet and streaking toward Bella through the trees between them. "You! It's you! You're dead!"

"No shit! I'm a vampire, you bitch." Bella snarled and dropped forward, her left hand slamming onto the ground.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. As Victoria flew toward my mate — who was struggling to raise herself up — I soared toward them both, absolute fury exploding from me, my roar reverberating through the forest and across the mountain. Bella threw out her right arm to block Victoria. As she latched on to Bella's wrist, Bella's left hand swung up and clawed at the side of the nomad's head, gouging her skull and grabbing a fistful of the leaf-matted red hair. As Bella tore away a large section of her scalp, Victoria wrenched Bella's arm around, snapping off her hand.

Just a split second too late, I caught Victoria's wrist with my left hand, crushing it to dust, and I reached forward with my right, clamping down on her left shoulder. She snarled and bit into my wrist. My fingers dug in and twisted, crumbling her already mutilated, armless shoulder, causing her to release her bite and scream. The momentum of my attack forced Victoria's battered body into the ground beyond my mate — a large area of that flaming red hair missing, her scalp wet with oozing venom.

Everything was clouded with a red haze. I heard nothing but screaming, shrieking, and ear-splitting screeches as I ripped, and tore, and shattered everything my hands touched. When the shrieking stopped, I scowled with utter loathing at the bodiless head in my hands, watching her silent snarl. I slammed her head to the ground already covered with the formless chunks and bits of white vampire flesh. "Fuck you, bitch," I said, snarling at her.

Spinning back toward my keening, wounded mate, I saw her drop the curling hank of hair and scalp, and she fell to the ground on her left side, clutching the stump of her right forearm to her body. I was instantly beside her, but couldn't reach her. Her shield was up. I dropped to one knee, my arms stretching out, encircling her shield. Roaring in complete frustration because I couldn't touch her, I pressed my body to the shield. I had to get to her, had to reach her, had to help her. I saw only my wounded mate lying on the ground. I heard nothing but her agonized wails. Then she was in my arms, and her chaotic emotions broke over me and crashed through me — searing pain, panic battling against rage, protection warring with the need to flee, and shock pulsating over it all.

The assault lasted until I somehow managed to deflect it just enough to grasp the all-encompassing love I felt for her and bathe her in it. I couldn't lose myself in my fury — Victoria was in pieces, and I could finish her later. I had to care for my mate.

"I'm so sorry." Kissing the side of her head, I held her to me. "I got you. I'm right here," I murmured to her as I sat heavily on the ground and cradled her to my chest. I tucked her head to my right shoulder and ignored the stinging bite on my own wrist. "I'm right here, Bella. I'll help you. Please, let me help you."

Her howling wails began to quiet as she tried to burrow into me. "Victoria! She ripped off my hand! It hurts so bad!" she cried into my neck. Hot rage flared from her. "I'm gonna kill that fuckin' bitch!"

I clamped my arms around her, pressing her into my body. "No! She can't hurt you anymore." Catching her jaw to try to hold her still, I forced her face up to mine. "Bella, look at me. I know it hurts. Victoria can't hurt you now. I'll help you." I was so fucking relieved it was only her hand — it could have been so much worse — and I searched deep within myself for the serenity I felt when my skin touched hers and let it flow over her. I sent her my love and willed her to feel it. She stared frantically into my eyes and, at last, her rigid body began to feel less tense against me. "I have your hand. It's right here. Let me see."
As I knew it would, shattering Victoria's wrist made her drop Bella's hand, and it was right next to us. Gently, I pulled her right forearm away from her chest and examined it. There would be a scar, but it didn't look like any pieces were missing. The urge to attach her hand and lick her wound nearly overwhelmed me, but I caught myself. My venom would cause the scar to be worse. "Listen to me. I need more of your venom to attach it."

Shutting her eyes, she whimpered and sucked in a breath. "Yours. Your venom, Jasper."

"Mine will make the scar worse," I whispered to her.

"Is it over James' bite? Will it cover his bite?" Her eyes were already closed but she squeezed them more tightly, grimacing with the pain. She was fighting so hard against the shock.

Vampires didn't suffer from the physical aspects of it like humans, but the mental chaos could be overpowering. How was she even able to think about the scar on her wrist?

I tried to take as much of the pain from her as I could, gritting my teeth against it. My limbs and head had been ripped from me before, and I fought back against the fiery ache, knowing it wouldn't last, knowing I could beat it and shove it down. "It covers some of it. Look —"

"No! I don't want to see it again! Just do it." She turned her face into me and whimpered, and her left hand scrabbled against my chest, catching my shirt and tearing it as she clenched a handful.

"Hold your arm still." I tossed the hank of hair and Victoria's hand toward the pile of vampire parts, plucked Bella's hand from the ground, and licked the dirt and pine needles from the wound and spit them out.

She hissed and flinched, trying to snatch her arm away. "Oh, goddamn! That hurts! It's not even attached and it fuckin' hurts!"

"I know, Darlin'. Shh, you have to hold still. Concentrate on how much I love you." I reached around her with my right hand to grasp her arm as I licked the end of her wrist and quickly fit her hand to it. Kissing and licking the lesion, I applied my venom, helping the edges to seal as smoothly as possible.

Panting rapidly with the pain, she squirmed in my arms and began trembling. "It's better, Jazz, it's better. You licking it makes it feel better, but it still hurts." She tried to jerk away from me again. "Oh! Are you all right?" She squirmed around on my crossed legs, trying to look directly into my face. "Let me see." She reached for my hand with her right one and hissed in pain again when she tried to take hold of it.

When I caught her face with both of my hands, she sniffed and growled.

"I smell her all over you!" She twisted away from me and spotted the fresh bite on my right wrist. "Oh! She bit you!" She grabbed my hand and studied the ragged bite. "I'm sorry, Jasper. If I lick it, will that help?"

"Yes, but her venom is in it." Her licking it would help it heal, but I knew Victoria's venom would taste bitter to her. "It'll taste bad because of her venom."

"I don't care, Jasper. I love you." She gingerly held my hand and tentatively ran her tongue over the open bite and wrinkled her nose. "It tastes sour. Not like your venom."

The gentle movement of her soft tongue over my skin felt like caresses to me. Her loving touch went far in helping both of us to calm down even though her venom stung also. No one had ever taken
such care of me before.

Even when Victoria's venom was gone, Bella continued to kiss and lick the sealed wound. I thought if we had not been injured, we both would have begun purring.

"Bella. Darlin', her venom is gone from the bite. It's sealed. It'll be fine." I caught her forearm and tenderly kissed her wrist. "You have to be still for a little while. Your hand's not going to work just yet. Don't worry about me — I'm fine."

Bella sighed and eased back against my right arm and shoulder then bolted upright again, just missing hitting my jaw with her head.

"Charlotte! Oh, my God, Charlotte! Jasper, we have to help her!"

I'd actually forgotten about her in my blind fury at Victoria and my anxiety for Bella. I started to rise up from the ground to go to her and saw that she was whole and on Peter's lap, his arms around her. Her jeans were gone, but Peter had stripped off his green T-shirt and covered her. He was curled completely around her and murmuring to her, stroking her hair and back and kissing her face and head, trying to comfort her. Much like I was attempting to do with Bella. Unfortunately, they had both been through it before.

Lowering myself to the ground, facing uphill so I could keep Charlotte and Peter within my view while I kept an eye on the pieces of Victoria, I cradled Bella on my crossed legs again, and whispered to her, "Shh, Bella, look. Peter has her. She'll be all right."

"But I have to go —"

"No. If her mate wasn't with her, we could help her, but Peter has her. Don't go near them for a while — he might attack you since she's still in pain."

She floundered against me and squawked, "Rose! Where's Rose and Em! Are they hurt? We have to find them!" She began to panic again and tried to get away from me.

Even wounded and in pain, my mate was worried about her coven and ready to go to them.

There was movement through the trees up the mountain beyond Peter and Charlotte. Peter's growl joined mine, and I tensed, ready to fight and protect my mate until I recognized Rosalie and Emmett through the waving pine boughs. They knew not to come too close.

I clutched Bella to me, straining to hold her against my body and not jar her healing hand. Considering she was a newborn, and it was the first time she had been injured, she wasn't panicking as badly as she could have been. As a matter of fact, I was surprised at myself. Back in Forks, I had nearly lost complete control of myself when Bella had gone after Edward, and Carlisle had caught her and held her to the ground.

I couldn't explain it. The only differences I could come up with were Bella and I had finally mated, and she had better control of herself.

For those reasons, and in addition to the fact I had her and a coven to take care of.

"Bella, they're here. I see them up the mountain. Shh. They look fine. It's okay." Speaking loudly enough so that Peter and Charlotte could hear me, I tried to reassure Bella. I cupped her face and kissed her. "It's okay. We're all here." Seeing that everyone was doing as well as expected, the thought flashed through my head that I wanted to take Bella and get away from all of them; be alone with her and tend to her in peace. Then I realized I couldn't sense any of them. Peering more closely,
I saw Bella's shield was up.

Turning to Rosalie, I asked, "Rose! Any sign of any other vampires?"

"No." Obviously disturbed, she sagged against Emmett and brought her hand to her forehead. "I took the human over the ridge."

Emmett wrapped his arms around her. "He's been dead for hours, Jazz. Do you want me to carry him away and bury him?"

"The man!" Bella jerked in my arms, and hissed in pain when she tried to reach up with her right hand to touch my face. "I saw Victoria and forgot all about him. He smelled good, but he didn't smell quite right, but then I saw her—she attacked Charlotte, and I forgot … and she was so fucking fast, and I couldn't …"

"Shh, Bella," I crooned to her. "Please, be still so you can heal. The man didn't smell right because he was dead. I can only guess that Victoria brought his body here to use as a distraction or a lure." It was an old trick, though it worked better if the human was still alive and actively bleeding. I'd used it myself. It almost always worked to draw out hidden vampires.

Adjusting my hold on Bella, I looked up at Emmett and Rosalie again. They didn't seem especially disturbed, so I hoped it wasn't someone we may have known. "Did you recognize him? Is it a human we knew?"

"No, Jazz. His license says he's from Texas. Maybe he was a tourist? She could have picked him up from miles and miles away."

I was relieved he wasn't someone Bella might have known. "Right. No, don't carry him away. We don't want to spread his scent around anymore. Empty his pockets and bury him as deep as you can where Rose put him. I don't want us separated just yet, though we'll have to run the perimeter to see if she left any evidence near us." I nuzzled Bella's ear. "Put your shield down, Darlin', so I can feel them. It's okay. You did okay."

She whimpered in relief and the shield was gone. Instantly, I felt Rosalie's distress and Emmett's anger. Peter's rage and agitation came through clearly, but his love and worry over Charlotte was blanketing it.

Strangely, even without her head attached to her body, I should have been able to feel Victoria, but I couldn't. Then I felt Demetri's anxiety, concern, and pain.

"Peter — Demetri?" We couldn't allow him to leave.

His head was bent protectively over Charlotte, but his still-black eyes looked up toward me through his hair. "He ain't goin' anywhere. I ripped his other leg off and brought it with me."

"Oh!" Bella exclaimed, twitching in my arms again. "Why'd you do that?"

"Shh, Darlin'. Keeps 'em from runnin' off. He won't leave without his leg." Sending my senses further, I felt no one but our coven and Demetri, but that didn't put me at ease. Victoria had somehow come within my range, and I hadn't been able to sense her. She was going to be turned to ash, but I was contemplating attaching her head first to see what the fuck she was thinking.

"Peter, when Rose and Emmett come back, I want to take Victoria's head and body back down to the yard."
"Burn that fuckin' bitch, Jasper," Charlotte hissed. "All I smelled was that human. She must have rolled all over him. The whore ambushed me and ripped off my leg then my arm, but I got her fuckin' arm."

Peter's hand cupped Charlotte's face. "Sugar, calm down. You did good with just one arm. You need to hold still a little while longer."

"Goddammit, Peter, I want that bitch dead. You know damn well she carried that human's body here to draw us up the mountain." Then Charlotte glared at me. "The only reason she didn't get my head is because Bella shielded me! Why do you want her, Jasper? To question her? She's insane like Demetri said, but she must have run past here and caught your scent. She came back to try and attack you. We'll all be better off when she's ashes!"

"I didn't sense her. I still can't."

"Jasper," Bella said, tugging at my shirt. "Maybe you didn't sense her because she's gone insane. Demetri didn't know she was coming closer or I think he would have said something. You must have seen how shocked she was to see me. She didn't know it was me at first. She must have run by here and caught your scent. Maybe Em's and Rose's, too."

Very lightly, she touched the fingertips of her right hand to my cheek, and grimaced again. "We have to kill her."

Again, my mate stunned me. I had thought she would never want to kill anyone, but I studied her eyes and knew she was sincere — and she was right. Somewhere in Victoria's deranged mind she had recognized Bella and knew she was a vampire. If there was any way at all, Victoria would never stop until she had avenged her mate or had been ended herself.

If anything ever happened to Bella, I would never stop.

Victoria must have passed just close enough to our borders to pick up our scents and came back to try and ambush us. She was partly successful.

Touching my lips to Bella's, I whispered, "You're right."

She nodded slowly and started to get up from my lap, holding her arm to her chest. I assisted her, brushed the leaves and pine needles from her clothes, and ran my fingers through her hair, settling it along her back. I wasn't sure if I did it more for my benefit or hers. I needed to be in contact with her.

"Char, where'd you throw her arm?" I asked quietly, running my hand slowly down Bella's back.

"It ain't far from where you tore the bitch apart." Charlotte curled herself into a tighter ball in Peter's lap, and he rested his chin over the crown of her head, watching us.

I knew he would want to rip into any pieces of Victoria that were left, but he wouldn't want to be away from Charlotte either. She needed him.

Rosalie and Emmett came back from the other side of the ridge, their sad duty completed, and they came cautiously toward us. I signaled them to stay back. They would both have the human's scent on them.

I quickly gathered all of the unrecognizable, scattered body parts into a macabre, twitching mound. I didn't expect Bella to want to touch any of them, but she found and gathered many small pebble-sized pieces and threw them onto the pile.

She was quiet, her emotions heavily muffled, but it seemed she needed to stay in contact with me, shadowing me and touching my side, hip or arm frequently.
When we'd gathered all the pieces we could find, Bella stood silently, pressed against my left side — her face blank and emotions tamped down — as I took my lighter out of my pocket and rolled the striker, creating a small flame. She didn't seem to be in shock; just brooding and thoughtful. I wondered how she would take seeing a vampire burn. She had never witnessed it before. I didn't think Rosalie and Emmett had either.

It brought to my mind all the pyres I had created and stood over, and I ground my teeth as I thought that Victoria should have burned soon after James had. A jagged bolt of anger shot through me. Anger at myself for not going with my gut instinct and finding and ending her back when we had tried to keep Bella from James, and at Edward for being so fucking naive to think Victoria wouldn't try to avenge her mate.

Guilt bubbled up through the ire. Not searching for Victoria had allowed her to get close enough to injure Charlotte and my mate. But it was finally over. It seemed fitting that the red-haired bitch had stumbled upon us, much like the first time she had, but her existence and the threat she posed would be ended. Her ashes would sink into the ground of the Whitlock territory. She would never have the chance to create any more newborns or harm my mate again.

It crossed my mind to take her ashes and spread them along a part of our border, but we'd wasted enough time on the bitch.

As I started forward to touch the small flame to a venom and blood-soaked portion of Victoria's T-shirt, a blast of fury exploded from Bella, she snatched the lighter from my hand and slammed it toward Victoria's hate-filled, scarred face.

"Nobody touches my vampires," Bella said, snarling. "Burn in hell, bitch. Say 'hi' to James."

To say Bella had astonished me with her outburst to Victoria right before the nomad went up in flames would have been the understatement of my entire existence. There truly was a bit of vengeful demon in my angel.

She stood and stared fixedly as the blue and orange flames spread over the dismembered vampire with a look of intense focus on her beautiful face, frowning as if she were in deep thought. After Victoria was nothing but a wisp of purple smoke, grey powdery ash, and a bad memory, Bella spit on the ashes, started to turn, and tugged at my ripped shirt.

"Can we find Demetri's leg and give it back?"

I nodded at her and followed along behind as she began to search for Demetri's leg. Luckily, she remembered my warning about getting too close to Peter and Charlotte and gave them a wide berth as she sniffed it out.

She stood over Demetri's twitching limb that was down the mountain a ways from Peter and Charlotte, shuddered, and rubbed her right wrist and hand. "Jasper, we need to put Demetri back together. He's not our enemy." Her eyes moved slowly up to mine.

Oddly, Bella didn't seem disturbed at the destruction of one enemy while she urged me to spare another. Needing to get her away from all that and be alone with her, I'd settle for the reassurance of her touch; there were still things that needed to be taken care of. I reached for her and pulled her into my chest and breathed in her scent, tainted with the sweet smoke of the fire. I craved it to help calm the buzz of the adrenalin-like rush still coursing through my body. Anguish and guilt that she had been injured swelled through me again, and I couldn't stop myself from running my hands over her.

"Oh, Darlin'," I whispered to her. "I'm still not sure what to do about him." I pressed my lips to the
top of her head and inhaled deeply. "I'm sorry about your hand. I am so sorry."

"It still hurts." She pulled her arm to her chest again. "It's not your fault, Jasper. It's not. I was after the human, but Charlotte got ahead of me somehow. Victoria jumped out of the trees and attacked her." She leaned into me. "I panicked and couldn't move. I tried to shield Charlotte. I'm so sorry she got hurt." She tilted her face up to mine. "Should we take some of Victoria's ashes back to Demetri to show him we killed her?"

Speechless, I just stared at her for a moment. "Darlin', we don't need to show anyone that we ended her." Brushing my fingertips over her cheek, I tried to understand what I was sensing from her. She seemed too calm and accepting of what had taken place. I would have expected her to be … well, hysterical. "Bella, how do you feel about what happened here? What are you thinking?"

Sighing resignedly, she blinked slowly and swallowed. "I'm glad the bitch is dead." She brushed a few stay hairs out of her face. "I've had a few revelations today — the first one seeing what it's really like to be a vampire. You all tried to tell me in different ways, but I never really saw it before." She backed away from me and bent over to pick up Demetri's leg.

"I'll get that."

"No, I should carry it." She lifted it by the ankle with her left hand, grimaced, and tentatively hooked her right arm around my left. "All part of the vamp experience. Like Peter said when we were playing war, 'this is educational and we're learnin' shit'."

-oOoOo-

As we neared the clearing around the house, Bella broke into a run toward Demetri, who hadn't tried to crawl away to get to the leg I'd torn off him.

Still faster than me, Bella reached him, shrieked, dropped his leg, and spun around, slapping her hands over her eyes. Then she jerked her right hand away from her face. "Ow! That still hurts!"

I caught her arm and held it out and away from us as I pulled her away from Demetri. "Not too close, Darlin'. He's in a lot of pain. He might try to attack. Your hand's going to hurt for a while. What's the matter? Why did you scream?"

"Where's his pants?" she squeaked out. Her embarrassment flowed out and around us.

"Torn off with his legs." I held her to me and kissed the top of her head. The vampire was lying there with both legs missing, bleeding venom into the ground, and my adorable mate was embarrassed about seeing his dick. I'd have preferred it if she hadn't gotten a look, but shit like that happened when vampires tore each other apart.

Considering both legs had been ripped off, he was lucky those parts were still intact.

"Do any of you men besides Emmett wear underwear?" she mumbled into my chest.

"I do. Sometimes." I kissed her head again and wondered how she knew Peter never developed the habit of wearing underwear. Charlotte must have told her. "I'll help Demetri. He'll probably try to fight me, and I don't want you too close. Would you go get a pair of my jeans for him?"

Rosalie called from the edge of the trees. "I'll go with her, Jazz." She started toward us and stopped. "I smell like the human — never mind." She crossed her arms in frustration. "Bella, get a pair of
I tilted Bella's face up and kissed her. "Rose is right. You shouldn't be in the house when Peter takes Charlotte in."

She nodded and whispered, "I'll be careful with the door knob."

Very lightly, I kissed her healing wrist and let her go. She ran for the house, holding her right arm to her chest, and stopped in front of the door. She delicately turned the knob with her fingertips, pushed the door open, and disappeared inside.

Emmett strode over and stood over Demetri's still form. "He sure looks dead. Want me to hold him while you work on his legs?"

"Yeah. Get ready to hold him down." I peeled off my ripped shirt as Emmett crouched down by Demetri's head and placed his hands on Demetri's shoulders.

Demetri flinched, but still hadn't opened his eyes, so I squatted down next to him, shoved my right hand under his lower back and lifted. When I started to brush away the bits of grass and dirt on his wounds with my shirt, he growled and tried to jerk away from me.

He flung his arms out and Emmett grabbed them. "Chill the fuck out, Pookie. We're tryin' to help you." He pressed them down on his chest, holding him to the ground.

I did not lick Demetri's wounds; I held each leg only as long as I needed to for it to attach, then I released him and told Emmett to let him go as he hissed and gasped in pain.

Covering his groin with my T-shirt, I crouched beside him. "You know you have to hold still. Or haven't you ever had anything ripped off before?"

"My arms," he said through clenched teeth. "With Jane's and Alec's talents, there's rarely any need to discipline anyone by removing appendages — whether they require it or not."

I couldn't ignore the resentment rolling off him. Apparently, he had experienced the talents of the so-called Witch Twins. I stood up and watched his face as he worked through the pain of his limbs reattaching.

"Potential recruits in the guard are often incompetent and easily managed." He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The Volturi guard is quite well known throughout the world. When we went to clean up in Mexico, the newborns we encountered were quite predictable and were dispatched quickly even though there were hundreds of them scattered about." He grimaced. "That was before your time, of course, Major."

"I know about it." I saw Peter emerge from the woods away from Rosalie, cradling Charlotte in his arms. At the same time, I heard Bella come out of the house, and she darted across the yard toward them, holding the pair of jeans to her chest with her left hand.

"No, Bella!" I shouted at her.

I bounded toward them, fearing Peter or Charlotte would lash out at her for getting too close, but she was in front of them already and the strength of the worried concern I felt from Peter caught me up.

As Peter eased Charlotte to her feet, his T-shirt tied around her hips, and holding her to his left side, he spoke quietly to Bella. She raised her right wrist toward him, and he gently grasped her arm,
examined the fresh scar, and lightly kissed the top of her wrist.

I was fucking floored. Only mated pairs would allow an intimate touch like that to an injury. My earlier rage rekindled, and jealousy flashed hotly through me as I stalked toward them. With what had happened to his mate, no vampire would have reached out to another like that yet. Bella had let me touch her because I was her mate. Would she have allowed another near her to help her?

She was too close to them, but obviously wasn't in danger, and I needed a moment to think. What the hell was up with Peter kissing my mate? I'd never witnessed anything quite like that before. His mate had lost a lot of venom and was still in pain, yet they allowed Bella near them, and he fucking kissed her wrist? They should have both been growling to warn her off.

As Bella carefully put her arm around Charlotte, I reached quickly toward them with my gift and was annoyed that all I could get from Peter was relief; otherwise, his emotions were thickly muffled again. Before I could dig any further, Bella's remorse overtook anything else I might have picked up.

Was it gratitude for Bella shielding his mate from further harm, or did he do it to comfort her? If that was it, that action was so foreign to Peter's normal behavior, I didn't know what to fucking think. My jealousy stabbed me again.

"Charlotte! I'm so sorry she hurt you! I should have put my shield up, and —"

Charlotte slid her left arm around Bella and tried to reassure her. "Hush, Bella, that wasn't your fault. No newborn would have been able to resist the human, and you kept that bitch from ripping my head off. That would have been a lot worse, sugar."

"Is there anything I can do for you, Char? Some way I can help you? If you need something, I'll get it for you."

"You can't, sweetie. I need to hunt, and I ain't eatin' no damn deer."

Stopping several feet behind Bella and standing tensely, I studied Peter as he watched me warily. That was more the reaction I would expect. I was still surprised at both their actions toward Bella. Inhaling deeply, I tried to calm myself before I did something I might regret.

Peter raised an eyebrow. "Do ya realize you went right through Bubba's shield? She didn't put it down — you went through it."

I hadn't realized that. All I knew at the time was I had to get to her. I hoped that wasn't a sign of some weakness. I studied Bella hugging Charlotte. Did I get through it because I was her mate? Or had she let me through it? I didn't think she had let me through it; she had been in too much pain at the time. I really needed something else to worry about.

"I didn't realize that." Blowing out a breath, my eyes flicked up to Peter's. "Taking Charlotte in the truck to go hunt?"

"Yes. Spotted a meth lab a few blocks from the court house on the way to Home Depot," he answered, eyeing me back. "Unless you're goin' to kill him, we'll take Demetri. He can ride in the bed. Maybe he can drive the truck back while me and Char pick up the other one. We'll hunt then wait for Home Depot to open in the mornin'."

Bella pressed her head against Charlotte's then turned to me. "You're not going to kill him are you, Jasper?" She stepped slowly toward me and leaned into my chest, sliding her arms around my waist. Lowering her voice, she said, "I think maybe we can use him like Peter said. If he brings the truck back, then maybe we could send him up to visit Edward? That would be a good test for him, right?"
If he brought the truck back. What if he fled? Then the decision would be easy. I'd hunt his ass down.

Pushing my jealousy aside, I thought over what we had talked about earlier; I had to admit that whether I killed him or not, we should expect a visit from more of the Volturi.

I slid my hands around Bella's back, pulled her against my body, and buried my nose in her hair while watching Peter. Bella didn't want me to kill Demetri, and Peter had suggested we could use him. We could, but it was a risk. If Demetri went back to Italy, most likely he would be bound to Aro again.

In some respects, I had to admit to myself, being in charge of Maria's newborns had been easier. Decisions were simpler then. If somebody fucked up or pissed me off, they were lit on fire. Except for Peter. I'd been more than ready to beat the fuck out of him and rip him apart the last couple of weeks, but I hadn't wanted to end him.

Running a coven was a whole new ball of wax. Bella didn't want Demetri to die, and even Peter seemed to be encouraging me to allow him to live. I didn't know what Charlotte, Rosalie, or Emmett thought. Did I not trust him because he was one of the Volturi or was it because he was too interested in my mate?

"Charlotte, what do you think of Demetri?"

"I can't say I trust him, Jasper, but he hasn't been given a chance. And I can't believe I just said that." Her hand went to her forehead. "Of course, if we take him with us to hunt, and he disappears, that'll put a bulls eye right on him. I wouldn't mind rippin' him apart." She sagged against Peter. "But, maybe we should give him a chance. If he comes back, then we can tell him to go scare the hell out of Edward. In fact, I think he shouldn't mention seein' Bella or us at all. That's if Edward doesn't hear him comin'. He should just tell Edward that he wanted to visit Aro's old buddy Eleazer and check up on Bella." She shook her head and a small smile appeared. "It'd be nice to be a fly on the wall at that meetin'."

"If they could, they'd shit themselves." Peter almost grinned at that.

The final decision was mine. The advantage to leaving him alive was it would delay the Volturi sending others. Killing him would guarantee a visit from even more of them. Would he be grateful to us for sparing him? It wouldn't be a bad thing to have a member of the Volturi with a debt of gratitude. A contact in Italy could be advantageous. It would also be nice to know if Bella's shield kept Edward from reading his mind.

Bella handled her shield well with Demetri, but Victoria had rattled her. We couldn't rely on her shield in a crisis yet. She was still such a young vampire, and I was so proud of her, but I still didn't want the Volturi to know what she was capable of.

I studied Charlotte's eyes. "You wouldn't mind him being near you in the truck?"

"Well, I don't want him near me, so he can sit in the bed like Peter said. He probably lost enough venom he's pretty weak, and you know it hurts like hell." She sighed and nuzzled Peter's chest.

I looked up to Peter's eyes and couldn't read his expression or his emotions. Bella was feeling hopeful. "Take him with you. He'll owe us and it might be good to have a vampire that's grateful to us in Italy." Bella started to jump, and I grabbed her to me. "Darlin', don't thank me. If he runs, I'll be after him, and I'll kill him."
"Okay." The smile fell from her face, and she pressed her head into me. "But thank you anyway for giving him a chance. I don't think he'll run."

"He better not, Bubba," Peter said quietly. "We aren't afraid of the Volturi like the rest of 'em, except that Jane kinda worries me." He lifted Charlotte into his arms. "Char wants a shower and then we'll be headin' out." He nodded at Bella and me and made his way quickly to the house.

My eyes followed Peter and Charlotte into the house as Bella and I walked slowly back toward Emmett crouching over Demetri. Emmett released his arms and backed away to the edge of the trees. Demetri's pain-filled eyes lit up when Bella came near, and I pushed her behind me after grabbing the jeans from her.

"The red-headed bitch brought a dead human here, but she's been taken care of. You're going with Peter and Charlotte to hunt. We don't hunt humans near here." Bella's fingers crept along my lower back to my hip and just her touch on my skin helped to calm me. As her right hand rested against my right arm, I heard her sniffing at me again. I would need a shower myself to get Victoria's venom and the smell of the smoke off me. I dropped the jeans on Demetri's stomach. "These should fit well enough until you can get more."

His guarded eyes shifted to mine, and his hands moved cautiously to the jeans. "Thank you, Major," he said quietly.

Bella licked my back, but I managed to keep the surprised pleasure from showing on my face. Unfortunately, I couldn't get a read on her emotions, except for her own gratitude. At least she was happy about Demetri. "Don't thank me. After you've hunted, I want you to bring Peter's truck back here. He and Charlotte have another to pick up. If you don't come back, know that I will be after you, and I will find you."

Bella licked my back again, and as much as I enjoyed it and wanted her to continue, it wasn't the time. I reached back with my right hand and squeezed her hip.

"Yes, Major." Demetri's eyes lit up again as Bella peeked around my arm.

The growl rumbled up through my chest, and I had the sudden urge to grab her, run into the forest, and cover every inch of her with my scent, but I only had to resist a little longer — only until Peter and Charlotte reappeared and got him the hell away from us. To hurry things along, I glanced over to Rosalie and Emmett. "Rose, get Peter's truck out of the barn and bring it over here."

She dashed along the perimeter of the trees toward the barn and a moment later I heard the engine start.

Dropping my eyes to Demetri, I saw he was still gazing adoringly at Bella. Annoyed, I poked him with the toe of my boot, and his eyes snapped to mine. "After you bring the truck back, I want you to go find Edward and report back to us, but I don't want him to know where we are."

"It would be my pleasure to pay a call upon the young mind reader and our retired guardsman, Eleazer." A slight smile played around Demetri's lips.

Once again, I found myself wondering what he was thinking exactly, but shoved it aside as Rosalie drove Peter's truck toward us, swinging it around so that the bed of the truck faced us, and put it in park. She hopped out, dropped the tailgate, and darted back to Emmett.

"Back up, Darlin', I'm going to put him in the truck."

Bella backed away from me, her hands flashing up to her chest, and the fingers of her left hand went
around her right wrist.

Moving to block his view of Bella, I glared down at Demetri again, and asked, "Can you stand?"

He shook his head as his eyes roamed over my bare chest and arms, taking in the scars and bites again. His fear fluttered around me as I grabbed his shoulders, lifted him, carried him over to the truck, and sat him on the tailgate.

I didn’t even try to suppress the satisfaction I felt at his hiss of pain. I pushed him onto his back and shoved him farther into the bed of the truck and slammed the tailgate shut. Only a little surprised he hadn’t tried to bite or hit me, I picked up the jeans he dropped and tossed them to him. "Remember what I said."

I was nearly desperate to get Bella away and, thankfully, Peter showed up with Charlotte in his arms, their hair still dripping from their shower, and he gently placed Charlotte in the front passenger seat.

"We’ll see ya tomorrow around noon or so. Don't know when you might see him again," Peter said lowly, nodding toward Demetri.

"Right, Captain." I backed away from the truck as Peter climbed in. When they reached the edge of the trees, I turned toward Bella. She squawked as I snatched her up into my arms and headed north. I hoped I wasn’t making a mistake letting Demetri go.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, that's right. I killed a Texan.

Stunt coordinator: Bonzie
Chapter 53, I Mend

Jasper's POV

I'd decided to go to Bella's pond, and though it wasn't that far away from the house, I almost didn't make it when her silky, wet tongue caressed the side of my neck, and her gentle fingers brushed over my nipple, sending a fiery splash of desire through me.

Somehow, I made it.

With the setting sun, it didn't matter that there were no trees right around the pond. It wouldn't have made a difference anyway. As we left the cover of the trees, she wiggled free of my arms, planted her feet on the ground, shoved my pants down, pushed me down into the tall grass, and nibbled at me as she crawled all over my body. Before I could even blink, she was at my feet, pulling off my boots and yanking my jeans down my legs. She flipped them away and was back at my face, licking and nipping at my skin.
"Jazz, I can't take it anymore. I smell her all over you. She hurt you." Her left hand was gripping my hair, but she hissed when she tried to run her right hand over my head.

"I know your hand hurts." I caught her arm and kissed her wrist. "I need you, right now, but we need to slow down a little bit, Darlin' ."

Her thigh slid lightly over my dick, pressing it against my lower belly and wrenching a deep moan right out of me.

Okay, maybe we could slow down later.

I shoved her jeans down over her hips and thighs and then grabbed her waist as I rolled her onto her back, flattening the fresh green grasses surrounding us. I kneeled beside her and peeled her jeans and panties off, knocking off her shoes, and flung them toward the pond. I'd hardly gotten her pants off when she hooked her legs around me and reached up to grab my waist and pull me toward her.

"Jasper, I want you now," she said, gasping against my throat.

The full force of her lust and need hit me; her desperation nearly as strong as my own. I skimmed over her slick entrance and drove my cock into her snug warmth; so grateful she hadn't been injured any worse than she had been. Relieved she was whole and in my arms, I needed her—needed to be inside her and reaffirm my claim over her, and I snarled at the satiny sensation. Her nails raked down my back, sending erotic shivers through me, and she met me, thrust for thrust.

I couldn't speak. I could only growl and groan as I plunged into her again and again; my orgasm coming closer and closer. At the first pulse of my release, I grabbed her ass and forced her up as I shoved as deeply as I could. I came so hard and fast, I squeezed my eyes shut and nearly roared against her throat. The blinding euphoria of my orgasm burst from me, and Bella snarled, dragging her lips over my left shoulder as my body curled over her. The fingers of my right hand gripped her ass, and the fingers of my left dug into the earth beside her head with the intensity of her orgasm. She gasped, and her teeth sank into my neck by my left shoulder—the slice of her teeth and the sting of her venom only added to our shared ecstasy.

Shuddering with the last deliciously sharp spasms, I pushed into her, reveling in her sex tightening around me. She snatched her teeth from my shoulder and sucked in a breath while I moaned and slowly rolled to my back, holding her body to mine. I loved the feel of her weight on me, and I stroked her back and kissed her head as she licked her fresh bite.

She was mine, and she would always be mine, so why was I so jealous of Demetri and Peter? Because of the adoration for her I saw in Demetri's dark red eyes, and the way Peter tenderly kissed her injured wrist. He'd never reacted that way to anyone but Charlotte.

Bella blew out an unhurried breath and kissed my throat. "Damn, that was so good, Jasper." She licked my jaw and kissed my chin, and a slight frown crossed her face. "What's wrong? Why are you upset?" Her fingers traced lightly over my face, combing my hair back, and she moved, shifting slightly over my body. I gasped at the pleasurable sensations while still being buried within her.

I looked deeply into her shining black eyes, not knowing how to voice my fears and uncertainties. Truthfully, I didn't want to admit to them either. I could handle an insane vampire bent on the destruction of my mate and coven-mates; I could even handle a member of the Volturi trying to rattle my cage with implied threats and mention of my despised sire. But I couldn't deal with the way Demetri looked at Bella with desire or the devotion he emitted as he did so.

I couldn't handle my oldest friends showing such familiarity or unusual compassion to my mate—
couldn't bear to see how lovingly Peter took her arm or how affectionately his lips touched her wrist.

Sighing, I looked away from her, and her fingers grazed over my chin and drew me back to face her.

"Jasper," she said softly. "What is it?"

"I wanted to kill Demetri, and not so much because he's a member of the Volturi, but because of the feelings he has for you, and the way he keeps looking at you." I swallowed apprehensively. "You wanted him alive, and I want to give you everything you ask for, but I didn't want to give you that because I was jealous."

Her dark eyes sparkled in the fading light, and her fingers trailed smoothly down my neck to my chest, as her love wrapped around me, snug and warm. "You know I love you, Jasper. I've never loved anyone as much as I love you." Her tongue quickly flicked out, tasting my chin, and she reached to kiss me. "What's he doing? How does he feel about me?"

She honestly didn't know the effect she had on him, and I was relieved to an extent. I'd seen so many females—human and vampire—who would have taken advantage of the admiration that other males held for them.

"He…he adores you. He wants you. Even after I told him you were my mate. It seemed to grow from the moment he saw you, and I wanted—"

Bella's puzzlement flickered around us. "He adores me? How could he adore me? He doesn't even know me!"

She was truly perplexed, and I stroked her hair and gathered a messy lock of it to bring to my lips; I loved her so much. "Bella, I don't know what it is, but you had a similar effect on the Cullens. They were all fascinated by you. You heard what Demetri said—even the so-called vampire kings are very interested in you."

She rolled her eyes in disgust. "Yeah, supernatural dudes just love me." Her eyes returned to mine. "But I love you, Jazz. Only you." She kissed me again and sighed. "I know you don't like him, but when he comes back, sending him up to see Edward would be a good test. I think my shield is around all of you. Or around your minds? Your brains?" She started talking even faster. "It's like I'm aware of you all. If it's around Demetri, then Edward shouldn't be able to read his mind and won't know he's coming—if Edward's paying attention to anything but his own melodramatic misery. Demetri could tell him anything and Edward won't know he's been here already." She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow. "Like you said, it might not be a bad thing to have a mole in the Volturi."

"What do you mean you're aware of everybody?" I wondered how aware she was. "Do you know where they are?"

"No." She frowned. "It's like…it's like when someone is sitting next to you, and you can feel them even though they aren't touching you. Sort of. Kind of like when you feel like somebody is looking at you?" She shook her head. "Not exactly like that—not as creepy." She huffed and shut her eyes. "I just can't explain it. I don't know. I don't even know when it started. It was just there." She looked into my eyes and smiled. "It's almost like how I'm aware of you. How I feel you, but not as strong. When you're not near me, I feel a pull to you. I think I could follow it and find you. It's not like that with the rest of them. It's like they're next to me, even though they aren't. They're my vampires, but you're my vimprint." She grinned at me.

"Vimprint?" I couldn't resist her smile.
"Yeah. My vampire imprint. Or maybe my vamprint. It's like I don't even see them like I see you.” She kissed me again.

Stupidly ignoring the latest manifestation of her gift, my mouth decided to open again. "So, is Demetri your vampire, too?" And before I could stop myself, I blurted, "Do you think he's attractive?" My jealousy was worming its way through me again, and I was starting to get pissed off.

Bella stared off into the trees. "Well, yes, he's good looking. But, when would a vampire change somebody who was butt ugly?"

Not for the first time, the thought crossed my mind that she spent entirely too much time with Emmett.

Then her eyes snapped to mine. "Jasper, I feel that. There is no need to be jealous," she said, admonishing me. "Just because I love you, it doesn't mean I can't see if somebody is good looking or not." She sighed heavily with exasperation. "Jasper! Why are you jealous? Why are you getting mad? Have I done something?"

Because I was a stupid, jealous idiot, I didn't have enough sense to keep my mouth shut. "You saw Peter well enough to think he was so fucking pretty," I accused her, growling. "You ran right up to him, and he kissed your wrist. What did he say to you?" My anger was building, and I wasn't even sure why. Except that other males found my mate as beautiful as I did, couldn't keep their eyes, hands, or lips off her, and I couldn't fucking stand it.

Concern and bafflement fluttered around her. "He said 'let me see,' so I did. I didn't know he was going to kiss my wrist. I thought he just wanted to see it."

I slid my hand up the smooth skin of her back and gripped her neck through her hair. "You don't know how out-of-character that was for him, or any vampire, and for you to allow him to do it...He's not your mate, and you let him see your injury and let him kiss..." I snapped my teeth together as my words were coming harder and faster, heated by my rising anger. "I still can't believe he and Charlotte let you near them that soon, and you shouldn't have let him touch you like that."

Her own anger sparked in her narrowed eyes. "What do you mean touch me like that? He didn't knock me down and shove his tongue down my throat! You're starting to piss me off, Jasper. I didn't do anything wrong."

Pushing against my chest, she sat up, and her change of position sent a flood of sensuous heat through my groin.

"And why would I want Peter or Demetri?" She pulled my hand from her neck, and in a blur, she was up and standing stiffly about ten feet away from me, her hands at her sides, clenched into tight fists.

With a guttural grunt, it took me a moment to get over the utter shock of not being within her, and I rose deliberately from the ground.

Apparently, her right hand and wrist were feeling better, and if I wasn't able to control my mouth, she'd be slapping it shut.

Then I was thunderstruck by the sight of her half-naked body. Her only clothing was her purple T-shirt, and I was mesmerized by the long, smooth lines of her legs and the glistening curls of her sex.

Instantly, I wanted her again. I ached to be inside her and have those legs wrapped around my hips. I stepped toward her, my hands reaching for her.
"Stop right there, Major!" She snarled and pointed her finger at me. "My eyes are up here, and I asked you a fucking question. Why would I want them?"

Tearing my eyes away from the enticing flare of her seductive hips, I blanched at the furious, glittering black of her irises.

She was abso-fucking-lutely magnificent in her outrage and indignation. Then my own came charging back. She had no fucking clue how beautiful she was to me, and even if she wasn't my mate, she had no idea how fucking appealing and tempting she would be to other males.

I took another step toward her and noticed my hands were compressed into tight fists, much like hers. I forced my fingers to open. "Bella," I said, my jealousy making my voice low and rough. "What they are is very good looking, tall, strong males. Demetri has a fairly secure job with the Volturi and a permanent home in a fuckin' castle. He has a high status with them. He's one of their top guards. I expect females find him very charming unless he's about to rip their heads off. I would suspect he has accumulated quite a bit of wealth over the centuries he's been alive. I know Peter has. And you don't know how the females fall all over themselves when they see Peter. They fuckin' love him. The scars scare them for a minute, but then they see those scars as evidence he's a strong fighter and protector. Most females find that very appealing, too." I sighed. "You still don't understand very much about vampires. You are so fuckin' beautiful—"

"I'm a vampire. Of course—"

"No," I said, my hand slicing through the air. "If you hadn't been a pretty human, you wouldn't be a beautiful vampire. My venom only enhanced what you already are." I took another step toward her. "You are so stunningly gorgeous, any male would be attracted to you."

Her eyes were still snapping with anger. "You're only saying that because I'm your mate."

"That's not it, Bella." Another slow step brought me closer to her. "Even if you weren't my mate, I would think you were sexy as fuckin' hell, and I would want you, and other males would think the same thing. Demetri already does. He wants you. He desires you, and it pisses me the fuck off."

Her fists trembled at her sides. "Jasper," she said through her clenched teeth. "Just because he might, for a moment, think he wants me, it doesn't mean I'll—"

"Just listen to me." My eyes narrowed with my growing anger. "The other thing you don't understand is vampires. The Cullens try to act like nice humans, not like ninety-nine point nine percent of the vampires in this world. When vampires want something, they take it. Demetri, or any other male that happens to see you, could decide he didn't give a shit that you're my mate and try to take you from me. It wouldn't matter that you're my mate. They would want you and take you."

"Dammit, Jasper! Who says I would go with them? They're not you. I love you!" She shook her fists at me. "I don't want them. I want you. Why do you keep worrying about that?"

Realizing I was stalking her, I moved another step closer. "You didn't hear me, or you don't understand. I didn't say they would ask you to leave with them. They would kidnap you. They would steal you away. That's what vampires do. That's what they are! That's what we are."

"Vampires are possessive, proprietary, selfish—if they see something they want, they take it. Humans, clothes, money, territory...my mate. Vampires take! That's how we survive. It's how we live. It's part of why I get so jealous, because I know how they are. How I used to be. How I still am." I ran my hand through my hair, hoping I was getting through to her. "You know Charlotte is mated to Peter, but you were still jealous of her. When you first saw Rosalie, you were pissed off and jealous and wanted to kick her ass for being
near me. You, Alice, and I can’t even be in the same room. You feel protective and possessive over me and the rest of our coven. You weren’t like that to the same extent when you were human. It’s your instincts telling you that if you don’t fight to keep what’s yours, another vampire will come along and take it."

"Peter and Demetri wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t let anybody take me. I’m stronger—"

"Only for now. By next summer, you’ll have lost that newborn strength, and you’ll be vulnerable. Most males will be bigger and stronger than you, and a lot of them won’t give a shit about that little rule about not fuckin’ around with somebody’s mate. If they can’t physically force you, they’ll try to trick you. So even with your shield, you’re not completely safe. Vampires are connivin’, lyin’, sneaky bastards, and the older they are, the better they are at it. The prize would be worth the risk."

"You don’t get upset when Emmett hugs me and shit. And that doesn’t explain why you keep getting pissed off at Peter. He has a mate, and she’s gorgeous." Bella flung her hands up in the air. "So he kissed my wrist. He was probably just a little worried about me."

"I can sense what Emmett feels about you. I can’t tell what Peter feels about you, and it drives me out of my mind." I raised my fist up and let it drop as I inched closer to her. "You don’t know Peter very well. He never gave a shit about anybody except me, and he didn’t give much of a shit. Then he met Charlotte. I never really saw how mated pairs behaved with each other until after I left Maria and saw them together, but I knew not to get too close to her." I blew out a breath. "He—they—really care about you, and that is so contrary to their normal behavior…I still can’t believe they let you near them like that, and he fuckin’ kissed your wrist, and you let him!" I was pissed off all over again.

"Don’t you start with that crap again." She was stiffly pointing her finger right at my face. "What was I supposed to do, punch him for being nice? Well, I probably should have fainted, because how often is Peter nice? Oh, never mind about that!" She waved her hands through the air as if she were shooing away those thoughts. "You know how I feel about everybody. I love them, and—"

"And you’re mine!" Having crept close enough to her, I grabbed her right arm, yanked her to my chest, and caught the back of her neck with my left hand. My lips were over hers, and I growled. "I know you love them. I know how you love them, but Isabella, you don’t know what I feel from Demetri. I can’t help my jealousy."

I captured her mouth with mine, and dragging my right hand down the center of her chest, I tore her T-shirt from her so that I could finally get my hand on her soft breasts.

With my right hand roughly kneading her breast, she moaned into my kiss and her rigid body relaxed and molded against mine. "I don’t want anyone else touching you the way I touch you." My fingers brushed over her stiff nipple, and she gasped. Kissing her jaw, I moved to her neck and licked over the scars of my claiming bites. "I don’t want anyone else’s scent on you—only mine."

The instinct, the drive to claim her as mine and cover her with my scent reared its green-eyed head, and I turned her so that her back was to me, and she hissed as I pushed her to her knees. Down on my left knee and bending over her, I forced her upper body down and nuzzled her neck beneath her ear, breathing in her enticing fragrance that was so close to my own and growled possessively again. "Only my venom on you. Only my come inside you." I ran my hand down over her stomach, caressing her satiny skin, and when I reached her soft curls, I slid my fingers between her wet folds, gathering our mixed fluids from our previous lovemaking, and spread them over her. "Only my come all over you."

She groaned and mumbled incoherently with her sudden spike of lust, and she pushed her sweet ass back against me.
"I love the scent of my come on you." Pushing her hair over her left shoulder, I nuzzled the right side of her neck and nipped at her shoulder. "I love your scent all over me. You get so wet for me, and I love that." The speed of my breath was increasing, as was hers, and my lips were at her ear.

"Smelling you, touching you—just looking at you makes my dick So. Fuckin'. Hard." I slid my fingers back to her clit and began circling it the way that made her squirm in my hands while I kissed and sucked at her neck.

"Oooo, Jazz, that's good. That's so good," she panted. "Please. Please." She groaned and pushed her ass against me again.

Amazed again that she felt so warm to me, I angled my hips to barely push the head of my dick against her, and I breathed over her ear. "No one but me will ever touch you like this."

"No. No. No one." She rubbed her head against mine then she reached for my right hand with hers. "Oh, Jasper," she hissed. "Please, I want you."

"Do you want my dick inside you?" I licked her shoulder. "Do you want me to fuck you and come inside you? Spread my venom all over you?"

"Oh, God, yes!" she shouted, and her right hand was spread over the side of my face, holding me against her. "Yes. Please."

I slid my rock-hard cock over her eager, throbbing heat and growled to her. "Girl, you belong to me. Only me. No one else."

Biting into the smooth skin of her shoulder, holding her to me, she cried out my name as my hips thrust forward, filling and claiming my mate again.

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Wanting to take care of my newborn mate in all ways, after a few hours of some deliriously intense sex, I had tried to encourage her to feed. Her annoyance at me resurfacing, she had been contrary and had resisted until I had caught a stupid mule deer that had come too close, bit into its thick neck, and let the blood run down my chin and throat. Her eyes zeroed in on the blood, and her thirst and need had beaten into me, but her instincts had taken over. She wanted the warm blood, but a trickle of fear and caution prevented her from taking the offering until I had purred at her and sent a heavy wave of my love over her.

She drained the deer, tossed its body aside, and attacked me, her lust nearly overwhelming me. I'd hated to do it, but I needed to feed also. I had regretfully fended her off and ran, knowing she would follow, and would catch me, if I didn't find something else to drain quickly enough.

I'd run across the scent of whitetails and tracked them, snapping the necks of two when I'd barreled through the small herd. After we'd drained them, the blood smeared on her face had me more than ready to welcome her snarling advance, and I groaned loudly when she pushed me to the ground and sank down over my throbbing dick.

After hours of my body thrusting into and sliding over hers, my hands gripping and caressing every beautiful inch of her, and my tongue removing every trace of spilled blood from her, Bella was lying contentedly across my chest, her fingers idly twirling a lock of my hair. She sighed serenely through her quiet purr and nuzzled my neck, her light kisses tickling my skin. I just breathed her in; my scent was all over her, hers was all over me, and I purred deeply in satisfaction.
We were both so blissfully satiated, I hated to move and disturb our tranquil peace, but the thought began to nag at me that if Demetri was going to return, he would do it before daylight, and I wanted to be at the house and have my mate fully clothed before he did.

Stroking her hair, my fingers threaded through the soft locks, gently untangling and combing out the bits of leaves, grass, and pine needles. "We need to find what's left of our clothes, Darlin', and head back to the house."

"I'd rather stay right here," she said softly as her hand glided down my stomach.

I caught her hand before she reached my groin. As much as I wanted it to continue to its destination, I knew she was being ornery again and trying to distract me. Kissing her captured fingers and gathering her hair with my other hand, I sat up, easing her to the ground. "But wouldn't you like a bubble bath?"

"Oh, now you're trying to tempt me with a bubble bath. I'm still not sure how you got me to feed." She grabbed my right hand and examined my wrist. "How's your wrist? Does it still hurt? I hate that she bit you."

My own anger flared up again because the red-haired bitch had harmed my mate. I crushed that emotion and nuzzled her face to calm myself. "It's fine, Darlin'."

She sighed, kissed my wrist and stood up, brushing even more forest and grassy debris from herself and her hair. "Vampires are sneaky and conniving."

I stood and traced my fingers along her jaw. "I wouldn't have to be," I began, kissing her forehead, "if some little newborn wasn't trying to be so cantankerous. You were hurt and lost venom. Feeding helps the healing."

"You distracted me enough I forgot about it. It hardly hurts at all." She grinned and pushed me away, demonstrating how well her hand was doing, and then we quickly found our clothes though there wasn't much left of her T-shirt.

Amazingly, we hadn't shredded our pants. After carefully pulling on her jeans, she situated a wide strip of the deep purple cloth over her breasts, like we'd done during our week away in the wilderness, and I tied it at her back. I quickly separated her hair into three sections and braided it, tying another piece of her T-shirt around the end to hold it. I couldn't stop myself from pulling her to my chest and planting kisses along her bare shoulder and exposed neck. The wispy curls at her hairline were irresistible.

Slightly annoyed, she pulled away from me and turned to face me. "A bath sounds really good about now. Right?"

"Bella," I said, drawing her name out and taking hold of her hand to kiss her knuckles. "Joining you in the tub would be even better."

"Both of us still won't fit, so you won't be able to connive me into letting you." She backed away a few steps and picked up her shoes. "Besides, I'll get there before you!" She spun and bolted in the direction of the house, her teasing laugh ringing through the night air.

Shaking my head at my adorable little spitfire, I zipped my jeans, scooped up my boots, and hauled ass after her, fully intending to put my scent all over her again after her bath.
After a quick shower alone, while Bella waited for me to vacate the bathroom, I tried to entice her to me by walking naked out of the bathroom, with only a towel draped around my neck. My little newborn was hell bent on getting her bubble bath and stood glaring at me, hands on her hips, and her eyes never once dropping below my face, until I sighed dejectedly, stepped aside, and let her into the bathroom.

Sighing loudly again, I sprawled across our bed, naked, and waited quietly, but impatiently, for her to finish. The vanilla and brown sugar of her bubble bath, along with Bella's enticing cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg, wafted from the bathroom, filling our bedroom and my head with her warm, tantalizing perfume. Knowing she needed a bit of time to herself, I hadn't insisted on joining her in the tub.

It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since Peter's phone call warning us about a visitor. A lot of shit had happened in those hours, but Bella had handled it all exceptionally well for a newborn. Lightly splashing in the tub, her emotions were contentedly smooth, humming quietly along with only an occasional hiccup of anger, fear, or protectiveness. I suspected she was trying to control them, knowing I wasn't far from her. She seemed to be simply concentrating on enjoying the hot, fragrant bath, and I was more than willing to let her have that bit of peace if it made her happy.

The more I considered it, the more I thought that Demetri would return. He had been too interested in Bella, even when he was in pain, and I was certain he would be back. Jealousy started sizzling up through my body again, and I clenched my fists over my stomach, trying to keep from gripping and tearing the quilt on the bed. But just the thought of him anywhere near my mate, and looking at her with the same desire as he had before, set my teeth on edge.

I would definitely be putting my scent all over Bella, and quickly, because we only had an hour or so until daybreak.

Hearing the thunk of the bathtub drain and the water draining away, I started to breathe more quickly in my anticipation and sat up.

There was a longer wait than I had expected. I could hear her brushing her hair and then a sharp snap.

"Oh, dammit!"

"What's the matter, Darlin'?" Silently, I got up off the bed and stood in the middle of the floor. I breathed in her enticing, erotic scent and caught myself crouching, ready to spring at her.

"I broke the damn handle off the goddamn hairbrush," she groused. "At least I can still use it. If I remember to be gentle. Rose might be a little annoyed I broke another one. Where are Rose and Em?"

"I don't know, Darlin'. I don't feel them anywhere. They're probably hunting and…"

"Um, yeah." Embarrassment flickered around her contented emotions, and she sighed. "I guess, maybe, it's been a while since they hunted…and…stuff." Blowing out a breath, she continued in a shaky voice, "It must have been really awful for them to have to bury that poor man." Her breath caught. "And his family won't know what happened to him. Maybe he was a tourist on vacation, and he's just gone."

"Darlin'," I said softly. "It doesn't excuse it, but people disappear all the time. There's no way to tell
how many of the people who go missing every year might be victims of vampires or just their own bad luck. His body needed to be buried to protect us, and Emmett and Rosalie know that. We'll still have to run the perimeter to make sure she didn't leave any evidence of him near us."

"I know," she said sadly. "I feel bad for Em and Rose having to do that, and for the man's family, but something in me wants to make sure we're all safe, and I don't care about anybody else." A touch of guilt and heavy wave of protectiveness flowed from Bella. "The most important thing is that we're all safe."

"Nothing is more important to me than your safety, Bella."

"I really understand that. I really feel it." She continued brushing her hair and was grumbling to herself, and I heard a drawer open slowly and close again. Then she appeared in the short hallway between the closets, a towel wrapped around her and a bright smile on her face.

"Look, Jasper! I braided my hair!"

I pounced.

She squawked as I ripped the towel from her body, grabbed her waist, and leapt back toward the bed. I sat her on the edge of the mattress and laid her down as I nuzzled her breasts, taking one of her soft pink nipples into my mouth. It stiffened against my tongue, and she moaned as her hands went to either side of my head, her fingers threading through my hair.

"J-Jasper, shouldn't we get dressed?"

Her fingertips scraped over my head, sending tingles down my spine, while her legs slid up the outside of my thighs and over my hips as I leaned over her.

"Not yet," I said, growling, releasing her right nipple and trailing my tongue over her chest to her left. I paused only long enough to thoroughly wet my fingers with my venom before sliding my hand down her body as I reached for her sex, my fingers slipping inside her warmth, my thumb grazing over her clit. "Part of your safety includes me all over you."

"Oh!" Bella's fingers fist ed in my hair and, she held me to her breast. "Let me get all the way on the bed." She groaned into my hair.

I knew Demetri was coming closer, even though I couldn't actually sense him yet, and my agitation increased. The urgency I was feeling to scent her and make love to her was building exponentially. I released her nipple with a quick nip and buried my face in her neck. "No."

She pulled her hands from my still-damp hair and grasped my shoulders. "What's the matter?" she asked, panting, her lust building.

"I need you." A low growl rumbled up through my chest as my fingers slid into her again and again. "I'm gonna fuck you, and you're gonna come." I dragged the head of my dick over her ass, leaving a trail of my pre-come over her silky skin.

At her rush of pleasure, I rose up, pulling my fingers from her wet heat, and drew my hand up my belly to my chest, spreading her musky, spiciness over me.

"Don't stop!" she complained, reaching for me, her right hand clamping around my left wrist. She let out a whining moan and hooked her heels at the top of my thighs, trying to pull me into her.

"I won't stop." I urged her up, as I grabbed my swollen length. "Look," I ordered her. "Watch as I
put my dick in you."

Her eyes snapped open as she tugged at my arm, raising herself. Her beautiful, glittering black eyes were fixed on my cock as I slid it over her. Then they flashed up to mine, and she grinned, a mischievous light glinting in the shining depths. She licked over her left hand and fingers and placed her hand on my chest. Her palm pressed into me as she spread her venom down my stomach, and a trilling purr warbled through her throat as her fingers coasted over the head of my dick.

"Fuck me, Jasssperr," she hissed.

I almost lost control and plunged into her with the tidal wave of lust that broke over me. My growl thrummed louder, and I sucked in a breath as her fingertips sent a shot of burning heat through me. "Look," I rumbled. When her eyes dropped back to my hand, I slid into her gradually, deliberately, watching as I sank into her, my entire body shuddering with our combined pleasure and the relief at finally being inside her.

She snarled and pushed her head back against the bed, arching her body up, and her legs slid up until she could wrap them around my waist, holding me to her.

I couldn't pull away from her, so I rolled my hips against her, pumping into her, the fingers of my left hand digging into her hip and my thumb on my right hand stroking her engorged clit.

"Oh, fuck, Bella…mine, only mine." I was salivating so badly, I quickly wiped my hand over my mouth and then spread that venom down her side, hip, and up her thigh, while her growl hitched, and she reached for my hand. Gripping my right wrist as my hand returned to stroking and caressing her sex, she squirmed against me as I pushed into her.

"So fuckin' good," I said, gasping, trying to breathe in even more of her fragrance. "Every. Fuckin'. Time."

Her breath caught, and I felt her inner muscles clench, and I knew she was going to come. Thank Christ, because I knew I wouldn't last. Her eyes were squeezed shut, she was biting her bottom lip, her head was thrashing back and forth, and it was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

Rolling my hips, thrusting into her, I bent over her. "I feel it. I feel you're gonna come. And when you do, I'm gonna come so hard…I'm gonna fill you—" Then I thought she was going to crush my wrists as she exploded around me. She screamed through her clenched teeth, her pink lips curling back, and her legs drawing me in tight.

The electrifying sensations of her orgasm flashed through me, overtook me, and I came, straining against her, my chin dropping to my chest as I watched her writhe and shake under my hands. There wasn't anything more erotic than my Bella gasping my name as she came, pulling my orgasm from me, holding me, her hands reaching for and clinging to me.

When the last pulses of my orgasm faded away, I gently lifted her into my arms, relieved she hadn't crushed my wrists, and climbed onto the bed. I eased down onto it, cradling her to my chest and kissing the top of her head.

"Bella, I love you so much," I murmured into her hair, lifting her long braid so we wouldn't lie down on it. I shifted to my back and ran my hands over her shoulders.

She sighed and snuggled into me, her soft purr vibrating through both of us, setting off my own.

"I love you, Jasper." She kissed my chest over my heart. "Now, what's the matter? You seemed just a little upset, and, um, rather urgent. Well, then I was a little distracted…"
I closed my eyes and sighed. I couldn't seem to hide anything from her. "I think Demetri will be back." My eyes shifted to look at the window at the front of the house, and I could see that the sky was brightening. "And I think he'll be here mainly because of you." My hands wandered over the smooth muscles of her back and down to the swell of her hips.

She planted a soft kiss over my heart and lifted her head to study my face. "Do you feel him? Is he on the way now?"

"No, I don't sense him, but I think he'll be here soon. Before the sun is up."

She kissed my jaw, and I saw the concern in her still dark eyes. "Jasper, please don't worry. I honestly don't think he'll do anything to hurt me or you. Please don't be jealous." Her hand traveled slowly over my chest to my neck and into my hair. "Please try not to be jealous. You know I love you."

I smiled at her and raised my head to kiss her, and that's when I felt it—the strong curiosity of another being at the very edge of my range. I froze as I waited to hear if it was Rosalie or Emmett. I knew them so well, it shouldn't take long before I caught the flavor of their emotions.

Bella's eyes grew wide at my stillness. "What is it? Rose and Em?"

"Wait." A moment later, I knew. It wasn't our coven-mates, and it wasn't Demetri. I was sure it was a vampire, and he or she was exuding curiosity, wariness, and annoyance as he cautiously came closer.


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Bella hadn't been happy about it, but I only wiped some of my come off her before tossing the towel into the bathroom and dressing her as quickly as I could. We didn't have time to wait for her to dress herself.

She only growled a little bit when I licked her back above her bra strap before lowering her dark green T-shirt. "Jasper, I think you're carrying this scenting thing a bit far."

"Not really, Darlin'," I said as I pulled my grey V-neck T-shirt over my head. I only had a few left. We'd have to do some internet shopping again. "Like I told you, you haven't met many vampires. I want to make sure you reek of me. Besides—I like it. Sit."

"Yeah, everybody's going to smell us from a mile away," she grumbled.

Fortunately, she didn't argue, but she frowned at me as she dropped to the floor. I had her socks and shoes on her feet in a couple of seconds and was pulling on my boots a second later.

"Are we going to wait on the porch again?"

"No. This one is coming in from the north. We'll jump into the trees and head that way. C'mon, Darlin'." I tugged her into the bathroom as the first rays of the sun began to peek into the window. "Stick with me, stay behind me, unless I tell you different, and don't growl."

She opened her mouth, ready to start arguing, but snapped it shut and nodded. I grinned at her, licked her face, kissed her, and jumped out the window over her bathtub.
When she landed in the yard beside me, I held my finger to my lips and leapt up into the trees. She was right behind me as we bounded from branch to branch. All her playing with and chasing Emmett through the treetops had paid off. She landed in each one nearly as noiselessly as I did. I wanted to stay to the east of where I thought the intruder was, so we ran out of trees very quickly. We streaked across the field at the bottom of the mountain and headed for the next copse of pines.

"I'm pretty sure it's a vampire," I whispered to Bella. "He's still heading south. Probably following one of our trails. We'll be circling around."

"A vampire? You said 'he.' You think it's a male?" Her worried eyes looked up to mine as she huddled against me on a thick limb.

I kissed her forehead. "Don't worry, Darlin'. We'll go east and north to get around behind him. The trees are sparse on this side, but we can do it."

"East?" Her hands tugged at my shirt.

"The wind, and we'll be downhill from where I think he's moving. Cooler, heavier air flows down the mountain. Victoria knew that. That's how the scent of the human came down to us. I'm hoping we catch his scent. Stay close to me. Ready?"

Bella's lips pressed into a thin line, and she nodded.

Since I'd mated with Bella, it seemed I was better able to detect the general location where another vampire was, once I'd become aware of their emotions. Or maybe the only difference was I had even more reason to notice. I had a mate to take care of.

We were about 1500 feet or so away from the vampire that was now almost directly west of us. Moving more cautiously through the trees, we went another thousand feet north before I turned us to the west.

Stopping on a large limb about twenty feet above the ground, I took in another deep breath, trying to scent the strange vampire. Sensing that he was still heading south toward our house, I motioned to Bella that she should stay in the tree while I dropped to the ground. Stepping very lightly through the bed of pine needles, I tacked back and forth until I found his scent—a male, with an aroma that reminded me of a clear, spring-fed pond surrounded by weeping willows.

Before signaling to Bella, I concentrated on the male's emotions. He was still moving away from us, but slowly. I looked up at Bella and motioned for her to come to me.

She dropped silently to the ground and hurried to me as I walked toward her and brought my finger to my lips again.

 Whispering into her ear, I told her, "I found his scent. I want you to smell it, but if you get upset when you smell it, you have to be quiet. Do you think you can do that?"

She sighed, and her big, worried eyes rose to me as she nodded sharply.

I urged her to follow me and stopped when we reached the spot where the vampire had passed. She closed her eyes and sniffed. Then she inhaled deeply, and her brows lowered in concentration.

Tilting her face up to mine, I raised my eyebrows in question. She frowned slightly again and shook her head. I smiled at my mate and brushed my lips over her forehead, then tugged at her hand to follow me. We tracked the vampire over the ground for a while until I felt that he had paused.
We weren't far from Bella's pond, and if we were up in the trees, we would probably be able to see it. I pointed upward and leapt up to a branch thick enough to hold both of us.

The trees were close enough together we didn't have to jump far and the pond was soon in my sights. I didn't see anyone by the pond, but I knew he was near it. With the rising sun, he was probably just inside the edge of the trees of the south side of the clearing. The majority of it was still in shadow, but most vampires wouldn't want to be out in the open during daylight hours.

He was curious, and there was still a touch of annoyance hovering over his wariness, but then a lusty appreciation began to weave into and around his other emotions. I stifled an irritated growl. Evidence of Bella and I would still be quite heavy in the area, and unless he was gay, he was another one that was savoring Bella's scent.

Movement through the trees at the far end of the water caught my attention. A very large male with short dark hair stepped from between the trees and moved slowly toward the area where Bella had knocked me to the ground and ravished me.

Not that I hadn't ravished her right back, of course.

Bella's emotions had been concerned, worried and alert, but then she was puzzled. I reached back for her, not taking my eyes from the enormous male dressed in black slacks and a dark grey oxford shirt. Not exactly attire one would wear to hike in the Rockies.

Her hand clasped mine, and she shifted closer to me on the thick branch. Her right hand rested against my back, and she leaned past my left arm, studying the male.

Then her eyes flew open, her grip tightened on my hand hard enough to start hurting, and before she could gasp, I turned and clamped my right hand over her mouth.

"Bella, quiet," I said with barely a wisp of air passing my lips. "Do you recognize him?"

Her wide, fearful eyes flicked to mine, and she nodded.

Cautiously lowering my hand from her mouth, I glanced at the vampire and back to her. "Who?"

She gulped and whispered, "I think it's Felix."

Felix of the Volturi. He was as massive as Emmett, if not a couple inches taller, and the rumors were that even though he didn't have any sort of gift, the kings had kept him around because of his loyalty and his great skill as a fighter.

Demetri had said he was in New York. Demetri was a lying motherfucker, and I thought I'd found a good enough reason to end him.

My eyes narrowed as I took in the sight of the large vampire creeping guardedly through the lightly swaying grasses until he stood over the trampled and gouged area where Bella and I had made love.

He took in a deep breath, expanding his wide chest, as his eyes darted over and around the open area and water. Perplexed, he turned slowly and inhaled again.

Bella's and my scents were so entwined, it seemed to confuse him. But when the wide, knowing grin spread over his face and sexual lust coiled darkly around him, jealous fury exploded within me, and I sprang toward him.
Hearing limbs snapping as I broke through them, he whipped around to confront his attacker, his wide eyes narrowing quickly to black slits. His ringing snarl joined mine as he dropped into a defensive crouch.

The blast of terror I bombarded him with, that should have laid him out on the ground, merely sent him to his knees. He snarled through his clenched teeth, and his fists shook as he jerked them up level with his head as he fought against the mental assault.

In a flash, I ripped his right arm from his body and flung it away as I circled him. I skidded to a stop about fifteen feet in front him, sinking into a crouch, roaring at him, ready to spring at him again, when I heard Bella growling behind me.

Before I could turn to catch her, she stopped rigidly a few feet away from me, her loose braid whipping around her, and she was glaring at Felix.

"He's down," she ground out, her lips curled back from her teeth.

My eyes snapped from her back to Felix lying sprawled on his back, hissing and writhing with pain.

My beautiful, magnificent, perfect mate had knocked that huge vampire down with her shield. Blinking again, I could see a slight shimmer in the air around him. She was holding him down.

I didn't have a chance to tell her how proud I was of her when I heard rapid footsteps approaching from the southwest.

At once, I was in front of Bella, my hand reaching back to keep her behind me. "Just hold him." Then I snarled in warning at whoever was coming toward us, prepared to defend my mate.

Just before they broke through the trees, Emmett shouted, "Jazz!" Then he burst through the low brush, Rosalie right behind him, his feet plowing trenches through the earth as he slid to a stop, throwing his right arm back to protect his wife.

He blinked rapidly at the wounded, hissing vampire on the ground, and his eyes shot to Bella and I. "Who the fuck is that?"

"Oh, Em, Rose." The words rushed from Bella as she sagged against my side in relief. "We've had a doozy of a day."

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Chapter 54, I Rend

Jasper’s POV

“Doozy of a day? No shit,” Emmett muttered, remaining in his guarded position, prepared to defend his mate and coven.

Rosalie was a bit behind him and to his right, also in a fighting stance, her darkened eyes trained on the strange vampire.

My eyes flicked back to the Volturi guardsman on the ground as I pulled Bella more firmly to my side. She was apprehensive and keyed up, but not afraid. “Got ‘im, Darlin’?”

At her quick nod, I kissed the top of her head and sent her the swell of pride I felt for her. “You’re doin’ good. Keep him down.” Glancing over at Emmett and Rosalie again, I informed them, “This is Felix from the Volturi.”

“Son of a bitch!” Rosalie exclaimed in a breathy gasp. “I thought he was supposed to be in New
York.”

“So did I.”

Emmett snorted loudly. “We’re goin’ to have to kick Demetri’s ass.” He took a step closer to Felix. “I wonder what else he lied about?”

Bella stiffened against my side and glared indignantly at Emmett before she turned her concentration back on the prone, twitching vampire. “Maybe he didn’t lie, Em. Maybe he doesn’t know where anybody is unless he looks for them. Remember? He had to think a minute before he said where he thought Edward was.”

“Bella,” I said, feeling my jealousy stir at her defense of the tracker. “I’ll be…” I trailed off as the faint drone of an engine came to me.

“You’ll be what?” She started to step away from me and peered up at my face.

“Engine. Down on the road. Shit!” I spat out in frustration. Turning and grabbing both of Bella’s shoulders, I looked intently into her eyes. “Bella, let Felix go. We can’t leave him here, so I’ll carry him back to the house. You, Em, and Rose watch him while I have a little discussion with Demetri.”

“Don’t kill him, Jasper. Please, just find out what happened.” Her glistening eyes were begging me not to end the guard. “Maybe he didn’t know Felix was coming.”

I inhaled deeply, but didn’t say anything. I thought I might be lighting both Demetri and Felix on fire, and didn’t want to lie to my mate by saying I wouldn’t. “I’ll talk to him.” My head snapped to our coven-mates. “Emmett, find this asshole’s arm,” I said, nodding toward Felix.

“Bella, let him go.” My voice lowered with the sense of urgency I was feeling.

She let out a long breath and nodded.

Felix began another snarl as he struggled to a sitting position, but I hit him with the old standby—a flood of lethargy with a large helping of apathy because I needed for him to be quiet. He flopped lifelessly back to the ground. At least he stopped hissing and snarling.

Perhaps I had been a bit hasty in tearing his arm off, but it was too late to worry about it.

I’d have preferred using terror and dread on him, but I didn’t need him trying to fight against me, and it hadn’t worked as well on him as others. Hauling him through the woods and across the treeless area near the road would be difficult enough—he was huge.

The sun was rising higher; we’d be glittering streaks through the field, but if we detoured around to the west a little before heading to the house, we’d be in the trees as much as possible.

I hoisted Felix’s massive frame over my left shoulder and held his long legs down against my body. He’d be bleeding venom onto me, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Got his arm, Jazz.” Emmett appeared next to me.

“Good.” My eyes traveled over each of them. “I think that engine we hear is Demetri coming back. Or, I hope it is. If it’s a human wandering around out here, we’ll deal with it. It’s too early for Peter and Charlotte to be back yet.” I turned to Bella and quickly kissed her forehead. “Darlin’, stay behind me. Emmett, bring up the rear. We’ll have to run fast, but we’ll beat him to the house. C’mon.”
We all took off as silently as ghosts through the forest, bearing west to stay in the shadow of the trees. We dashed across the dirt road one at a time, and I was relieved to catch a glimpse of the tail end of Peter’s truck disappearing into the leaves and brush that hid our driveway from view.

Even with running up the mountain and circling around to keep to the forest cover, we would still make it to the clearing around the house before him.

As we neared the edge of the open space, I dropped Felix’s limp body to the ground and caught Bella’s chin with my fingers. “Bella, hold him down, but don’t touch him. I’m going to keep him under my influence.”

Her wide eyes studied mine, and she nodded. “Please,” she began in a small voice.

“All right, Bella. Just hold him down until I tell you to stop.” I trained my eyes on Emmett and Rosalie. They both nodded. They would tear him apart if Bella’s concentration broke. “Stay here.”

At their quick nods, I crept through the trees, heading in the direction of the barn, and crouched down behind a few bushes at the base of a thick pine. I could hear the truck as it made its way slowly up the old logging trails that switched back and forth.

Settling into a still, calm anticipation, I was grateful that I could monitor Bella, Emmett, and Rosalie while I kept Felix immobilized. I reached out toward Demetri.

It was puzzling, but a thread of fear wove through his wariness. He should be cautious, but why was he frightened? Had he known that Felix was coming, and he feared my reaction? Or was he just afraid of facing the mate of the object of his affections? I couldn’t allow my anger to take over so I waited.

Finally, the truck appeared along the dirt lane, and Demetri drove slowly toward the barn and stopped, peering into its dim interior.

He pulled away from the barn and rolled cautiously toward the house, parking the truck in front of it. The windows were open, and I could see him testing the air and his eyes darting around; possibly looking for us.

Bella’s spike of anxiety worried me, but she quickly snuffed it out.

Emmett, as usual, was full of excited anticipation, and Rosalie was guardedly alert.

I slithered back through the underbrush in their direction just far enough to put myself directly in line with Demetri and the house. He very deliberately opened the door and stepped out of the truck, raising his phone to his ear as he moved away from the truck when I stunned him with a heavy stupor and dose of the apathy and lethargy that held Felix.

Demetri’s phone slipped through his fingers as he dropped in a heap to the ground next to the deep blue truck.

In less than an instant, I was standing over him, my right foot planted on his throat, and I heard Bella gasp. Snapping my head toward them, I saw Emmett’s huge hand over her mouth as he pulled her back down behind their cover. There was a loud thud and a grunt, and Bella burst through the leafy shrubs, darted across the yard and was beside me, staring down at Demetri’s blank face.

“I Isabella, I want you to back the fuck up,” I said, a low growl pushing my words out.

Her dark red eyes flew open in surprise as they jerked up to mine, but she backed away a few feet as
her hands flew together, and she began anxiously wringing her hands and pulling at her fingers.

I reinforced my hold over Felix and tried to keep the irritation from my face and voice. “Why are you over here? I told you to stay with Rose and Emmett.”

A spark of anger flashed through her eyes and her lips parted to speak, but she clamped them closed, her mouth forming a straight, tense line across her face, and she backed up another few feet. Worry began to cloud her anger.

“Still holding Felix?” I asked, the growl still rumbling in my chest.

Nodding her head jerkily, she clenched her hands into fists and held them stiffly at her sides.

Giving her a single, sharp nod, my eyes dropped to Demetri, and I began pulling back my influence. When his eyelids began to flutter open, I pushed on his throat with my foot. “I will crush your throat if you try to escape.”

As his eyes moved slowly up my body to my face, I noticed they were a bright, well-fed red. They were also filled with trepidation. He tried to swallow, and I felt the muscles work feebly against the sole of my boot.

I knew he would be able to smell Felix’s venom on me, but he wouldn’t know what I’d done with him. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” My constant, deep growl made my voice low and threatening.

“I tried to call you, Major,” he rasped out. Instinct would have demanded he at least try to get my foot off his throat, but he was trembling with his effort to keep his hands down at his sides. “It went to voice mail. I tried to call—”

I hadn’t gotten any calls. Then I checked my pockets and glanced up at Bella as I realized I didn’t have my fucking phone.

I did, however, have my lighter.

Bella had been watching my every move, and when she saw that I didn’t pull my phone from my pocket, hope flashed through her worry, and her hands sprang up to cover her mouth. “I’ll check our room!” she squeaked as she bolted for the house.

I hadn’t even had a chance to send Rosalie to look for my phone. When I heard Felix’s bass snarl, I hit him again with another flood of lethargy. He must have moved as soon as Bella had pulled her physical shield out of range. Emmett’s throbbing rumble harmonized with Rosalie’s higher-pitched growl and then the ear-splitting shriek of tearing metal reached me. A dismembered foot, a lower leg, and an arm flew out of the trees and sparkled brightly in the morning sun before each landed with a bounce in the yard on the house side of the driveway.

To his credit, Demetri didn’t even try to take advantage of the commotion, though his entire body shuddered with the sounds of his comrade being dismembered. My eyes flicked to him and then back to Rosalie emerging from the forest.

Felix’s torso landed unceremoniously just past the edge of the trees, and Emmett appeared beside him. Thankfully, Emmett remembered not to stay in contact with him very long.

There really wasn’t any point in trying to hide him any longer.

Bella had left the front door open, and she was nothing more than a blur as she raced back to me, her
right arm outstretched. She stopped so fast, she almost fell into me, her long braid whipping around her shoulder.

“Here’s your phone! It was in your jeans under the bed!” she said in a rush. “Though I don’t know how they got under the bed. I was looking around the floor and saw them.” Taking in another breath and swallowing quickly, she said more quietly, “I didn’t break the phone, but I did kinda rip the pocket a little.” Her face lowered with her embarrassment, but her eyes turned up to me. “I didn’t mean to rip them. And I kinda dented the door knob on the front door, too, and…and then I heard the screeching, and I thought you ripped up Demetri, and—”

“Bella,” I said firmly, and her head snapped up, wide eyes on mine. “I don’t care about the pants or the door knob.” I continued, softening my voice. “Thank you for getting my phone. I should have remembered to take it.”

She was very agitated and troubled. Moving slowly so as not to startle her, I held her eyes with mine as I reached toward her hand and delicately plucked the silver cell from her fingers.

She snatched her hand back and began picking at her fingers worriedly. “How come Em and Rose…?”

Sighing internally, I quickly considered changing the subject, but realized she wouldn’t learn anything if she wasn’t told what she had done wrong. Running into the house had taken her too far away from Felix, and she had been distracted by wanting to find the phone. But if I told her while I was standing over Demetri, he would learn about the range of her shield.

I could delay it.

“Bella, we’ll talk later. Please go over to Rosalie and Emmett.”

Her hands went to her mouth, and she was feeling guilty already. I thought she had an idea about what had happened. Her head hung as she glanced down at Demetri and back up to me.

“Jasper, I—”

“Please, Bella, go over to Rosalie. Don’t touch Felix.”

She nodded sadly and turned away, walking dejectedly toward Rosalie who was standing about ten feet away from Emmett as he stood guard over the mutilated Felix.

When Bella stepped into Rosalie’s open arms, I turned my attention back to Demetri. “Peter gave you my number?”

He swallowed again before answering. “It was Charlotte, but yes. They gave me your number and theirs.”

I hadn’t been without my phone very long, but it had been just long enough to miss the call Demetri had made. Grinding my teeth, I listened to his message, warning me Felix was in the area and would probably be looking for him.

Forcing myself to not crush the small device, I snapped it shut and shoved it into my pocket as my eyes bore into his. “Had Felix told you he was coming west?”

“No. As is our usual method, when one completes his mission, he heads for the other. We do not normally call each other unless there is some concern or problem. I haven’t spoken to him in two weeks. I informed him about the newborns in Washington, their demise, and that I was tracking their
creator toward the east.”

His voice was a strained whisper. I could have let up on his throat, but didn’t. It was too satisfying having him under my boot and at my mercy. He seemed quite eager to answer my questions and even volunteer additional information.

“Did you tell him anything about Bella?”

“No.”

That was curious. Why hadn’t he mentioned to Felix that he had witnessed Isabella Swan’s funeral? “Why not?”

It was so brief I nearly missed it, but a thread of grief wove through his anxiety and his eyes darted away and back. “I was waiting to capture the redhead before informing anyone of Isabella...Bella’s demise.” He blinked several times and then said, “If Felix spoke to Aro, he would have told him. Aro prefers good news, of course. I wanted to have the happy news of Victoria’s end before I told him about...the funeral.”

That was thought-provoking. Aro would have thought Bella’s death was bad news? Unfortunately, I already knew the Volturi were too interested in her.

“Had you missed checking in with Felix?”

“No. I had assumed he was still in New York, but I...looked for him this morning after my hunt. That’s when I discovered he was so close. I would not be able to deter him, so I attempted to call you instead. I had not called and asked him to come. He has not called me, though I sincerely wish he had.”

Demetri knew I would be able check his phone. Looking down my nose at him, I studied his face, watching for any sign he might be trying to deceive me while I pushed as hard as I could to gauge every nuance of emotion he emitted. There was determination, courage, earnestness, dread, a small touch of hope, and, strangely, respect.

Bella had said she was aware of all of us and made it sound as if she felt it all the time. If I ended Demetri, would she feel a loss? The connection she had with our coven—was it something she could consciously control or was it an automatic or instinctive response? She felt us, but she couldn’t tell where we were, unlike Demetri who could locate others. But even I could determine approximately where someone was, if they were within my range. Demetri didn’t appear to be restricted in that way, but was he limited in other ways?

Lowering my head to stare into his eyes, I asked, “How does your gift work?”

Blinking slowly, he attempted to swallow the venom that was pooling in his mouth. I eased back on the pressure to allow him to do so.

In a very human gesture, he nervously licked his lips. “Each being radiates an energy of sorts. When meeting a vampire or human for the first time, I can detect the mental pattern that they produce. In my experience, each is different—much like fingerprints. It helps quite a bit to also have their scent. Do you know of Eleazer’s ability?”

“Somewhat,” I said quietly.

“If a vampire or human has some power or gift, Eleazer can see an energy field or aura around them. Through his vast experience, he can often interpret the patterns and colors he sees and can usually
define what sort of gift it might be.” Demetri inhaled a quick breath. “I can feel a part of that aura or energy, but it isn’t automatic. I have to consciously decide to… tap into that energy. I can remember it and then find the subject anywhere in the world. Eleazer is not able to do that. He has to be in the presence of the human or vampire.”

“Do you feel them all the time?”

“No, only when I recall it to the front of my mind. It is rather like a radio. It is off unless I choose to turn it on. Eleazer is similar in that way.”

Unlike mine which was always on. Edward and Alice were others whose gifts were always on. The shield around Bella’s mind was always there, but she had additional layers that were off until she wanted to use them or they were instinctively activated for protection. Where I received emotions all the time, unless I consciously worked to block them, Demetri had to work to tune into the signal. I could also transmit those emotions to others.

Demetri was unable to sense the members of my coven, and I thought that was due to Bella wanting to protect them. I had speculated if it would still work if they were far away from her, and I began to wonder if she would be able to turn it off or remove it from them. If she could, I didn’t want to leave any of our coven exposed to Demetri’s “radar”.

Then I remembered that Demetri had said he could sense where Carlisle, Alice, and Edward were. Was it because she had not shielded them or was it because they were so far away?

Like Emmett had said; that mind mojo ju-ju shit was fucking impossible to figure out.

Then a thought went charging through my mind. We had a vampire we could experiment with. Bella had not touched or bitten Felix, though I hadn’t thought her venom really had anything to do with it, and she certainly hadn’t mentioned that he was hers. I shoved down the jealousy that threatened boil up through me again.

If Bella could shield him from the tracker, and then unshield him…

Though he displayed no outward signs, Demetri had become more distressed and anxious the longer I remained silently in thought. Having made my decision, in the blink of an eye, I was crouched beside him, my right hand gripping his throat.

There was another question I wanted to ask him. “Did you lead Victoria to us?”

His eyes widened with alarm. “Absolutely not, Major!” he hissed out. “I swear to you, I would not do anything to harm—” He cut off his rapid-fire words, ground his teeth, and finished in a calmer tone. “I would not do anything to harm your coven.”

For some strange reason, I didn’t think “your coven” was what he was originally going to say, though he was vehemently sincere.

I kept any expression from my face as I grabbed my jealousy and shoved it as deeply as I could. I couldn’t allow myself to lose control.

“I’ve decided what I will do with you, tracker,” I said to him in a harsh whisper too low for the others to hear.

His fear increased, but he was determined to bravely face whatever that decision might have been.

He swallowed nervously again and asked, “ Might I say something before you deliver your verdict,
Major?”

I tilted my head toward him, inviting him to continue.

“Your power and skills are truly impressive and fearsome, Major. Vampires do not subdue Felix—except for Jane and Alec.” A puzzled frown briefly flickered across his face. “I cannot imagine why Aro never sought you out to invite you to join his guard. He has seen evidence of your accomplishments in others’ memories for decades, though, apparently, not many survived meeting you. He is always seeking gifted vampires and is continuously disappointed. Very, very few have any sort of useful ability at all. Gifts are quite rare, as you know. It’s been quite a long time since any promising or useful talent has been found. Most aspirants are dismissed.”

“Or ended?” Ignoring his flattery, I cocked an eyebrow and adjusted my hold on his neck.

“A few,” he reluctantly admitted. “Some have remained as lessor guards for a time.”

“Who are your strongest vampires and what are their gifts?” Since I had him on the ground, I thought I would take advantage of the opportunity. I hated it, but maybe I could also take advantage of his adoration of Bella. Was it enough to make him answer those questions truthfully?

He blinked rapidly as he fleetingly considered that question, and his sense of defeat and capitulation showed clearly on his face. “You know of Jane and Alec?”

“I do, but please elaborate.” I eased my grip on his throat slightly to encourage him.

He breathed in slowly and sighed with a mixture of long-suffering exasperation and a strong dislike. “The aptly named Witch Twins have also been thoroughly bound to Aro by Chelsea so that they don’t stage a coup. They both know they could overtake him, but they are quite loyal and subservient to him. I do not feel their admiration of him is entirely Chelsea’s doing, as he did save them from being burned alive as witches.” A frown flickered across his face before it was replaced with his previous, hard-won calm. “Jane needs to see her victims in order to inflict pain on them, and she can only affect one at a time. Alec’s power is slower, but he can deaden the senses of many humans or vampires at one time. His range is about two thousand feet. He can also selectively keep his power from those in his area of influence. This enables members of the guard to dispose of the sense-deprived victims.”

The way his jaw tightened when he spoke of them led me to believe he had experienced their special talents more than a few times.

“You know of Chelsea,” he stated.

At my nod, he continued. “To me, Chelsea’s gift is the most insidious, and it is highly prized by Aro. You’ve heard that she can affect emotional ties. Like when she bound me to Aro. She can also break ties between vampires, except for mated pairs. In Aro’s experiments they have repeated over many decades, they have discovered that she can’t separate truly mated pairs, but she can bind those mates to Aro.”

Without consciously meaning to, my eyes searched for Bella, and I wondered if Chelsea would be able to bind the both of us to Aro. I decided right then and there if I ever met that bitch, I would end her.

Bella and Rosalie had moved farther away from Emmett and Felix and were sitting on the ground, huddled together, the morning sun making them both shine—Rosalie like scattered diamonds and Bella with her soft shimmer. I could see Rosalie’s bright golden head bent over Bella’s gleaming
mahogany, whispering to her as she sadly nodded her head.

“I don’t believe that Chelsea would be able to bind you and Isa…Bella to Aro,” Demetri quietly offered.

I had given myself away when I turned my eyes to Bella, but he already knew she was mine. Wouldn’t anyone be concerned about his mate? My eyes snapped back to the Volturi guard on the ground beneath me. It had occurred to me some of his devotion to Bella could be gratitude for her freeing him from his manufactured ties to his master, and maybe he was hoping the shield that protected us from his ability would also protect him from being imprisoned again.

Perhaps it would. I wasn’t happy about it, but there really was only one way to find out.

Using them, and Bella’s gift, in that way would make me no better than my own sire. Maria used me to control and train her newborns and gain as much territory as she could for nearly a hundred years, but I suddenly had a different perspective on it. I would use whatever advantage I could to protect my mate and coven.

A slow smile spread across my face as I looked down on him. “If you want to live…”

Demetri was silent for a moment then one eyebrow raised. “Come with you?” he asked sardonically.

“This is what I want you to do, Demetri.” I loosened my hold on his throat even more. “You will put Felix back together. I’ll send Emmett and Rosalie to go catch a couple deer for him. No humans can be brought here.” Sliding my fingers down his neck and chest, I paused when I reached the center of the Volturi V on his charcoal grey T-shirt. “I know how you feel about my mate, and I want to end you, but I won’t. For now…for her.” My fingers closed into a fist, and I applied a slight pressure against his sternum. “I can punch a hole right through you.”

“I understand, Major.” He cleared his throat. “Not many can do that,” he said, eyeing my fist, “but I believe that you can.”

I merely nodded. “You and Felix will find Edward in Alaska—under the guise of determining Bella’s status. Neither of you will say anything about running across us here.”

I rubbed my knuckles against his breastbone, making his eyes widen in pain, then I unhurriedly stood up and propped my hands on my hips.

“But the mind reader—”

“If my guess is correct, he won’t be able to hear you coming—Alice won’t see my or your decision to go there, and you’ll be a nice surprise for everyone.” I took a step back from him. “We’ll have to experiment with my theory, and you and Felix will be the lab rats. I don’t have a problem ending him if he doesn’t like the idea.” I poked him in the side with the toe of my boot. “We’ll move Felix into the woods to get us all out of the sun. After he’s fed, I plan on heading for the house. You,” I said, pointing my finger at him, “will make sure he doesn’t tear it apart. Get up.”

“Yes, Major.” Very cautiously, Demetri rose fluidly from the ground, keeping his eyes on me.

Feeling a spike of elation, I steeled myself against Bella’s happy assault and turned just in time to catch her flashing, glistening shimmer as she zipped across the yard and plowed into me.

“Jasper! I love you!” She flung her arms around me and reached to kiss me.

Lifting her up, I crushed her to my body and kissed her lips and jaw as she wrapped her legs around
my waist. “I love you,” I murmured into her neck. Just having her in my arms, a large part of the tension I had been feeling began to drain away.

I heard a rapid intake of breath from Demetri and felt him struggle to inhibit the sense of awe and appreciation that blossomed from him. The muted sparkle of Bella’s skin in the sunlight was enchanting, but it was a good damn thing he tried to suppress his reaction to the sight of her. His own harsh glitter was nearly as bad as Emmett’s.

Indicating Demetri should go ahead of us, Bella and I followed him toward Felix and Emmett.

“Emmett, I’ll drag Felix into the woods. You gather up his parts. Thank you for not ripping his clothes off. Wouldn’t want to embarrass any of our coven-mates. Demetri’s going to put him back together.”

“I’ll help!” Bella said excitedly and tried to pull away from me.

“No, Darlin’. I don’t want you to touch him yet. You and Rose go over by that oak tree.” I brushed my lips over her forehead as I set her on the ground. “We have a vampire to experiment on.”

“Experiment?” Rosalie asked when she and Bella were next to the wide oak tree.

“Yes.” I grabbed the nearly unconscious vampire around the waist, hoisted him over my shoulder again, and entered the shade of the forest. I dropped him under a thick pine, and he hit the bed of rust colored needles with a loud wump.

I was going to need another shower to get all of his damn venom off me.

Demetri moved to stand beside him while Emmett tossed the huge vampire’s body parts next to him. Then Emmett joined me in the shadow of the old oak, placing Rosalie and Bella between us.

“Thanks for watching him,” I said to them, tucking Bella into my right side. “I have another job for you. I want you to go catch a couple deer or something for our guest. I’ll keep him under while Demetri works on him.”

Rosalie rolled her eyes and frowned at me, but she patted the arm I had around Bella. “Let’s go, Em. He’s not going to say anything about his experiment until we get back.”

“Then we’d better get goin’.” Emmett’s eyes lit up with mischief. “Behave yourself, Pookie,” he said grinning at Demetri as he and Rosalie disappeared through the trees.

Demetri just raised one eyebrow and nodded at them as they jogged by and then looked to me.

I grasped Bella’s hands and kissed her knuckles. “Darlin’, we’re going to sit up in the tree.”

“But, why?” She studied the two vampires curiously.

“Because when I let Felix go, I expect his first thought will be to kick ass, not climb trees. Up ya go.”

She leapt up and seated herself on a wide branch about twenty feet up and settled back against the rough trunk. I jumped up and joined her, though I remained standing over her.

“You’ll have to work fast,” I told Demetri. “While I have him under, you’ll feel it when you touch him. When you have his foot in position, I’ll let up on him and you attach it. He’ll start to come around, but I’ll hit him again when you let go. We’ll proceed from there.”
“Yes, Major.”

I saw his jaw tighten in apprehension as he bent to his task. I couldn’t tell if he was worried about being affected by me or about Felix coming to and attacking him. Whichever it was, he moved over his comrade swiftly, and when he was finished, he backed away from him and blew out a relieved breath.

“I’ll hold him until Rosalie and Emmett get back.”

Demetri tipped his head down in an abbreviated bow, never taking his eyes from me, and backed up until he was leaning against a tree not far from Felix’s motionless form. He crossed his arms and settled back to wait.

Bella stood up and snuggled against me, snaking her right arm around my back and running her left hand up my chest. “Jasper,” she said in a rapid whisper. “I don’t think you had to rip his arm off back there by the pond and—”

I pressed my lips to hers. “I know. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

She smiled and nodded, kissing me back. “Are we going to jump out of the tree now?”

“No. We’ll just wait here.” I brushed my lips over hers again, fully aware Demetri had a clear view of us and was becoming uncomfortable and feeling more than a little envious.

I certainly didn’t have a problem showing Demetri who she belonged to. In fact, I was enjoying it.

Bella had crawled onto my lap as soon as I sat down on the thick branch, stretching my legs out along the limb. After a while, her nervous shifting and fidgeting was beginning to have a rather pleasant effect on me. Her hand stroking my chest and sliding up to my neck was contributing mightily to the pleasurable sensations.

It wasn’t the time.

“Darlin’, I said, nuzzling her ear and keeping an eye on Demetri. “You need to sit still.” I caught her hand before it worked its way into my hair, kissed her fingers, and gently held it to my chest.

“I can’t help it, Jazz. Em and Rose have been gone a long time, and I’m kinda nervous.” Her lips brushed over my cheek as she whispered to me. “I mean, is Felix going to take the deer when you let him go? He’s used to eating people. Or is he going to attack whoever is near him? He’s huge, so that must be why the Volturi have kept him around. He must fight really well.” Her voice was coming faster and her eyes were getting wider as she began to tremble. “If you couldn’t knock him out, would he have been able to hurt you? Do you know how sexy it was to see you handle him like that? He’s bigger than Emmett! And I’m not sure if I like him or not. I remember he leered at me when I was in Italy, and he called ‘dibs’ and shit, but I don’t know if he did it just to upset us, or—”

“Bella,” I said firmly, grasping her hand more tightly with my left one and pulling her more snugly against me with my right. She was talking faster and faster, and I had to stop her before she became too distressed and tried to get away from me.

“What?” she asked, ceasing her restless fidgeting and looking up at me.

“Shh, Darlin’. Rose and Em will be back soon.” I lightly licked and then kissed her temple. “Felix is huge, but no one’s ever beaten me.” I smiled at her. “So, I’m sexy?”

She tipped her head down and smiled shyly up at me, melting my frozen heart again. “Yes.” A little
embarrassment pushed aside some of her anxiety. “It’s…it’s…You’re so beautiful, Jasper, and when
you leapt after Felix, and then you were standing there growling, and looking so fierce, and…”

A warm ribbon of lust twined its way around me, and I couldn’t stop my hands from gliding down
the smooth skin of her arm while the other skimmed over her side to her hip.

But it wasn’t the time. Nearly as distracted as she was, I had to bring my newborn mate’s attention
back to the issue at hand.

“I love you. I’ll do whatever I need to do to protect you.” My own voice was nothing more than a
breath. “But we need to pay attention, Darlin’.” Glancing down at Demetri, I saw that his eyes were
closed and there was a new tenseness to his jaw, but he hadn’t moved.

To direct both of us back to the more immediate topic and make Bella focus, I kissed her brow and
pulled back just enough to capture her eyes. “Bella, we’re far enough from Demetri that he can’t hear
what we say. I probably shouldn’t have ripped off Felix’s arm, but his feelings at the time pissed me
off.”

“What kind of feelings?” Her eyes squeezed shut, and she grimaced.

“Lustful ones. Now tell me, what did you mean when you said he leered at you and called dibs in
Italy?”

She peeked up at me and then tucked her head into my neck and sighed. “When Alice, Edward and I
were almost to the…throne room, Felix leered at me like he was going to eat me, which would have
been better than… Well, I thought he was implying he was going to…to rape me.” She shuddered in
my arms, and I fought back the growl that threatened to spill out. “Then Edward got all stiff like he
was pissed off, so I could just imagine what Felix was thinking. Then Felix called dibs like if they
were going to kill us, he got to have me.” She shuddered against me again and curled up more tightly
on my lap. “It was disturbing, along with all the other awful things that went on. But I didn’t know if
he meant it, or if he was just doing it to try and terrorize us more.”

“Probably both,” I murmured to her. I hadn’t been above using the same tactics, and Bella, Alice,
and Edward had been at their mercy. It was a miracle they had made it back to Forks.

Once again, I was so grateful Bella had made it out of Volterra alive. The Volturi could have so
easily kept them all.

“Darlin’, when you ran into the house to find my phone, you were too far away from Felix to hold
him down.”

“I know. Rose told me.” She started to feel guilty again. “It’s my fault Rose and Em ripped his arm,
foot, and leg off. Even though you still had him, she told me he started to move when I ran to the
house, and they attacked him.”

In a way, I thought it was good she was beginning to feel sorry for him. I honestly thought that her
shielding of us had more to do with her wanting to protect those she considered her vampires. Bella’s
biting everyone was just a side effect of her being a newborn.

Newborns bite. It’s what they do.

I had thought, however, that she needed to come into physical contact with them in order to shield
them. Biting was certainly physical.

Again, I wasn’t happy about it, but if Bella felt slightly more sympathetic toward Felix, then I
thought she’d be able to shield him, too. If she could recognize or determine what she was doing, then she’d be able to do it again. Maybe even turn it on and off.

Using Felix and Demetri to work it out would certainly help the rest of us.

“Darlin’, you don’t need to feel guilty about that. Shit happens in chaotic situations and sometimes we make mistakes.” I kissed the top of her head and spoke softly to her. “What we have to do is try to learn from it. You know where your limits are. If you’re holding someone with your shield, you have to stay within that limit. You have to keep your main focus on that.” Stroking her long braid, I sighed again. “I have to learn all over again to control my emotions.”

She reached up and kissed my neck under my jaw. “We can learn together. We make a good team—when I’m paying attention.”

“Yes, we do.” Nuzzling into her hair and drawing in her scent, I smiled against her head.

Fortuitously, I faintly heard Emmett and Rosalie and caught a jolt of Emmett’s sense of accomplishment and Rosalie’s annoyance. They would be joining us soon.

“Get up, Darlin’. Rose and Em are coming. Em’s happy and Rose is annoyed, so they must have caught something.”

As we stood up on the branch, Demetri’s eyes were on us, and he was instantly alert.

“Rosalie and Emmett are on their way back. You might want to move a little farther away from Felix.”

It wasn’t long before we heard the weak, liquid thump of three heartbeats. Whatever they had caught was still alive. Barely.

Demetri darted away from Felix as Rosalie appeared through the trees, a limp mule deer draped over both arms. It was so large, the tips of its hooves dragged on the ground. She set it on the pine needles near Felix with a look of disgust on her face, bounded over toward Bella and I, and leapt up to join us on the limb.

“Its fur is all over me,” she complained with a hiss as she angrily brushed the hairs from her light blue oxford shirt and blue jeans. “Next time we tear off somebody’s arms and legs, how about you go catch their dinner, Jazz?”

It was about that time Emmett appeared, a smaller mule deer under his left arm and a mountain lion under his right. He dropped them near the deer Rosalie had brought and ran over to hop up into the tree with us.

“We’ll have to take it easy on the mountain lions for a while,” I whispered to them. “You all stay here.” I caught Bella’s chin and tilted her face up to mine. “Bella, I need to know that you’ll stay here. It’ll distract me if you’re too close to Felix.”

When she nodded, I kissed her and dropped to the ground. As I walked silently around Felix, I began to ease back on the lethargy and apathy I’d been holding him with. Like Demetri, I felt his awareness grow, but he remained still and didn’t open his eyes.

I positioned myself so that everyone was in my field of view, and I was about ten feet away from the big vampire. Studying them both, I came to the conclusion he and the tracker had had too much practice being subdued or tortured by Aro’s beloved twins. They had probably learned the hard way not to react strongly when released from their powers.
Again like Demetri, Felix breathed in deeply, probably hoping to discover who was near him. A spark of recognition flared along with a sense of alarm. Was he reacting to Demetri’s scent or did he remember mine?

“Felix. You cannot escape me.” I took a slow step toward him. “You’ve been brought two deer and a mountain lion to feed from. We don’t bring humans here.” Another slow step brought me closer to him. “Why are you here?”

His eyes opened gradually, and he was looking right at me. “Major Jasper Whitlock. Nice to finally meet another member of Carlisle’s coven.”

His face didn’t give it away, but I could feel his suffering from the pain he was experiencing as his limbs knit back to his body.

“I’m not in Carlisle’s coven. Why are you here?” I repeated, allowing a slight frown to show on my face.

Surprised, Felix’s eyes traveled down my scarred arms and back up. “I came to find Demetri.”

I motioned for Demetri to move into Felix’s line of sight and then crossed my arms. “You found him. Why else are you here in my territory?”

Demetri quietly cleared his throat and looked to me for permission to speak. I gave him a short nod, noticing he had moved so that he was blocking Felix’s view of Bella, Rosalie and Emmett. I dropped my eyes to Felix who was looking intently at him. Felix seemed relieved to see him.

“Felix, I’ve informed the Major—the leader of his own coven—that we both came to America on assignment and while you were to go to the east coast, I was to ascertain Isabella Swan’s status. He also knows about the newborns in Seattle and that I was tracking their maker.”

Was he feeding any information to Felix? I felt no deception from either of them, and Demetri didn’t mention he had told us Felix was supposed to be in New York.

Felix’s eyes snapped back to me, and he gave me a long, hard look, taking in the scars that showed on my arms, neck, and jaw. Curiosity replaced his relief. As he must have come to a decision, resignation flowed heavily from him, and he swallowed thickly before speaking.

“I took care of the coven in New York that was drawing too much attention to themselves,” Felix said, his voice rumbling through his broad chest. “Our master called and asked if I had heard from Demetri. I hadn’t for a while so decided to head west. I stopped in Casper to refuel the car and myself.” The very edges of his mouth began to draw upward. “I detected Demetri’s scent, and others. I followed the scents to here, found your boundary lines, and circled your territory. Six vampires is a large coven. I didn’t detect the scents of Carlisle or his mind reader or seer.”

“No, you didn’t,” I answered him. He had still been under the impression I was part of Carlisle’s coven, as Demetri had been. Perhaps I was glad Demetri had set him straight. “Those animals are about to die. Feed from them. The carnivore will be marginally better than the deer.”

“I’ve had the misfortune of feeding from animals before, Whitlock,” Felix sneered.

Bella growled at Felix’s disrespectful tone. As my eyes flicked up to her, I noticed that Demetri flinched. He was probably worried about being flattened by her shield again. I shook my head at her and waited until she blew out an annoyed breath and leaned against Emmett, tucking her face into his side. He wrapped his long arm around her and patted her head with his other hand.
I was amazed she didn’t bite him.

In the meantime, I hit Felix with a blast of dread quickly followed by a heavy cloud of compliance and submission. “You should be grateful for the blood that will help you heal.” Next, I bombarded him with a mix of aching thirst, craving, and need, and growled at him as he sat up with a hiss and reached for the dying cougar. “My name is Major Jasper Whitlock, and you’re in my territory. We’ve already dismembered you once,” I said with a low snarl, leaving the threat hanging in the air.

Felix pulled the shallowly breathing lion onto his lap and grimaced before sinking his teeth into the big cat’s neck.

While he drained the lion, I wondered why he mentioned he’d gotten a call from Aro. Or had it been Aro? It could have been one of the other Volturi leaders.

He quickly drained the first animal and snarled in disgust as he shoved it off his lap and reached for the larger of the two mule deer. “Why don’t you bring humans here? I caught the scent of a human —”

“Because that’s how I want it,” I said to him. “The human you smelled was carried here by the bitch that was creating the newborns in Seattle. She’s been taken care of. We can show you her ashes if you’d like.”

Growling, Felix drained the mule deer, flung it away, and fiercely wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I don’t need to see her ashes, and that’s enough of that putrid shit!” Instantly, he was on his feet, situated so he could see all of us. “What are you planning on doing with me…Major?”

“I’m thinking about it. While you bury those animals’ bodies, I’ll let Demetri fill you in on what he’s been doing lately.” I sauntered toward Bella, never taking my eyes from Felix. When I was about ten feet away from the tree she was in, I raised my hand toward her. “While I spend a little time with my mate. Darlin’? Join me?”

She smiled, and jumped toward me, landing right next to me and wrapping her arms around my waist as I pulled her into my chest. “You boys have a nice time catchin’ up. We’ll be right here.”

Felix’s eyes widened in shock as he watched Bella drop from the tree. “That’s Isabella. She’s a newborn. I never thought that sniveling child of Carlisle’s would ever change—”

“He didn’t,” I said, tipping my head down toward Bella and looking up at Felix, while Demetri hissed at him in warning.

“Felix and I will bury the animals,” Demetri said through his clenched teeth, glaring at Felix and grabbing his arm.

“Bury them deep. We’re close to the house.” I backed up until I was under the limb that Bella had been on, and gestured to Rosalie and Emmett to come down.

Rosalie moved in close to Bella at my left side and Emmett stepped lightly behind them both. I was pleased to see they had both moved in to protect Bella.

“Bella,” I whispered so that Demetri and Felix couldn’t hear me. “We’ll be using them, and you.”

“Your experiment, right?” Her bright red eyes searched mine. “Jasper, like I told you before, I will do anything I can to protect all of us. I wish Charlotte and Peter were here.” She slipped her left arm around Rosalie’s waist and leaned her head against her shoulder. “I think we should do it.”
A sliver of guilt worked its way through me. “Bella, using you and your shield…it would make me no better than Maria—”

“Don’t even say anything like that, Jasper.” She glared up at me. “I said I would do anything to protect us. You said yourself we should use any advantage we have, and use everything we have. Who knows what might come at us one day?” She pulled her arm from around Rosalie and stood in front of me, looking at all of us. “We’ve never hesitated to use Emmett’s muscles—that’s why you had him hold Demetri right? And when Demetri first got here you used Rose and Char’s beauty to try and fool him.”

“Don’t forget about yourself, Bella.” Rosalie smiled. “And it worked, as a matter of fact.”

“What?” Emmett asked, confused, while placing a hand on Rosalie’s shoulder and the other on mine.

Rosalie grinned up at him. “The harem thing. I told you.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s why I had to work so hard to get Jazz’s stink off you.” He started chuckling.

“Jasper does not stink!” Bella hissed.

I caught Bella’s chin with my right hand. “That’s enough you two. They’ll be done soon.”

They’d already buried the first mule deer and while Demetri tamped down the dirt over its body, Felix had begun digging the hole for the second deer that had died.

Bella frowned up at Emmett and snorted. “Yeah, well, anyway…Jasper, you used your power against both of them. We should use what I have, too. We should use whatever we’ve got. It’s what it’s for. Maybe I should try and shield Felix’s mind from Demetri, but I don’t want to bite him.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Ew.” Rosalie agreed with her, also wrinkling her nose in revulsion.

“But if he pissed you off, you’d bite ‘im,” Emmett said reasonably. “You bite everybody.”

Before Bella could snap at him, I put my hand over her mouth. “Darlin’, you’re startin’ to get worked up. Emmett, shut up.” I brushed a few loose hairs out of Bella’s face. “Calm down, please. Of course, I agree we should use every advantage. I didn’t want…I don’t want to use you without your permission. But I’m not above using them.”

“Um…” Bella blinked worriedly. “We could tell them, right?” Then she crossed her arms over her chest. “But I still don’t want to bite him.”

“I don’t think you have to, but I do think you have to touch him, and maybe want to protect him. C’mere.” I ran my hand over her head and braid, and pulled her into my chest because I needed to feel her against me. “When I thought about it, I could feel a difference. I think I can feel your shield around my mind. There’s a warmth…it’s hard to explain.” I kissed her head and refused to let my jealousy take over. “Even Demetri said he felt a warmth or a light or something when Chelsea’s influence was gone. I want you to concentrate on both of them and see if you can sense a difference.”

“Felix is the only one here I haven’t touched.” Bella turned slightly so she could see them.

“Or bitten,” Emmett couldn’t resist adding.

Rosalie jabbed Emmett with her elbow. “Shut up, Emmett, or I’ll bite you. And you won’t like it.”
Ignoring Emmett, Bella stared at the two Volturi guards as they quickly dug the third grave through the dry earth with their hands to bury the mountain lion.

I could see them speaking quickly to each other and casting the occasional glance our way. Then out of the blue, they were both on their feet, a snarl ripped out of Demetri’s sneering mouth, and he slapped Felix across the face hard enough to make him stagger backward and the crack reverberated throughout the woods.

“Mind your tongue, you imbecile, or I shall remove it!”

Though Felix towered over the tracker, he dropped his head in submission and backed away from Demetri’s threatening stance.

I hadn’t been paying the strictest attention to them, and didn’t know what had set them both off, but Demetri was emitting enough wrath and indignation, I was surprised he hadn’t taken off Felix’s head.

Of course, they had startled Bella, and she was clinging to me and staring back at them.

Narrowing my eyes at them, I pushed caution at them as I stroked Bella’s head and back. “It’s okay, Darlin’. I’m watching them. They’re getting back to work.” I ran my hands over her shoulders and down her arms. “Now, concentrate on them.”

“Okay.” With a heavy sigh, Bella turned to face them fully and leaned back against me. “I don’t think I see anything.” She dropped her head and covered her eyes with her hands. “Okay, okay,” she mumbled. She drew her hands up and over her bowed head. “Maybe if I…” She reached for Rosalie and took hold of her arm as she peered again at the Volturi guards.

“Damn! There it is!” Her head jerked up, and her body stiffened.

Demetri was down in the hole, bent over to lift out more dirt, and Felix was standing near him, holding the great cat across both of his arms. Instantly, Demetri was standing up straight and gaping at us, and Felix was staring at us suspiciously.

“What happened, Darlin’?” I slid my hands back up to her shoulders and gave them a gentle squeeze.

“I could see it! I had to think about my shields and then there’s the one around my mind, right? But I can’t see that one. Then I thought maybe I was too far away from them—they’re more than fifty feet away.” She spun around, a bright smile on her face. She reached up, placing her hands on the sides of my face. “But I’m touching you, and then I touched Rose, and I could see it in my mind! I could even see it around Em. It’s like the other shields—you can kind of see a blur in the air. That’s my shield around your minds!”

“Shh, Darlin’. Not too loud.” I smiled and kissed her. “I knew you could do it. What did you do?”

It was her turn to kiss me. “Comparing you all to Felix, I could see the faint blur. It’s around your heads, but not your faces. So I think maybe it’s around your brains like mine is.” She grinned. “I took it from Demetri, but I can’t put it around Felix. I guess I’ll have to touch him.”

Emmett started to open his mouth, and Rosalie lifted her hand, touching her index finger to her thumb right in front of his face.

He rolled his eyes and groaned. “All right! No damn pinchin’.”
“Can you see them?” Bella asked.

“No, but that’s okay.” Starting to feel hopeful and excited myself, I asked, “Can you put it back on Demetri from here?” I kept my eyes on him.

“I don’t know. I didn’t try.” She closed her eyes, and her brows drew together with her concentration.

Demetri gasped. His right hand rose slowly, and his fingertips touched his temple.

Bella had done it.

Her elation burst from her, she grabbed my arms and shook them. “I did it!”

“Yes, you did.”

Rosalie grabbed her arm. “Oh, Bella! I wonder what else you can do?”

“Damn.” Emmett was nodding his head slowly and brought his hand up to stroke his chin. “I wonder if you can shield him so he can’t track anybody?”

“I don’t know.”

I didn’t want us to get ahead of ourselves; Bella might not be able to do it, but if she could prevent Demetri from tracking others by shielding him, would she be able to block Edward from reading thoughts? Or Alice from seeing visions? Would it be permanent unless she removed it?

First, we had to determine if it was a matter of proximity to Bella. If the shield failed when Demetri was away from her, it wouldn’t do us much good, and when he saw Aro again, Aro would rape his mind, learn about Bella, and have Chelsea enslave him again.

We needed to find out.

..
Creative consultant: Let's just dance (I Mend, I Rend. Then I Send perhaps?)
Chapter 55, I Send

Jasper’s POV

Rather than invite Felix and Demetri into our house after they finished burying the animals, I suggested we sit on the porch. I directed them toward the north end, where the porch wrapped around the house, to have a seat in a couple of the straight-backed rockers while Bella perched on the rail by the front steps. Of course, I was leaning against the rail between her and the Volturis.

And to think that, when she was human, Bella wouldn’t have been able to sit on a porch rail because she would have tipped right off. Probably would have cracked her skull open while she was at it.

Emmett and Rosalie were seated farthest from the guards, by the bay window in front of the library, and Emmett had settled himself between Rosalie and our guests. He’d noticed the looks Felix had
swept over Rosalie.

Waiting for Peter and Charlotte to return, I would be able to hear better outside, and although Felix appeared quite calm, under his unruffled exterior, his fear was palpable. It was only midmorning, and he’d already been dismembered once. If things got out of hand, I'd be forced to do it again, and there was less to destroy if I kept him outside.

I didn’t know what Felix had said to cause Demetri to admonish him so forcefully, but the way he kept glancing at Bella and Rosalie, I could imagine. They were both exceptional women—especially my Bella.

He’d probably find Charlotte to be attractive, too. Not only was she pretty, some males found battle scars on a woman to be sexy.

Several times, a faint trace of lascivious interest would flutter from Felix, but he would quickly suppress it—luckily for him. Demetri must have warned him to mind his manners while around me. I imagined it was difficult for him. Being one of the Volturi, he would have become accustomed to seeing something he wanted and taking it.

I managed not to growl.

Much.

Curiosity became the predominant emotion from Felix, and he asked, “How old is your newborn, Major?”

Bella leaned into my shoulder. “The newborn’s name is Bella,” she said with a quiet growl. “And I’m seventeen days old.”

Felix, ignoring the heated glare Demetri shot him, appeared impressed and said, “Excuse me, Bella. For one so young, your control is excellent.”

“Unless you piss her off,” Emmett muttered.

Bella huffed at him and turned toward Felix again. “I’ve been working at it.” She jumped down from the rail, suddenly eager and excited. “I could show you. C’mon!”

Before I could get a hand on her, she was off the porch and running for the barn, her long braid bouncing over her back.

“Emmett, Rose.” I nodded toward Bella, and they both followed her.

I turned to face the two males and crossed my arms over my chest. “Before you go over to the barn, I’d like to know why Demetri slapped you, Felix.”

Felix stood slowly, straightening to his full height as he rolled the torn sleeves of his venom-dampened shirt up to his elbows and looked down his nose at me. “Demetri informed me I made an inappropriate comment concerning Isabella. She is a mated female, though she is not the mate of the pubescent mind reader. She is your mate.”

“And the proper respect will be shown to her, and her sire and coven leader,” Demetri said with a scowl, looking up at Felix with darkening irises, and his hands curling into white-knuckled fists.

Beneath his warning to the larger vampire, I could feel his devotion and knew it was for Bella.
Grinding my teeth for a moment, I fought back the anger and jealousy that so easily could have taken
me over again. I decided it would be better if I didn’t know what Felix had said. I wanted, so badly,
to break them both apart, but if they were nothing but ashes, I wouldn’t be able to use them or
Demetri’s ability to find out more about how Bella’s shield worked. A lot was riding on their
cooperation, and I preferred to experiment with them than risk my coven.

I sighed as I also reminded myself that disposing of two of the Volturi’s top guards would guarantee
hostile retribution. Not that I didn’t think we could take them, but at what cost?

Forcing calm onto myself, I peered up at Felix, deciding to show him another of my talents. “Look at
me, Felix.” I pushed the feelings of subservience and amenability at him. For the first time, panic
fluttered around him briefly. When the pupils in his red eyes began to shrink, I stepped closer to him.
“Yes, Felix, Bella is my mate, and you will respect that fact.”

His pupils didn’t contract down to pinpoints as Edward’s had done, but I thought I had enough of a
hold over him.

Demetri was astonished and took a step back from Felix. “You can enthrall vampires?”

“When I need to,” I replied. Pushing more compliance at him, I continued. “Felix, we have a
proposition for you and Demetri, but it requires Bella touching you. You will not harm her in
anyway.”

Felix blinked slowly, despite his fear hovering beneath the submission I pushed toward him. “I
wouldn’t. She’s rather appealing,” he said dully. “She was pretty as a human, but as a vampire …”

My left hand shot out and grabbed his jaw. “What were you going to say?”

Felix’ eyes widened slightly as I fed him an angry warning on top of the submission, but added in
some truthfulness.

“As a vampire, she is quite … hot, as you Americans say.”

My hand tightened on his chin. “Oh?”

“Er, she’s quite attractive and then there’s … She’s an anomaly. I was astounded when Aro allowed
her to leave. She’s the only human to ever leave that room alive besides our receptionist, Gianna,” he
said, his voice full of disbelief.

“What room was that?”

“The main throne room where Heidi brings the humans for us to feed on and where penalties are
handed out.”

Once again, I was beyond relieved that Bella had made it out of there alive. But I was also concerned
about the interest Aro had in her. He must have realized her potential and wanted her turned, only
allowing her to leave so he wouldn’t have to deal with a newborn. Or was Aro so arrogant, he
thought he could swoop in at any time, using his gifted guards to capture and persuade Bella and
Edward to join the ranks? Chain her to him? You didn’t live as long as he did and not learn some
patience. It was all just another form of hunting: lying in wait while the prey moved into a more
advantageous position.

Then there was the matter of determining if Edward would obey him. He wouldn’t have. Obviously,
Edward would rather have seen us all dead, and the Kings would have had some sort of bargain in
place. Bella, Edward, and Alice’s services in exchange for … what?
Before my fury at that could take over, I crushed it and focused on Felix again. I didn’t know if there was anything we could offer him as an enticement, besides my hunting him down and destroying him if he didn’t cooperate. Bella had broken the hold Chelsea placed over Demetri, but there was also the chance that his mind would be safe from Aro’s probings. Would that appeal to Felix? Aro had been reading his every thought for centuries; he was probably used to it. Well, Edward had been reading our minds for decades, and the intrusion was never welcome. “As I said, we have a proposition for you. I expect you to accept it.”

“What is it, Major?” Demetri asked almost too eagerly.

“We’ll discuss it while my mate shows you the garden she is very proud of.” I stared into Felix’s eyes. “Has Chelsea also bound you to Aro?”

“Yes. Or so she has said. Aro has ordered her to do it to everyone. Our master prefers to ensure that those who are useful to him and the Kings stay loyal.”

“Would you have remained in his service even if she hadn’t tied you to him?”

“I did for many years even before Chelsea used her power on me. I have … benefitted from my service to the Volturi, though …”

“Though what?”

Demetri cleared his throat. “Like most of us, he has resented Aro’s frequent intrusion into his mind.”

“I can speak for myself, Demetri,” Felix said with a slight growl. He sighed heavily. “I have demonstrated my loyalty and allegiance to them countless times over the centuries, and yet—”

I drew back on the pressure I was exerting on his chin. “Yet you resent his constant digging into your mind and his having Chelsea use her gift on you.”

“Yes. There have been those moments.”

“Which was probably why he had her do it.” I released my grip on him. “There isn’t a leader that hasn’t pissed off most of his troops.” I’d certainly pissed off every member of my coven at one time or another. The difference was I didn’t need to force them to stay with me.

Smirking internally, I believed I had stumbled across enough of an incentive for Felix to at least make a trip to Alaska. He might even enjoy it.

If Bella would agree to shield him … I was almost sure that she would.

I stepped back from Felix and extended my hand toward the impatiently waiting Bella. She was standing in front of the barn with four of the large, plastic watering cans Charlotte had bought surrounding her. Her arms were crossed, her hip was cocked, and she was tapping her foot on the ground.

“After you,” I said to the vampires.

I wasn’t sure how she did it, and I’d been standing right there, but it wasn’t two minutes later, Bella had Demetri and Felix watering her sunflowers down the side of the barn with the bright pink watering cans while Rosalie watered the lively orange marigolds in front with the hose. Bella directed me to the little orange flowers and started dexterously plucking the weeds from between them and tossing them over her back into the grass. I didn’t mind weeding her flowerbeds, but I stayed between my girls and the guards.
Bella was happily telling them how our other coven-mate Charlotte had thought digging gardens, picking out the rocks, and planting seeds would be a good way for her to learn to control her strength. “I like the plants a lot better than those stupid toys that Peter brought. I mean, it was nice of them to do that, and it is good practice, but I like the plants. They’re little, live things, and I really want to be careful with them. I don’t care so much for the toys. Other than I don’t want to smash them to hell. Well, and they were a present.”

When Felix came forward to refill his two watering cans, I quickly took the hose from Rosalie at the flowerbed on the other side of the door, and Bella stood up in the middle of her marigolds, holding a prickly-looking, leafy plant between her thumb and forefinger. “See, Felix? I can pick out the weeds without crushing them or tearing up the flowers.”

Setting down the watering cans and glancing at me before speaking, he studied her, obviously trying to control his thoughts and reactions. “You’re doing very well, Bella. Most newborns would have destroyed the watering cans and the flowers.”

“Well, Char yells at me when I break shi … I mean stuff. I hate breaking things.”

Emmett had planted himself toward the back of the barn to keep an eye on them and was shaking his head. “Wish I had a video camera. Nobody would ever believe this shit.”

“Believe what?” Bella asked, squatting down to pluck out a few more weeds.

“That you got two of the goddamn Volturi here usin’ big, pink watering cans to water flowers.”

Bella frowned at him and brushed a few loose hairs out of her face with the back of her wrist. “Rose told me you watered the flowers while Jasper and I were gone.”

“That’s a little different, Bells.”

Felix lost the battle with his emotions, because I caught a flicker of lustful appreciation from him as his eyes followed Bella’s careful movements. I dropped the hose and growled at him, making him back up a step. Unfortunately, his huge foot came down in the flowerbed, crushing one of the little sunflowers.

“Dammit, Felix!” Bella was instantly on her feet, eyes darkening to black, and her trembling fists held up in front of her chest.

Several things happened at once, almost too fast for my vampire sight to pick up.

I turned to reach for Bella.

Demetri abruptly dropped the watering can he had been using, and his hand rose in Felix’s direction. “Felix, you should move out of the flowerbed.”

Emmett’s mouth fell open, and his eyes flew open in dread.

Rosalie said, “Oh, shit,” and started toward Bella, her hands outstretched.

Felix looked down at his foot, lifted it, and glanced up at us with wide, fearful eyes.

Bella growled.

I hit Felix with a blast of lethargy and grabbed Bella’s right arm as she launched herself at him.

As Felix began to sway, threatening even more of Bella’s knee-high sunflowers, Demetri leapt from
the middle of the fifty-foot long garden, his hands outstretched to knock Felix away. He was flying through the air and nearly on Felix, and I was pulling Bella toward me, when she snarled.

As I swung my left arm around to pull Bella to my chest, both Demetri and Felix were slapped to the ground just past the defenseless flowers.

“Ha!” Bella shouted. “I knocked their asses down!” Then she elbowed me in the center of my chest.

Since I was half-expecting her to do something like that, it didn’t hurt as badly as it could have, and I got my arm around her. That was when Rosalie collided with us, and all three of us crashed to the ground, obliterating one of the pink watering cans, water shooting out of it like a geyser.

Bella threw us both off with a roar. She reared back, legs spread wide, fists reaching for the sky, and water dripping from her arms, making her dark green T-shirt appear black. Before I could get my feet under me, she crouched to spring at Felix. Emmett came out of nowhere, tackling her, and they were a spinning, snarling, and hissing blur as they tumbled across the grass, landing about thirty feet away from the barn.

My little hellcat had learned her hold-breaking lessons well. Bella grunted with her effort, and Emmett let out a loud “oof!” as she kneed him in the side and leapt away from him.

She bolted for Felix again, who was sitting up by that time and holding his head in his hands. Demetri was crouched just behind him, his eyes going wide as he gawked at Bella charging them. I scrambled toward her and managed to grab her left foot as she began a leap to get around me. When she hit the ground on her side, I pounced on her, grabbing her flailing hands at her wrists and forcing her onto her back and her arms out away from her body. When she tried to kick me, I shoved my legs between hers and spread them.

Thank Christ, Rosalie dropped on our legs as Bella managed to draw hers up and attempt to flip us over.

She was snarling and screeching bloody murder, and I forced her head down with my jaw before she tried to head-butt or bite me.

Demetri and Felix were frozen in place, their red eyes ringed with white. Demetri stood just behind Felix, who was still sitting on the ground, as Bella screamed out her frustration and fought against me.

“Dammit, Jasper! That goddamn oaf crushed my damn sunflower, and I’m gonna kick his ass!”

“She hasn’t even torn up any of them!” She let out a rippling snarl and tried to push my head away from hers. “And we crushed the damn watering can! I like those watering cans! And I’m fuckin’ wet!”

I was straining as hard as I could to hold her arms down, and I heard Rosalie grunt as Bella tried to bend her legs to get her feet on the ground.

“Bella,” I ground out through my teeth. “Bella, stop. It was an accident.” Oh, how I hated defending that asshole. “Take it easy, Darlin’.”

Emmett, looking the worse for wear with grass stains and dirt smeared all over him, slid to a stop between Bella and me and the guards, who hadn’t moved a muscle.
Bella dropped her head to the ground. Squeezing her eyes shut and hissing, a growl still vibrated through her chest.

A lot of shit had happened in the previous day and a half, and I thought my little newborn had had enough. She had been doing so well, but she must have hit her breaking point, and we didn’t need her attacking one of the largest vampires I’d ever seen.

That was my job.

Gathering all the tranquility from my memory that I could, I flooded her with it. Nuzzling her jaw near her ear, I spoke softly to her. “That’s right. It’s okay. I’m right here. It’ll be all right.” I brought to mind how peaceful it made me feel whenever Bella and I were sitting quietly together, and it flowed through me and into her. “He didn’t mean it.”

“I know it was just an accident,” Bella said with a breathy voice. “I just … it’s just … I mean, I can’t … He smashed my damn flower and Charlotte brought us those seeds!” She gulped noisily. “I’m starting to worry about Charlotte and Peter. Shouldn’t they be back by now?” She tried to turn her face toward me, and her eyes opened gradually, still showing a shining black. “Do you think maybe they had trouble with the truck and stuff for the greenhouse? What if the truck broke down? Maybe they had trouble hunting. Charlotte was hurt pretty bad and—”

“Shh, Darlin’. Peter will take good care of Charlotte.” I continued nuzzling her cheek and kept watch on Demetri and Felix while they eyed all of us. “If the truck broke down, they would have called one of us.” Loosening the grip I had on her wrists, I caressed the backs of her hands with my fingers. “They’ll be okay. Don’t worry about them.” The tension in her body was easing up finally as I spoke to her, and I could feel her starting to relax beneath me.

As if he materialized out of thin air, Peter, wearing a new, straw cowboy hat, appeared about ten feet behind Demetri, his eyes taking in the scene and settling on Bella and me.

“Me and Char are just fine, Bubba,” Peter said calmly. “Nothin’ to worry about.”

As Bella exclaimed, “Peter!” Demetri and Felix jerked in surprise. Felix started up from the ground, but Demetri clamped a hand on his shoulder and held him down, hissing at him menacingly.

Peter’s hands were propped on his belt, and his bright red eyes were watching them thoughtfully. He would have appeared to be unconcerned, but I knew he could have beheaded them both in an instant.

“What the hell is goin’ on around here, Bubba?” Just the corner of Peter’s mouth turned upward and his head cocked a bit to the left. “Were there monkeys? Some terrifying space monkeys maybe got loose?”

Emmett barked out a laugh, Bella snorted, and I heard Rosalie groan with exasperation as she released our legs and lifted her weight off them.

I couldn’t help smiling at the humor flowing out of Bella. “We’re doing better, Peter,” I said softly. Bella had been enraged to the point of wanting to attack a male vampire nearly four times her size, and not five minutes later, she was almost laughing.

“Still a little whimsical in the brainpan. Seems calm enough, though,” Bella said, breathily, smiling with her relief at seeing Peter.

Chuckling with her, I slid my hands up her arms. “Okay now, Darlin’? You’re not going to attack him are you?”
“No, I, uh, I’m not really sure what happened.”

Peter, keeping his eyes on Felix, crossed his arms. “Say ‘hi’ to her, and she freaks out, but piss her off, and she ain’t afraid of nothin’.”

Drawing Bella from the ground as I rolled to a sitting position, I pulled her onto my lap and wrapped my arms around her, not quite trusting her yet. “Bella, I think maybe you need a little quiet time,” I whispered to her.

“But, where’s Charlotte?”

“She’s got the truck and the new trailer we bought,” Peter answered her.

“Trailer? Is she okay to drive?” Bella looked up at Peter. “Can she get them up the mountain?”

“She’s fine, Bubba. Like I told ya, there’s nothin’ to worry about. If it’s got an engine and wheels, Char can drive it.” He lifted his hat, ran his fingers back through his hair, and settled his hat on his head. “Just thought maybe I should run back. Mind tellin’ me who this big one is, or should I guess?”

My left eyebrow went up as I perused the two nervous guards. They probably didn’t have vampires sneaking up on them very often. “First two guesses don’t count.”

Peter studied the large vampire as he crossed his arms again and tapped his chin. “Felix, right? Since our little demon hasn’t bitten you, and the Major hasn’t turned you into a crispy critter, I guess I can say it’s nice to meet ya.”

Emmett, still grinning, relaxed his tense stance. “Bellzy-bub said she didn’t want to bite him, but I knew he’d do somethin’ to piss her off and then she’d be after him.”

Felix’s eyes moved slowly from Peter to Bella and me. “Bubba? Beelzebub?”

Even though Bella started growling again, Emmett couldn’t shut his trap. “I started callin’ her Bellzy-bub because she can be as scary as fuckin’ demon spawn, but when she’s not tryin’ to chew somebody’s leg off, she’s my Belly-boo.” He crossed his arms and gazed off into space. “But Jazz has a few names himself …”

Chuckling, Peter took a step closer to the Volturi, his eyes trained on Felix. “Yeah, you might have heard about the God of War, and a lot of folks, including Demetri here, call him the Major, but there was also Satan of the South, the Original American Badass, Maria’s Devil, Maria’s Demon, and then there’s my personal favorite—fuckin’ asshole.”

Bella’s growl grew louder, and I tightened my arms around her. “Peter,” I said, warningly.

Demetri’s eyes widened in alarm, and Felix looked guardedly from me and Bella, and back to Peter.

“Yes, I’ve heard most of those references for Major Whitlock,” Felix said judiciously.

“All well deserved.” Peter grinned, flashing his even, white teeth.

Emmett had his hand over his mouth, but he was still laughing. Bella wasn’t. She was beginning to tremble, and I could feel her anger escalating.

I couldn’t shut Peter up without letting go of Bella, and I couldn’t disable him with a blast of any kind of emotion—doing that would leave him vulnerable to the Volturi guards. I wouldn’t be able to
drag him away from them. Emmett and Rosalie could watch Demetri and Felix, but Bella might get even more upset.

I was stuck, and that fucker knew it.

On the bright side, since he was trying to give me a hard time, that meant they had a good hunt, and Charlotte must have been doing really well.

I glared at him and took a deep, calming breath. “Darlin’, how about we go get cleaned up?”

She growled at Peter.

Carefully, I rose from the ground, keeping my arms around Bella. “Remember that time out I mentioned? We’ll go do that.”

Her teeth were still clenched, but she spoke to me. “What about them?”

“Peter, Rosalie, and Emmett can handle ‘em.” I started backing away and slowly turned to face the house, holding Bella tightly to my side.

“We’ll finish watering your flowers, Bubba. You go ahead. My iPod’s on the island in the kitchen, if you want it.” Peter’s voice rumbled.

As we got farther away, we heard Felix ask, “You know who I am. May I ask who you are?”

Emmett laughed again. “Oh, that’s just Captain Peter Whitlock—the God of War’s second-in-command.”

As Bella and I entered the house, I felt a return of the slim ribbon of fear from Felix.

-oOoOo-

Unhappily, on my part, Bella said she’d wait for me to get a shower, and then she would take a quick bath.

Wanting to be available in case there was trouble with the Volturi guards, I didn’t even attempt to entice her to me when I got out of the shower, though I did notice her eyes didn’t move above my waist. I just smiled at her and pulled on a pair of jeans, my last ash grey V-neck T-shirt, and my boots, and flopped across the bed to wait for her.

She splashed, she sang along with Peter’s iPod, she mumbled to herself, and she cussed a few times with a couple “Dammit, Peters” thrown in there. After a while, I was getting tired of waiting, but I was being entertained, and the scents were delicious.

I couldn’t understand everything she had been saying, but some of the lines of the songs were funny.

Christmas music? And not even real Christmas songs—parodies. Something’s stuck up in the chimney?

I had begun to wonder what else Peter had on his iPod. Alvin and the Chipmunks?
That question was soon answered when the weird Christmas carols ended and Bella began to sing softly with the next play list. Each new song added fuel to the fire of my annoyance.

It started with *Heaven’s Just a Sin Away*, which devolved into *Third Rate Romance, Low Rent Rendezvous*. It went right to *Lovin’ on Back Streets*, and *She Just Started Likin’ Cheatin’ Songs*.

By then, I was getting pissed off. Did he have a goddamn play list called “Classic Country Cheatin’ Songs”? I wondered if he’d offered her his iPod for a fucking reason.

In the meantime, I’d heard my coven-mates, and that fucking Peter, enter the house, and Peter told our guests to have a seat at the kitchen island and amuse themselves with the Legos he picked up for Bella. After that, I couldn’t hear what they were saying—not even Emmett. But the emotional tenor of the room remained composed, with touches of curiosity and some humor.

After Bella’s soak in the tub, she allowed me to help her get dressed, and I couldn’t resist running my hands down her sides and kissing my claiming bites on her neck after easing the hunter green T-shirt down over her head.

I was very glad Rosalie had picked up several green shirts in different shades for Bella; though, we’d soon need to get more.

Bella had pushed my face away and told me to comb her hair since I needed something to do.

What I needed was to have my hands on her, and get her away from all those males.

Bella’s quick bath had lasted about an hour and a half, but I had to say it had done her good. Her swirling emotions had smoothed out considerably, and I could feel she was in a much better mood.

We walked through the living room and into the family room where Emmett and Rosalie were parked in a chair near the fireplace. Peter had shoved another chair around to face the kitchen and intentionally block the sliding glass door.

Feeling tendrils of besotted longing and a separate dart of lusty admiration, my eyes snapped to the two vampires seated at the left side of the island. Demetri’s mouth was hanging open and a lecherous smirk adorned Felix’s face.

I instantly realized my mistake.

It had never occurred to me to consider what sort of reaction the Volturi guards might have when seeing Bella cleaned up and with her long, thick hair flowing loosely over her shoulders and back. They’d only seen her as a scared spitless human and as a vampire with dirt on her face and her hair in a braid.

I drew myself up to my full height and narrowed my eyes at them, somehow managing not to growl as I stepped between Bella and them.

Bella wasn’t paying any attention to them. She was looking at Peter.

“Charlotte’s not back yet?”

“She’ll be here soon, Bubba. Can’t drive fast with all those panels and shit for your greenhouse.” He crossed his ankles on the ottoman and continued watching the Volturi. “Plus she had to buy some more shit.” He clasped his hands together and rested them on his belly. “Got the windows open so we’ll hear her comin’.”
Bella just nodded, propped her hands on her hips, and turned toward the kitchen. She had to step around me so she could see the vampires.

“Demetri.”

After finally tearing their eyes away from Bella and taking note of my glare, Demetri and Felix both schooled their features to display polite interest.

I was sure they had centuries of practice for that shit.

“Er, yes, Bella?” Demetri pushed a pile of Legos toward the center of the island and rested his arms on the beige laminate.

“Ooo! Legos!” Bella exclaimed, stepping toward them. She stopped herself and shook her head, making her silky hair flow sensuously over her shoulders like a damn shampoo commercial, and sending her spicy scent through the room. Her hands flew to the sides of her head, and she flipped her hair back over her shoulders, sending even more of her enticing fragrance through the air.

Demetri breathed deeply and sighed, and Felix who was sitting beyond him, just propped his chin on his fist and smiled courteously.

Peter’s eyebrows went up when I reached to rest my left hand possessively on Bella’s back.

Rosalie was feeling anxious, but the feelings of humor I was picking up from Peter, Felix, and Emmett were not reassuring to me at all.

“Never mind about the Legos.” Bella held her hands up. “Demetri, can Chelsea tell when a bond has been broken?”

At least my girl was thinking about the real issue at hand.

Clasping his hands together and sitting up straighter on his stool, Demetri lightly cleared his throat before answering her. “I don’t believe so, Bella, but I don’t recall that one of Chelsea’s false bonds has ever been broken before, except through death, of course. I don’t believe she was aware of it.” He shifted on the stool again. “I would not be aware that a vampire I had previously tracked had been killed until I tried to find him again. If Aro ordered me to find him, and I could not sense him, I would assume he had been ended. Then I would search for him anyway using the traditional means. I would also employ modern technology. You’d be surprised how easily you can find someone using cell phones, email, and the internet.”

Bella frowned in thought and moved toward the right side of the island. Anticipating that she would plop down on the stool across from Felix, I held out the one across from Demetri for her. I sat to her right and kept my eyes on Felix. Bella sitting so close to them made me uncomfortable; to say the least.

“But what about Victoria? You said you lost her,” I asked the tracker. “Did you ever think she had been ended?”

“At first, I did. But she blinked in and out rather rapidly, so I proceeded under the assumption she was somehow blocking me or perhaps having some sort of episode.” He ran his hand through his hair. “That only happened with one other vampire. It wasn’t precisely the same, but enough so that I continued to look for Victoria. That other vampire’s signal would fade out until it was nearly nonexistent. He was insane, and it was as if his mind would shut down for a time.” He stared down at his hands for a moment and then looked up at Bella. “Victoria’s blank episodes were lasting longer and longer. It was why I did not realize she was on her way here from Montana. I am sorry that you
“Yeah, Charlotte got hurt pretty bad.” Bella looked over at Peter.

“I told ya she’s fine.” Peter smiled reassuringly at her. “Char’s tough.”

Bella reached for me, and I held her hand, bringing her wrist up to give it a gentle kiss, taking the opportunity to show my claim over her.

“My wrist is fine. Jasper helped me.” She smiled at me and turned again to Demetri. “So, you don’t think Chelsea could feel that I broke your bond to Aro? So they don’t know?”

Felix’s eyebrows went up at that.

Demetri’s eyes flicked back and forth between Bella and me. “I would say no. It may only be a technicality, but I was tied to Aro. He was not tied to me. Chelsea can sense bonds, form them, or break them only when the vampires are in her presence. She reinforces the bonds periodically. It’s also why she accompanies Aro on his excursions—especially when he thinks there might be a talent he can find a use for. She has to be physically present.”

Running my fingers down Bella’s arm, I reaffirmed my decision to end Chelsea if I ever saw her. Then another thought nagged at my mind. “What about Marcus?”

“Marcus?” Felix asked in his deep voice.

“He can see bonds between vampires. Can he see when a bond has been broken?”

Demetri shook his head. “No. His gift is similar to Eleazer’s and Chelsea’s in that in order for him to see the ties between beings they must be in his presence.”

Still being on alert, I caught Charlotte’s mental signature and her eagerness. I hoped she was eager to be home, but she was probably excited about showing Bella and Rosalie what she’d bought. She was south of us, so she hadn’t gone around the mountain yet. “Charlotte’s comin’.”

A smile lit up Peter’s eyes, and he stood up from the wide chair-and-a-half and sat on the padded arm facing us. He lounged against the chair back, keeping his eyes on Demetri and Felix.

“Felix,” I said. “I have a proposition for you.”

“Oh?” He pushed himself upright and rested his hands on the edge of the counter. “What would that be, Major?”

At least he didn’t call me Satan or asshole. “Bella has stopped Demetri from getting a fix on any of my coven. She has shielded me from Edward. He wasn’t able to read my mind after she became a vampire.” I gave her arm a loving squeeze.

“Demetri thinks I broke his bond to Aro,” Bella added.

Demetri indicated he wanted to speak by shifting his eyes to me and tilting his head. I didn’t mind his deference, but I wasn’t sure I liked that he was asking permission, if that was what he was doing, but I would go with it. They were both used to being around Aro, Caius, and Marcus. I gave him a nod.

“As you know, Felix,” he began, “Aro theorized that Bella was a shield when she was human because he could not read her thoughts. He expected it to become stronger when she became a vampire. I believe she has put a shield of a sort around my mind, breaking Chelsea’s manufactured
bonds to Aro.” He reached up, and his fingertips brushed over the scars from Bella’s bite. “I suspect that he will not be able to read my every thought.”

Emmett had moved from his seat with Rosalie to sit on the ottoman beside Peter.

Felix took in a slow breath and cocked his head, his eyes resting momentarily on everyone present. “You want to try this on me,” he stated.

“Yes,” I answered him quietly.

“And what else? What is involved, and what do you want from me?” His eyes shifted down to his comrade. “Pookie mentioned bites in the throat and on his arm. Lovely new scars, by the way.”

Emmett snorted out a guffaw, Rosalie gasped and covered her nervous smile with her hand, and even the corners of Peter’s mouth lifted at Felix’s jab at Demetri. However, Bella snatched her hand away from me, covered her face, and groaned in embarrassment, dropping her elbows onto the counter.

“Oh, God.” She turned toward me and buried her face against my chest, while I slid my arm around her. “I didn’t mean it. Well, I did because Demetri was being a jerk,” she mumbled, “but I didn’t.”

I couldn’t suppress my own small smile. Who knew the Volturi’s main muscle had a sense of humor? “I don’t think she’ll have to bite you, but I do think she’ll have to touch you, like I told you before.”

Demetri pursed his lips, and a corner of his mouth began to lift as his eyes moved up to Felix’s face. “The shield around my mind does not hurt.”

Felix blew out a breath in disgust. “I’m not concerned about pain. Even losing a limb, or two or three,” he said, raising his eyebrows, “doesn’t hurt as much as attention from Jane.”

Bella whimpered into my shirt, and I pulled her close and ran my fingers down over her head. “Darlin’, your shield protected you from her when you were human. It’ll still protect you.” She might have been concerned, but I didn’t think it was for herself. She had seen Jane torture Edward, and she knew what losing a hand felt like. Perhaps it was a good thing she felt some sympathy for Felix. I looked at the vampire in question from the corner of my eye. “I want you to let Bella touch you and see if she can shield you like she shields us. Then I want to see if she can remove it and put it back like she did to Demetri.”

“And?” Felix asked, tilting his head up.

I tightened my hold on Bella, dropped my chin over her head, and looked up at Felix, preparing to shove her away from him. “If you don’t cooperate, then I can’t allow you to leave,” I answered him softly.

Bella twitched in my arms, but she remained silent. In my peripheral vision, I saw a return of Peter’s toothy grin, only he wasn’t amused. Demetri had become very still.

Felix nodded. “That is as I expected, Major,” he said with acceptance. “If your mate can break the false bond to Aro and shield my mind, then what? What do you want in return?”

I raised my head to look Felix squarely in the eye. “I want you and Demetri to meet with Edward in Alaska. I believe he won’t be able to hear you coming, and Alice won’t see you. When you get there, I want you and Demetri to behave as though you haven’t seen Bella, and you’ve come to make sure that Edward followed through with changing her as he’d promised. Like you’re checking to see...
if Edward followed orders. Of course, you shouldn’t tell him where we are.”

“Is that all?” Felix asked, crossing his arms over his wide chest.

“I want you to report back to me.” I straightened, but kept my left arm wrapped protectively around Bella.

“But don’t kill any of them,” Bella interjected.

Felix’s eyes flicked to Bella, and his hand came up to stroke his chin. “I would relish reconnecting with Carlisle’s beloved and privileged first son.” His lips curved up in a hint of a smile. “And afterward? Would we be free to leave?”

Peter stood up from the arm of the chair, but I kept my eyes on Felix.

“Afterward, I don’t care where you go, but I don’t want Aro, or any of the other Volturi, to know the extent of Bella’s shield. I suppose if he tried to read your minds and can’t, he’ll have an idea of what she can do.”

“And he would not be pleased.” Demetri glanced apprehensively at Peter and turned toward Felix. “We might be able to leave, but returning to Volterra …”

“Might not be the best idea,” Felix muttered. “However, Aro would expect us to return, and I’m not overly concerned about his reaction if he can’t read our minds. All of his other guards fear me.”

Peter took one step, bringing him closer to the four of us at the kitchen island. “We would sure be upset if anyone came after anybody in our coven.”

Demetri turned back to Peter. “I’ve already stated I would not do anything to harm your coven, Captain.”

I could almost hear the gears turning in Felix’s head as he thought. At last, he released a breath and placed his right hand in the center of the counter between the piles of Legos.

“I could see a possible shift in the balance of power. Major, I would not do anything to harm the members of your coven, either.” He slid his hand slowly toward us.

“But we don’t want power,” Bella said, her eyes growing wider as she stared at Felix.

Rosalie got up from her chair and went to Emmett, leaning against him and placing her hand on his shoulder. “We want to be left alone.”

Emmett grabbed hold of her hand and nodded in agreement.

The tension level had grown, and I sent out a delicate cloud of peace. “We do not want power, and we do want to be left in peace, but we will defend ourselves.” When Demetri and Felix were both looking at me, I continued, “You said you wouldn’t do anything to harm any of us.”

“I would do what I could to protect you and your coven, Major,” Demetri said, dipping his head in a bow.

“As would I,” Felix murmured.

“Hedgin’ your bets, Felix?” Peter asked, another dark smile spreading across his face. “Tryin’ to play both sides against the middle?”
“Not at all, Captain.” Felix placidly returned his gaze. “I’ve been around a long time. I’ve seen vampires come and go. I’ve helped some of them along on their journey.” His bright red eyes turned to mine. “With others, it behooved me to maintain a cordial relationship with them. I feel it would be in my best interest to maintain a civil working relationship with you, Major. One never knows when one might need a friend or an ally. And if your mate can shield my mind, it would be a relief to not be subject to Jane’s occasional adolescent fits of temper.”

“Oh, Felix, I’ll be your friend,” Bella blurted, practically bleeding compassion and reaching toward his hand.

I grabbed her wrist, preventing her from touching him. “Darlin’, they’ll be going back to Volterra eventually. They’ll be working for Aro.”

“Aro may or may not want me to continue my service to him if he cannot delve into my mind,” Felix replied. “But I’ve always had a contingency plan.” He shrugged his huge shoulders. “Working for the Volturi has not been a bad life. I would continue there, if the brothers do not object. But if they should, I have other options.”

“Demetri, would you keep working for Aro?” Bella asked.

“I would,” he said slowly. His eyes darkened slightly as he studied Bella, and a hint of his earlier adulation bloomed again.

Loudly clearing my throat, his eyes snapped back to me. I would prefer it if he was on the other side of the world from Bella. Maybe he could be a mole for us. “We don’t know for sure that Bella’s shield will prevent Edward or Aro from reading your minds. This is part of the experiment.” I sighed. I didn’t want to give away that we didn’t know everything about her shield, but I didn’t see any way around it. “We’re not sure if she’s shielding us because we’re near her. You’ll be the first real test.”

“I’ll still do it. What have I got to lose?” Felix drummed his fingers on the counter. “Besides my unlife, that is. Furthermore, if Edward can still read my mind, I’m positive I can think of something to entertain him.”

Emmett sat up straighter with a twinkle in his eyes. “I think I’m likin’ this guy.”

Rolling my eyes at Emmett, I shifted on my stool and rubbed Bella’s side. “Demetri, you can sense Felix now?”

After a slight pause, he nodded.

“Bella, I want you to try and put a shield around Felix’s mind like you have around the rest of us.”

“Without touching him?”

At my nod, I saw her eyes lose focus and a small frown line appear on her brow. She looked from me to Demetri and then to Felix.

“I can’t seem to do it even though I’m closer to him. Is it okay if I touch you, Felix?”

“Yes, Bella.” Felix leaned forward, slid his hand closer to us and became still, his eyes on me.

Bella pressed her lips into a thin line and placed her tiny hand over his very large one.

After another moment, his eyes widened in surprise, his mouth dropped open, and his gaze went to Bella. He turned slowly to Demetri.
A smile fluttered around the edges of Demetri’s mouth. “I can’t sense him. It’s as if the signal was cut off.”

Pulling Bella’s hand back from the large vampire, I wrapped my fingers around her hand and peered at Felix. “What did you feel, Felix?”

He blinked several times, and he lifted his hand from the counter and touched his forehead with his fingers. “It’s … it’s like a weight was removed from my mind, but replaced with … with a … warmth. I’ve not felt anything like it before.”

As I kissed Bella’s hand, I noticed Emmett and Rosalie had moved closer to us, both of them fascinated. Even Peter seemed pleased.

“Darlin’, can you take it off him? Demetri, tell us if you can sense him again.”

“I hope this works,” Bella said quietly as she leaned against me and concentrated on Felix.

Felix ran his hand over his dark head and said, marveling, “How strange,” at the same time Demetri’s face beamed, and he crowed, “Yes!”

“What did you feel?” Bella’s eyes were alight with excitement.

Felix sat back, dragging his hands over the laminate. “The sense of warmth went away, but the weight did not return. I had not realized there was a weight on my mind until it was gone.”

“That is what I experienced,” Demetri said, nodding his head. “Would you say the warmth felt like a brightness?”

“Yes.” Felix looked down at Demetri. “I would call it a bright warmth. There was no sense of heaviness or constriction, though it was only there a moment.”

“Okay, Bella.” I squeezed her to me. “One more thing. Try to put it back. Demetri?”

“I can still feel his mental signature.”

Bella let out a long breath, her brows lowering again.

“Ah!” Felix touched his temple.

Demetri’s face lit up like Christmas. “Gone!”

“It’s quite agreeable,” Felix remarked. “Soft. Quite unlike the way it feels when Aro is reading my thoughts. It’s as if he pushes into my mind and then there is a pulling sensation. It’s not painful, but it isn’t pleasant.”

“Yes!” Bella’s left fist shot up into the air. “I did it!”

“That’s some wicked shit, Bells.” Emmett came forward, offering his fist, and, of course, she bumped it with her own.

His pride in Bella was nearly glowing through his skin, and even Rosalie was sporting a radiant smile. Again, Peter was amused. I was quite pleased myself. If the shield she placed over their minds held when they were three thousand miles away in Alaska, we would definitely try having her remove and replace it while they were there. It might be an extra added incentive for Felix and could be useful in the future.
It annoyed me to no end that Demetri didn’t seem to need any sort of incentive to do what I wanted. Just in the last few minutes, his adoration of Bella had begun to modify and deepen.

They couldn’t get the hell out soon enough.

When Peter’s eyes met mine, and his head tipped toward the back of the house, I listened more closely and could pick up the sound of my truck. Charlotte was on the dirt road at the bottom of the mountain and would be making her way up the logging trails.

“Let’s take this back outside. Charlotte’s nearly here.” I pulled Bella even more tightly to my side when she started to slide down from her stool. “Peter?”

He pushed the chair and wide ottoman out of the way and opened the sliding glass door. “Fellas, ya’ll come on out. My mate will be up here soon. We’ve got a pick-up and a trailer to unload.”

When Demetri, Felix, Emmett, and Peter had filed out the door, Bella squealed and threw her arms around me.

“I did it, Jasper! I didn’t know if I could because I didn’t even know I had put a shield around everybody. Well, not a mental shield like that, but that’s so damn cool! So, now maybe Jane won’t be able to zap Demetri and Felix. I remember what she did to Edward, and it looked terrible, and maybe Aro won’t be able to read their minds!” Finally taking a breath, she pulled back from me and stared up in to my eyes, suddenly worried. “But that will probably piss Aro off. Do you think he’ll kill them?”

“Darlin’, I think it will make him question their loyalty, since they won’t be bound to him any longer, but they have been useful to him. I don’t know if he’ll try to kill them. I do think that Felix can take care of himself, and he and Demetri seem to share … a common respect and a sense of …”

“No, it’s more of a brothers-in-arms … compatriots. Though Felix was relieved when he saw Demetri.” I ran my fingers through her silky hair at her temple and cupped her cheek. “I think they’ll watch each other’s backs.”

Rosalie moved to stand closer to us. “I don’t know if we can trust them,” she said her voice low and strained with tension. “How do we know they’ll go to Edward? What’s to keep them from telling the Volturi everything they’ve seen and heard here? Just that would have Aro drooling like a dog.”

I stood from my stool and reached for Rosalie’s hand. “Rose, I don’t trust them fully, but I do know they were both relieved that their bonds to Aro were broken, and they both like the idea of him not being able to read their minds. I’m sure they’ve become used to Aro digging through their heads, but they didn’t like it. Imagine never having a private thought.”

She sighed angrily and pressed her lips together. “I never liked Edward doing it, but at least there was a way to keep him out. He didn’t get everything.” She squeezed my fingers. “But they might call Aro and have him bring his henchmen, and women, over here to try and attack us. Emmett, Charlotte, and I have no powers at all. They’d kill us and try to take you and Bella. Only God knows what they’d do with Peter.”

“Oh, Rose!” Bella wrapped an arm around Rosalie and pulled her into a hug with both of us.

“Rose! Rose.” I released her hand and patted her back, trying to lessen her anxiety. “You know I won’t let that happen. Emmett wouldn’t let that happen. We’ll protect each other.” Placing a hand on her shoulder, I bent down a bit to look into her fear-filled eyes. “Rose, they were both sincere when
they said they wouldn’t do anything to hurt our coven. I don’t think they’re a danger to us. If I did, they’d never leave here alive. I think they’ll be beneficial to us. Now, let’s get outside. Peter’s starting to feel nervous with his mate getting closer to the strange males, and Charlotte’s almost up here. Seeing Felix might set her off.”

-oOoOo-

I had a hell of a time keeping Bella away from Charlotte, the truck, and the new trailer loaded down with stuff. Whatever all that stuff was. She was so excited to see Charlotte and help get the truck unloaded, I practically had to tackle her and drag her away, much to Demetri’s delight and Felix and Emmett’s amusement.

After being introduced, Charlotte said a distrustful “how-de-do” to an appreciative Felix, grabbed Bella’s hand, and hauled her over toward the fire pit. From there, Bella could watch what everyone was doing, and Charlotte could grill her and Rosalie about everything that had happened since she left.

I positioned myself in the mid-afternoon sun between our glistening women and the barn, while Emmett, Felix, and Demetri unloaded the truck, and Peter barked orders about where he wanted everything stored.

It wasn’t long before all those four-foot by eight-foot plastic panels, long, wooden posts, and all the other shit Charlotte bought, was stowed away, and Emmett was shaking Felix’s hand and slapping Demetri on the back as they made their way toward us, Peter following behind.

It looked like Emmett had made a couple new friends.

Felix and Demetri stood quietly in front of me, their hands clasped in front of them, glittering in the sunlight and looking like they were awaiting their next orders, while Peter and Emmett surreptitiously flanked them. The ladies had hushed their rapid talking, and I felt Bella come up behind me, placing her left hand on my back as her right curled around my arm above my elbow.

She peeked around me and smiled shyly at the two vampires. “Thank you for helping to put all that stuff away since Jasper wouldn’t let me help.”

Felix merely bowed his head.

Demetri returned her smile and said, “You are most welcome, Bella. Thank you for breaking our bonds to Aro.”

I tilted my head toward Bella and surveyed the Volturi guards. Felix was calm, but alert, displaying that bland, politely interested look again. Demetri was happy, but tense. I felt he was struggling, though he didn’t show it. I thought he might be trying to contain his feelings for Bella, but it was already too late. He had slipped earlier, and even though it had been the barest sliver, it had been enough.

“Yes,” I began, “Thank you for your help.” I covered Bella’s fingers on my arm with my own. “I believe we have come to a parting of the ways, gentlemen. It’s time for me to send you to Alaska.”
Felix smiled broadly. “I look forward to seeing the young mind reader again and catching up with Eleazer and Carmen.”

Peter just smirked at that, and I got the feeling Edward wouldn’t enjoy the visit at all.

I patted Bella’s hand. “Darlin’, I’d like a word with Demetri.”

One eyebrow rose as she looked up at me with suspicion.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, trying to reassure her.

She pressed her lips together and sighed. “Okay.” She smiled again at the two vampires. “Looks like Jasper is trying to get rid of me again, so I’ll say goodbye, and I hope you have a safe trip. Don’t forget to give us a call.” She started to back away from me and stopped. “Meeting you this time was kind of better than the first time I met you.”

“Yes, it was. Despite the … rough beginning. Immortality suits you.” Felix bowed, bringing his right hand to his chest. “It was an honor to meet you, Bella, Major, and your coven. I’ll take my leave. Demetri will have no problem catching up.”

Felix turned and walked slowly away until he reached the edge of the trees at the top of the logging trail, then he darted away, disappearing into the shadows.

I was only mildly surprised that he would turn his back on a coven of six vampires, three of whom had kicked his ass and dismembered him.

“Nice to meet ya, Pookie. It’s been real.” Emmett swooped around Demetri and swept by me, grabbing Bella and slinging her squawking self over his shoulder. “Say ‘hi’ to Eddie Sparklenuts for me!” Emmett called as he bounded away. Bella snorted, Emmett let out a booming guffaw, and they both laughed and cackled all the way back to the house.

Rosalie and Charlotte started toward the house, giving Demetri a little wave and then they both broke into a run, disappearing into the house right behind Emmett.

Peter came and stood next me, crossing his arms and cocking his head. “Try not to get yourself killed, Demetri,” Peter quipped. He glanced at me from the corner of his eye and turned back to the vampire. He tipped his hat, grinned showing a mouthful of sharp teeth, and walked away.

When he had closed the front door behind him, my eyes slid back to Demetri. His face was still, and his unblinking gaze mirrored mine, but his emotions were filled with apprehension and there was an undercurrent of fear, bordering on panic.

I tilted my head down and looked up at the highest ranking Volturi guard. His control was excellent, but he’d had centuries to perfect his poker face. I studied him for several more minutes, and his calm façade never cracked.

“Demetri,” I said in a low, quiet voice. “You have nothing to fear from me simply because you love Bella.”

He blinked, his eyebrows twitched, and a flicker of bewilderment shot from him, and then the panic began to grow.

“Yes. I know. You covered it well, but I felt it when your devotion and adoration of her shifted into something more. And I really can’t blame you, because she’s amazing—who wouldn’t love her?”
Moving slowly so I wouldn’t startle him, I hooked my thumbs in my front pockets. “You said you would never do anything to harm her.”

When he opened his mouth to speak, I raised my hand to stop him. “You said you would protect her.”

He swallowed thickly and declared in a passionate whisper, “I would protect her with my very life, Major.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” I lowered my hand and propped it on my belt. “Everything I do is for her. I didn’t kill you at first, because she didn’t want me to. Despite the fact that you’re in love with my mate, you’re still alive because I think it would be more beneficial for her if you are. I think her shield will keep Aro from reading your mind, and that will protect her. He may or may not want you dead—he may or may not want you to remain in his service. I think he will because there’s no better tracker than you. You being aware of what goes on in Volterra will be to my benefit, which, in turn, helps to protect Bella. And I don’t want you here.”

Demetri nodded guardedly.

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Demetri?”

“I believe so, Major.”

“I’m not concerned with Felix. He sees a pretty female and reacts like most any male would. Though even among vampires, our women are especially beautiful.”

“They are,” Demetri agreed, but he didn’t relax his guard one iota. “Felix is … fond of Bella.”

“I know.” Just the corner of my mouth lifted slightly. “Don’t make me regret leaving you alive. Have a safe trip.”

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Chapter End Notes

“Were there monkeys? Some terrifying space monkeys maybe got loose?” ~ Captain Malcolm Reynolds to Kaylee Frye in the TV show Firefly: episode “The Train Job.”

“Still a little whimsical in the brainpan. Seems calm enough though.” ~ Captain Malcolm Reynolds to Shepherd Book about River Tam in the TV show Firefly: episode “The Train Job.”

"Satan of the South" from Fighting the Odds by CatMasters on FFN.

“Original American Badass” from Tiger Stripes by juliangelus on FFN

“There’s something stuck up in the chimney” ~ The Chimney Song by Bob Rivers
Heaven’s Just a Sin Away by the Kendalls

Third Rate Romance by Sammy Kershaw

Lovin’ on Back Streets by Mel Street

She Just Started Likin’ Cheatin’ Songs by John Anderson

“Immortality suits you.” ~ Felix Volturi to Bella Cullen in Breaking Dawn.

“Eddie Sparklenuts” ~ I saw that in the profile of notashamedtobe on FFN and almost split a gut laughing.
Jasper's POV

Two days. Two glorious, mind-blowing days spent hunting in the northwest section of our territory with my beautiful mate. Hunting and having sex. Hot, desperate, needful, intense, claiming sex.
And lots of it. I was damn glad we didn't get tired.

Bella had made me wait long enough. After the Volturi guards had left, she spent the first little while fawning over the hats and boots that Charlotte had picked out. They had fit perfectly, and seeing Bella in cowboy boots and a straw cowboy hat had lit a raging desire within me. I had been salivating at the thought of making love to my cowgirl, but somehow she held me off even longer so she could get into the materials for the greenhouse.

Not that having a tall, good looking, and charming male in love with my mate, or another strange male ogling her had anything to do with my wanting to reclaim her as fucking hard, and as fucking often, as I could.

But my enticing, tempting mate had other ideas. She wanted to get started on the greenhouse to protect her damn flowers.

Peter and Emmett had decided against a traditional one with a concrete floor. They had plans to construct a sort of pole-building hot house extension at the side of the barn. Bella couldn't wait to start digging holes to place the posts in. When she broke the string Emmett had set to line up the holes, a shovel, and then a posthole digger, Charlotte yelled at her and told her to just dig holes with her hands-which she was more than happy to do.

When we were running another string to get the corners square, she kept getting in the way and managed to break that one, too.

Emmett released a gusty, world-weary sigh, clamped his hands on her arms, and lifted her. She was squawking and kicking as he carried her over to the door of the barn, where he set her down.

"Look, Bells. Go get your damn mangled bucket," he said, pointing into the barn. "I want six inches of gravel in each and every hole you dug. No more, no less. Get the rocks from the pile you made when you were plowing up the dirt for your flowerbeds."

Unfortunately, that hadn't kept her busy long enough.

She was having fun mixing the Sakrete in the wheelbarrow until she broke the hoe she was using, and Charlotte gave her that flinty, Clint Eastwood stare she was so good at and hissed.

Emmett didn't let Bella anywhere near the level or other tools, but she helped place the posts without damaging them. A bit later when, in her excitement, she demolished one of the double-walled four-foot by eight-foot transparent plastic panels for the walls of the structure while she was looking for something else, Charlotte glared at her and then spun toward me, snarling.

"That's it! You get your horndog self and your bull-in-a-china-shop mate out of here!"

I may have been projecting a bit of the lust I was feeling. Maybe.

Gratefully, I dragged Bella into the house, threw some clothes, a comb and brush, and a bottle of Bella's vanilla shampoo in a backpack, and we bolted into the forest before Charlotte changed her mind and came after me to beat my ass.

I thought a few days or so in the peaceful wilderness of the Rockies was something we could both use, while Felix and Demetri were traveling to the Denali National Forest.

After I convinced her to feed, my savage huntress took down two mule deer and then she took me down.
It never entered my mind to try and escape her.

After a couple exquisitely delicious hours spent reclaiming my stunning mate, she had decided a swim was what we needed.

With one of her teasing cackles, she took off to the north with our backpack, leaving me to find and collect our discarded clothing. It was a challenge, considering I was still under the influence of the last orgasm that had blown through me like a freight train.

I followed the trail of our combined scents to a large crater lake and heard Bella splashing and hooting with glee, her voicing ringing and echoing around the surrounding stony heights.

How she had found it, I couldn't figure out. She had run directly to it. It was like my adorably hyper newborn had a sixth sense for bodies of water.

The lake itself was at an elevation of about ten thousand feet, and it was nearly completely enclosed by peaks of nearly eleven thousand feet. The box canyon was barren-no trees around at all except at the southern end where the lake narrowed and emptied down the slope, creating a stream that fed into Silvertip Creek.

Spotting my naked and wet mate at the far end of the fifteen hundred-foot lake, I threw our clothes down beside the backpack she'd dropped near a scraggly, stunted pine, and leapt into the frigid water to chase down my woman.

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I was inside her, but she filled me. She fulfilled me.

My body covered hers, but her love and pleasure enclosed me in a thick, velvety cocoon, and I thought I was as near to Heaven as an earthbound creature could get.

Beneath the dwarfed pines, my elbows were propped on the dry ground, my forearms supporting her back. My hands were convulsively grasping at her shoulders as I thrust slowly into her slick heat, over and over again, while her smooth hands slid up my chest to my neck. Her fingers caressed my face as they crept into my hair and curled, holding my head and bringing my ear to her soft lips.

"I love feeling you inside me," she breathed. "I love you on top of me, and I love it when you ... fuck me."

I gasped and shattered in her arms, straining against her, groaning and growling into her hair with each pulse of the orgasm that detonated within me. Then her arms were around my back, holding me, forcing me even closer to her soft body as I shook and shuddered with my explosive release.

I moaned as I rolled slowly onto my back, my hands sliding down to her hips. "Sit up so I can reach you. I want to feel you come."

As she rose, her long hair flowed over her shoulders, hiding her breasts from me, and she reached for my right wrist as I stroked her wet heat, her fingers sliding up my forearm.
Seeing her sparkling black eyes close and her pink lips form a silent O, I pushed my own lustful ecstasy into her and gasped again when I felt the vibration from her low growl and she tightened around me.

Her hips rolled against mine as she came, and wave after hot wave crashed over me, pulling me under and sweeping me away with her.

Spent at last, Bella moaned deeply, and she eased her body liquidly down over my chest, still breathing heavily as she pressed wet kisses over my heart. She snuggled against me, her soft mouth at my throat, as I gathered her hair and laid it down the center of her back.

"I love the way you smell. I love you," she said tenderly. "You know you're mine, and I'm yours."

Once again, even though I had tried to cover it, she was aware of my jealousy. "Always," I whispered back to her.

My arms went around her and held her. While I was still inside her, and she lay content and satisfied in my arms, I didn't want to think about the Volturi guards, but those bastards intruded on my thoughts again. I estimated we might have another day or so before Bella and I should head back to the house and wait to see if Demetri called.

I pushed those irritating thoughts aside and reveled in the blissfully peaceful aura around my mate. Then I felt a strange emotional mix of humor, wary attentiveness, and vigilance.

"What is it?" Bella asked, raising her head to study my face.

"I think Peter's nearby. We should get dressed."

As she drew away from me, and my dick slid out of her, I couldn't contain the groan or control the sensual spasm that shot through my body. "Oh, my fucking God. He'd better have a good goddamn reason to be lookin' for us."

Bella was already shaking pine needles out of her clothes. "I think even Peter has better sense than to try and find us for bullshit. Something must have happened." She frowned at her hunter green T-shirt, sighed with long-suffering annoyance, and wiped my spent venom from her thighs. "Get up so you can help me get dressed. He's probably close."

"Yes, my love."

She gave me a hard look as I used her T-shirt to wipe myself off, then I quickly dressed her in the pretty, little, blue boy shorts and bra; blue jeans; and the charcoal grey Henley she handed me.

She carefully pulled on her socks and boots as I finished dressing, tugging my navy blue V-neck over my head. It was one of the last blue ones I had.

I was brushing dirt and pine needles out of her hair when I heard Peter's "ahoy."

"You're timin' sucks, asshole," I snapped, growling at him as he came out from behind a small clump of trees.

"I waited for y'all to finish."

Embarrassment flashed from Bella, and she turned and hid her face in my chest. "Oh, God."

Peter held his hands up. "Hang on now, Bubba. Jazz was projectin' somethin' fierce. Believe me,
when I felt *that* I ran the other way, seein' as how Char's all the way back at the house. Otherwise, I'd have taken the opportunity to enjoy it." He peered around at the sterile peaks surrounding the lake. "Probably a good thing you all were up in this hollar or your phone would have been ringin'. It wouldn't have been a good idea for Demetri to interrupt."

Suspiciously, I studied Peter's knowing smirk over Bella's head. I hadn't said anything about the extremely strong and deep emotions I had felt from the tracker, but Peter was acting like he knew something. Or thought he did.

Peter clapped his hands together. "Yep, those hills are hell on cell reception. It's why I had to come lookin' for ya. You left a pretty thick scent trail, so it wasn't too hard to find ya. You were right damn loud, too."

I hissed at him, but it didn't do any good.

Bella released a whining groan and covered her face with her hands, but despite her mortification she tried to shake it off and get to right to business. "Um, so what's up?"

I kissed her forehead and began gathering our dirty clothes, shoving them into the backpack, while she tugged at the hem of her shirt and stared at the ground.

"Demetri called me a while ago, after he tried to call you. He and Felix have been scopin' out the Denalis' house, and he doesn't think Edward can hear 'em. He said they aren't goin' to move in until he talks to you."

Two days. Two *fucking* days was all I'd had with my beautiful mate before the shit started again.

*Fuckin' Demetri.*

"We've been here at this lake for a while. Bella wanted to swim." I hooked the backpack straps over my shoulder. "How the hell did they get there so fast?"

"Swim? Is *that* what ya call it?" Peter waggled his eyebrows at Bella as she glared at him.
"Remember that private jet Demetri mentioned? They had to drive back to wherever they left it, turn in their rental cars, and then they flew to Fairbanks."

I should have considered that. Of course, I hadn't known where they might have left the jet, and I had been more concerned with them getting away from Bella than how they might get where they were going. "We'll head up that ridge and see if we get a signal."

It only took us a few minutes to make it over the ridge and head down the southeastern face to get under the cover of some trees. Bella was beautiful in the midafternoon sun, but it was distracting as hell.

My phone displayed a couple bars, and Demetri answered before the first ring was completed.

"Major?"

"Yes, Demetri. Where are you in relation to the Denalis' house?"

"We are near a large rock outcropping, halfway up a mountain, east of their home. We have a clear, unobstructed view of it. All members appear to be present, and we have seen Edward in a room above the garage. We've been at our current location since about five AM your time."

Demetri spoke quickly and concisely.
"I know where you are. You're within Edward's range. If you haven't seen any unusual activity, then he can't hear your thoughts. What's your plan?"

"We plan to walk up to the front door. I suspect they won't refuse to allow us in. We'll ask to speak to Edward. I anticipate that he may observe our approach. If he runs, we'll follow and capture him. Otherwise, we'll follow most of our usual protocol. If he tells us Isabella has become a vampire, we will ask to see her, of course."

I could hear Felix chuckling in the background and asked, "What would you do if Bella was there?"

"Normally, I would try to determine if she had a gift, and then I would call Aro and inform him of her status if she were a vampire, and I'd await further orders. If Isabella was human, she and Edward would have been taken to Volterra, and Isabella would have been changed. The outcome for Edward, were that to happen, is unknown."

"Demetri, play it by ear. Like I told you, I'd prefer that he not know precisely where we are. Do you know how Bella was changed?"

Peter leaned into me. "Me and Char gave him the Cliff Notes version."

"Er, yes," Demetri replied. "I, in turn, gave Felix the basic information I had received."

"Good. Do you know about Bella's blood that Edward tried to hide?" It was despicable and underhanded, but I wasn't above trying to influence Demetri's already less-than-glowing opinion of Edward by bringing that up, and using Demetri's protectiveness for Bella against Edward didn't bother me in the least.

I grudgingly admitted to myself the tracker might have his uses.

One eyebrow went up as Peter cocked his head and smirked at me again.

Bella started to get angry about it all over again, and I ran my hand over her hair and cupped her cheek, trying to calm her.

Demetri lightly cleared his throat. "Yes. Like you, we found that action to be rather... repugnant."

His voice fairly dripped with disgust. Of course, if any of them had come across their singer, the human would have been drained almost immediately. Most vampires didn't try to preserve blood for later use. Fresh was always better.

"Demetri, give us a half hour to get back to the house, then go in. What you do with him is up to you."

"But don't kill him or anybody else," Bella said loudly at the phone.

Sighing, I looked heavenward, drew Bella into my side, and rubbed her arm. "Right. Don't end him." I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment and drew in a deep breath. "Have either of you spoken with Aro or his brothers? Are they expecting an update any time soon?"

"We haven't spoken with them. We should probably update him after we've met with Edward. He is eager to learn of Isabella's status and curious about the newborns in Seattle, but he knows that it could be detrimental to call me if I was in the midst of tracking someone."

"Do what you need to do." The guard spoke her name as if he were caressing each and every syllable, and I still fucking hated it. "Demetri, something else we are going to try is having Bella
remove and replace her shield from Felix while you are both up there. When you're able, we'd like to hear how it worked."

"Yes, Major."

"That'll be all. Update when you can."

"Bye, Demetri and Felix!" Bella called.

"Goodbye, Bella," Demetri answered softly through the phone.

-oOoOo-

As soon as we hit the north side of the clearing around the house, Bella bolted across the yard toward the barn to study the posts that had been sunk into the holes she had dug. "How come the roof and the walls aren't up yet?"

Peter just laughed and shook his head at her. "Bubba, vampire speed doesn't make concrete set up any faster. There's goin' to be weight on those posts. It's better to leave them sit a while."

"Oh." She flipped her hair back over her shoulders. "Where's Em?"

She spun and was running for the house almost before Peter lifted his arm to point.

As she banged through the front door, Peter and I grimaced as the door bounced back after hitting the wall behind it.

"Still seems a might wound up," Peter observed.

Sighing heavily, I mounted the stairs to the front porch. "She's a little nervous about Demetri being near the Cullens and talking to Edward."

"No shit."

"Got any spackle to fix the wall behind the door?"

"Yup. In the basement. Next to the paint for the wall."

Upon opening the door, we could hear Bella's low hiss and Emmett's deep grumble.

"I said no, Bells."

Bella and Emmett were sitting on a couple of the large ottomans in front of the TV, and Emmett was holding his game controller up out of her reach with his right hand and had his left spread over her face, pushing her away.

I tossed the backpack to the chair over by the sliding glass door and stared at the two of them. "What are you doin'?"

Bella shoved his hand away. "He won't let me play Halo with him."

Emmett huffed and snatched his hand away from her. "That's 'cause I don't want you breakin' my
shit. Go weave some potholders or somethin'.”

"Bella,” Charlotte called from the kitchen. She and Rosalie were sitting on opposite sides of the island. "We got you a Lego farm set and a couple of those Harry Potter things. One is a ship and the other has a dragon. We left those in the truck. So Felix and Demetri didn't play with them."

"I thought they unloaded everything out of the truck." Bella punched Emmett on the arm and headed for the kitchen.

"We had some goodies in the back seat we didn't want you to see yet." Charlotte smiled and pushed the boxes toward the edge of counter.

"Oh, you guys! You didn't have to do that. Harry Potter Legos? I think I read some of those books. Maybe.” Bella leaned against the edge of the counter and lightly touched the boxes. "Well, I'd like to read the books as soon as I can touch them without tearing them to shreds."

"Peter and I bought them for you. There's five. We stuck 'em in the library. I'd like to read 'em myself."

Meanwhile, Rosalie was eyeing me up and down and shaking her head in consternation. "You two drag more dirt, leaves, and pine needles into this house than ten Emmetts!” She gave me an icy glare, but when she turned to Bella, her face softened and a pleased smile spread across her face. "This came for you from Alice,” she said, lifting a plain, brown rectangular box.

"Yeah, Bubba, we hadn't picked up the mail for a few days, so we got it on the way out. Miss Ellen had been missin' me.” Peter dropped into the chair past the fireplace and propped his feet on the ottoman Emmett was sitting on.

"Pffft! I'm sure she was.” Bella rolled her eyes at him, but then sorrow emanated from her.

I immediately went to her, pulling her back against my chest and nuzzling her head above her ear. "What's the matter, Darlin'?"

Her hands drifted over my forearms, and she leaned into me. "That's probably my diploma. It was so nice of Alice to steal it and send it to me.” She sniffed and squeezed my arms. "I thought it would just be in an envelope, but she probably had it framed. Would you open it, Rose? So I don't break it?"

"Sure I will."

It only took a moment, and Rosalie was soon lifting a wooden frame, stained dark blue, from the tissue paper and bubble wrap within the box. She held it up for Bella to see.

"Oh. She got it framed in Forks High blue,” Bella cried and turned to face me, burying her face in my chest.

I stroked her hair to try and comfort her, and kissed her head. "She probably framed it herself, Darlin'. She wouldn't have let any humans see it."

"You're right, even though they're up in Alaska, and nobody up there knows me."

"She did a good job,” Rosalie remarked. "Though I smell Esme on it, too. They probably did it together. Where do you want to hang it?"

The sound of three phones ringing and vibrating interrupted our thoughts.
"Don't answer them," I instructed as I pulled my phone from my pocket and flipped it open to see who was calling. "It's Edward."

Rosalie frowned as she looked at her phone. "Carlisle."

Emmett was instantly beside me, also looking at his phone with a slight frown. "Esme."

"Let yours go to voicemail. I'll answer this one. We all need to hear what they have to say." It had been about an hour since I spoke to Demetri, and I steeled myself against what I anticipated would be Edward's presumptuous edicts.

I hit the button, and Edward's desperate voice practically wailed through the phone. Wind noise could be heard through the small speaker. The little bitch was running.

"Jasper! I'm on my way to Carlisle's, and then we'll be there as quickly as we can."

As expected, Edward was assuming I would want or need his help. I didn't trust the Volturi tracker completely, but I did trust him not to tell Edward our precise location. Clenching my teeth as I reminded myself Edward didn't know exactly where we were, I sucked in a deep breath and struggled to keep my voice as composed as possible. "Why would you try to come here?"

"Two of the Volturi are here looking for Bella! We must protect her! I know you're near Dubois, Wyoming, though it would help us immeasurably if you told us precisely where you are."

Hearing that, it was Bella's turn to frown, and her brows lowered with her anger.

I ran my fingers through her hair in an attempt to keep us both calm. "It's DEW-boyz. Which Volturi guards are there, and what did they say?"

"Felix and Demetri! I can't understand it, but I couldn't read their minds. I didn't hear them coming, and Alice hadn't seen them, or she would have warned us! You know if they had decided to find us, surely Alice would have seen it. They must have a new guard that's able to shield them from us somehow, though I didn't smell a third vampire." He faded out and then swallowed loudly. "You don't know the vile and reprehensible thoughts Felix had about Bella when we were in Volterra and-"

"What did they say, Edward?"

Bella stepped back from me and rested her hands on her hips as a sassy smile spread across her face. She was feeling quite smug. Rosalie and Charlotte looked rather self-satisfied, too.

And why shouldn't they? Bella's shield on each of the guard's minds was holding, and they were over three thousand miles away.

"I'm nearly to Carlisle's." Edward was gasping with his fear.

"Edward," I growled out. "What did they say?" For just a moment, I wished I was close enough to wrap my fingers around his scrawny neck.

"They want Bella! I don't know how long they were at Tanya's before I saw them, but I got the impression it had been some time. I was so shocked at seeing them sitting in her living room and speaking to Eleazer I ... It took a moment for me to realize that I couldn't read their thoughts. I then heard in Carmen's mind that Tanya, Irina, and Kate were so disturbed at seeing Felix, they left as soon they could. I ... I had not noticed that. Carmen had come to tell me they had guests. Guests!" he shouted with exasperation. "Felix had been one of the guard who had ended the Denalis' mother
Sasha and—"

"Edward! I know about their mother creating an immortal child, and the Volturi ending her, and you're babbling. What did Demetri and Felix say about Bella?" I was quickly losing my patience, but there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it.

Edward was actually panting in distress. "They came to check on her status. I told them she was a vampire, but I don't think they believed me. They want to see her for themselves."

*Good move on their part. I wouldn't believe him either.*

Rosalie and Emmett had set their phones to vibrate, and they were buzzing again.

"Why would they believe you, Edward? Aro knew you had no plans to change her. It's only logical he would send someone to check. You should have expected it. In fact, I'm surprised they waited so long."

After a moment in which all I heard was wind distortion over the phone, Edward said, "Felix asked where my beautiful little mate was, and I ... I had to tell him she wasn't here." Edward's voice caught at that. "Otherwise, she would have been here with me."

Felix hadn't wasted any time taking some jabs at Edward. It would have been entertaining, if a hot knife of fury hadn't sliced right through me. It was a struggle not to crush the phone. I was incapable of unclenching my teeth, but I managed to speak. "Did you tell them whose mate she is?"

Peter's phone began to vibrate. He pulled it out of his pocket and held it up so I could see it: Carlisle.

"Er, no, I didn't. I ... I left."

Bella sucked in a breath, and a black fire erupted in her eyes. I could have dropped the phone and grabbed her to keep her from going ballistic, but I felt an overwhelming need to try and impart some wisdom, and put a little more fear into Edward. I forced calm on myself, held my finger to my lips, and then reached to stroke Bella's coldly furious face. Her teeth were bared, and a bit of venom was beginning to leak from the corner of her mouth, but she nodded, squeezed her eyes shut, and slowly lowered her quivering fists.

I drew in a deep breath and made sure I had control over my tone. Or as much as I could summon up. "Oh. You ran away. Again. Forgive my astonishment." I couldn't prevent the sarcasm from bleeding into my voice, and blew out a breath. "Edward, you should have told them *I* am Bella's mate."

"But if I had told them that, they would find her!"

The child's idiocy knew no bounds. "Edward, listen carefully. Demetri cannot track Bella, no thanks to you and your little jaunt to Italy-unless you lied about that, also. However, Demetri can track Carlisle, and because of your thoughtless, ill-conceived, egocentric, and completely fucked-in-the-head suicide attempt, he can find you. And. Alice. You realize, of course, that he and Felix are most likely following you right to Carlisle and Esme's. Not that they need to follow your scent trail."

Edward's silence spoke volumes.

"Allow me spell this out for you, Edward. Even if you decide not to go to Carlisle's, Demetri may choose to stop by, since he's in the neighborhood, and say hello to his old friend and meet the missus. If I were him, I would. He'll soon meet Esme, and he'll have her on his radar." I leaned forward and touched my forehead to Bella's, needing to be in contact with her. "With you as a son, who needs
enemies?" Bella's hand rose to caress my cheek, and I leaned into her comforting touch. "Thank you for letting us know about the Volturi guards. It would be in your best interest not to try and find us. Goodbye, Edward." I carefully closed my phone, set it on the island behind Bella, pulled her to my body, and buried my nose in her hair, breathing in the reassuring scent that spoke of home to me. I was so grateful she was mine, so relieved she had survived Volterra and Edward.

"Edward is pissing me off, Jazz," she hissed in my ear.

"Me, too."

Her body was still rigid with her wrath, but she had controlled it. The tension was slowly draining away as my hands moved slowly up and down her back.

Her fingers grasped my sides and slid toward my back, her body molding to mine. "He's supposed to be so damn smart, and sometimes he is so fucking stupid. He doesn't think about anyone or anything but himself." Bella squeezed me, trying to get closer. "I was such an idiot to-"

"Don't, Bella. I told you before; you couldn't have fought against him." My left hand coasted up her back, and I held her head to mine. "I love you," I breathed, kissing her neck. "I know you were so mad at him, but you controlled it."

"It's not like he was here for me to rip up. Lucky for him." She pushed her face against my chest and inhaled deeply, breathing in my scent as I was breathing in hers. "Because I would have ripped him up."

"Me, too."

Peter's mirth danced around us. "Boy's almost too stupid to live. Good thing he's got Carlisle and Esme to hold his hand and wipe his nose for him."

Then my damn phone buzzed on the counter with another call. Finally noticing the anger radiating from everyone but Peter, I looked around at them as I picked up my phone. "Calm down. It's Carlisle." I pressed the button. "Carlisle."

"Jasper! I'm so relieved. Felix and Demetri Volturi are here in Alaska, and they are asking about Bella."

"Edward called. I know they were at the Denalis'."

"I suspect Edward was no more forthcoming with you than he was with me. He said he was on his way here," Carlisle's voice was low, and I could hear the stress in his words. "I tried to call you, but your line went to voicemail. Why didn't Emmett or Rosalie answer their phones? Are they there? Is Peter there?"

"They're here, and I told them not to," I combed my fingers through Bella's silky hair. "Edward told me that Demetri and Felix were there to check up on Bella. He said that he told them she was a vampire, but he did not tell them she was my mate. Predictably, he ran instead. He should be at your house soon, and he may try to talk you into coming here to protect Bella. She doesn't need it. You take care of your coven-I'll take care of mine."

We all heard Carlisle's sharp intake of breath, and I thought I heard two faint gasps through the phone. Esme and Alice must have been right next to him.

Esme's concerned voice was the next one I heard.
"Jasper, you know how much we all care for you, Bella, Rosalie, and Emmett."

"I do, Esme. This isn't the manner in which I would have preferred to tell you, but I've decided Edward's imprudence makes him a danger to my mate and those who choose to be in my coven. I've decided our separation should be more permanent."

Bella gave me an encouraging smile while her love encircled me and flowed softly through my heart.

"I understand, Jasper. I do." I could hear the sadness in her quiet voice. "I think I saw this split coming even before Bella awoke. It's obviously time for you to take care of your own family. You know I'm so proud of you."

Bella patted my chest and mouthed the word "bathroom" at me.

Smiling at my mate for wanting to give Esme some hope, I kissed her forehead. "Thank you, Esme, and yes, it's time we have our separate covens." She didn't sound as upset as I thought she would have. Looking back, it was inevitable from the time I realized Bella was my mate. I just had to wake the hell up and recognize it. I cupped Bella's face and pressed my lips to hers. "Esme? Bella reminded me we do have a bathroom here that requires your special touch. Would it be okay if I sent you the measurements and what we'd like?"

"Of course, it would. I would be happy to do it."

"Thank you." I sighed. "Please tell Alice that we received Bella's diploma, and she loves it."

"I will, Jasper. She's right here with us."

"Edward will be there any minute, and I'm sure the Volturi are following him. You don't need to fear them, Esme."

"What do you mean?"

Without thinking, I had tried to reassure her. I had to come up with something-fast. "Aro knew Edward hadn't planned to change her, but Bella is a vampire. It's what they wanted. You could also let them know that she is my mate. If they want to see her as proof, you can give them my number."

Esme pulled in a quick breath. "Aren't you concerned about them, Jasper?"

"Not especially. Bella has her shield, and we won't hesitate to defend our coven." Bella smacked me on the chest and scowled at me. I suppose that last remark could have been interpreted as a slur against the Cullens, but it was only the truth. I hoped Carlisle would maintain his authority over Edward, but I doubted it. "I should go, Esme. I'm sure Edward is nearly there. I'd appreciate it if you all would convince him not to try to come here. I don't want him here, and it would upset Bella."

I decided it wouldn't be wise to let her know it would upset everyone else also.

"I'll speak with him. Don't forget to send those measurements, and I'll work something up, and it would seem we need to prepare for guests. Goodbye, Jasper. Say hello to everyone for me."

"I will, Esme. Don't worry too much about Felix and Demetri. Goodbye."

Peter drew his hand down over his face and groaned. "You know that nutless wonder is goin' to come here, and then the rest of 'em are gonna be here."

Before I had a chance to say anything to him, Bella backed away from me, planting her fists on her
hips, and frowned at Peter.

"Peter, how the hell do you know that?"

He chuckled and held up his hand. "My right hand itches, Bubba."

"What?"

"When my left hand itches, I get unexpected money. When my right hand itches, we have company."

She let out a disgusted growl. "Oh, you're full of shit."

"That doesn't even include when I drop a fork."

Her hands flew up in the air. "You don't even use forks!"

"That's enough." I wrapped Bella in my arms and held her head to my chest. Emmett's snickers and Rosalie's and Charlotte's giggles broke the tension that had begun to build, but we needed to get back to business. "I have to agree with Peter. Edward's got it in his head he needs to protect Bella, and the last few times he tried didn't work out so well. If he runs, he could be here in eighty hours or less. If he comes-"

"The rest of 'em will be right behind him." Charlotte scrunched up her nose in frustration and dropped her hands to the countertop. "I wouldn't mind seein' Esme, but ..."

"They don't know where the house is," Rosalie offered.

Emmett went and sat on the ottoman again. "But they know we're near Dubois. Even Shitheadward would be able to track us from there."

"We have laid down a heavy border. Speaking of ... We need to run the perimeter again." I turned toward Peter.

"Me and Rose ran the lines before Felix showed up. We didn't find anything from the human that Vic-bitch brought here. Forgot to tell ya that when I saw Felix." Emmett rubbed his hand over his head.

"Thanks, Rose, Emmett." Kissing the top of Bella's head, I drew in her soothing scent again. "Now, Bella, I want you to take your shield from Felix."

If it worked, I didn't want her pulling it from Demetri. No one else needed to know that he was in love with my mate. Felix was a much better test subject anyway. I could just imagine the thoughts he would direct at Edward.

Bella blew out a gusty breath and then pressed her lips together as she concentrated. "Okay. I tried to visualize taking the shield from around his mind. When do you want me to try and put it back?"

"In a while. We want to give them time to get to Carlisle's." I was positive Bella took the shield from him. Since he'd already experienced it, he shouldn't give any indication that anything had happened. I didn't know why, but I was also sure that she would be able to put it back. Though I had confidence in Bella's shield, a weary sigh escaped me. "I'm pretty damn sure Peter's right that we're gonna have company again."

Peter's eyes lit up, and he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Battle stations. Prepare to be
Before we did anything else, Bella made me go upstairs to take measurements and draw a sketch of the bathroom and the right hand closet. Then she ordered me to scan the drawing and email it all to Esme.

"Maybe you should order some more clothes for us while you're online." She was pacing between the library, the living room, and the kitchen.

"What colors do you want, and why are you nervous, Darlin'?"

"Just get me the same thing you got before." She flitted to the bay window behind me. "I think I want some purple socks."

"Purple socks. Okay. How about your own iPod?" I didn't think I wanted her listening to Peter's anymore. I turned to reach for her hand, and she had already darted around the desk and the recliner and was on her way back toward the kitchen. "Darlin'?"

"Uh, an iPod sounds great."

"Why are you nervous?"

"We should do laundry and clean the house! Oof!"

Evidently, Rosalie caught Bella in her frantic pacing around the house and hauled her back to the library because they soon appeared in the doorway, Bella held securely in Rosalie's arms.

"Be still and answer him, Bella." Rosalie dropped her on her feet in front of my desk.

"There are people coming to the house! I don't really want them here right now. Well, I do miss Esme and Carlisle, and I'd like to thank Alice for the diploma, but you're right. Edward's a jerk, and he's probably on his way even though you warned him not to." She spun to face Rosalie who was standing with her hip cocked, her arms crossed over her chest, and an amused expression on her pretty face. "But if Esme's coming, I should clean this place up. I mean, we tracked dirt and pine needles all over the floor and up the stairs, and I'm sure the laundry is piling up, and maybe I should change the sheets. It's not like I need to fix a big dinner for them. Oh!" Her hands flew to the sides of her head. "We don't have anywhere for them to stay, because all the bedrooms are taken, and-"

I was in front of her and took hold of her frantically fluttering hands. "Bella."

"What?" Her bright red eyes snapped up to mine.

"Yes. All the bedrooms are taken and that's a good thing. If they come to Wyoming, they can check into one of the motels over in Dubois, or just hang out in the woods." I kissed the backs of both of her hands. "I don't want Edward in our house anyway."

"One of the advantages of having a house with only three bedrooms." Rosalie smiled deviously and batted her eyelashes.

"Yeah, Bells." Emmett poked his head around the doorframe. "Even if they're already on their way
and got a flight out, they won't be here for a while. They'll have to take a commercial flight 'cause Rose and Jazz are the only ones who can fly a plane—Edward was never interested. Uh, Jazz? Me and Pete are gonna run the lines before Belly-babe sticks a mop or a dust rag in our hands. See ya."

I gave him a nod and smiled again at Bella. "You can clean or do laundry if you want. When I'm finished here, I'll help you. Or maybe we could go outside and get some more rocks for your gardens, okay?"

Bella just stared at me. "You can fly a plane?"

"Yes. Next, I'd like to learn how to fly helicopters. Probably should have done that when we lived in Forks. So, are you cleaning, or ...?"

Nodding jerkily, Bella smiled hesitantly at me. "Jasper, would you braid my hair?"

"Yes, I will. I need one of those elastic bands—"

"I'll get one!"

She was gone.

"Oh, boy," Rosalie said, sighing. "Maybe you should just take her outside before she breaks something."

Charlotte joined us from the kitchen. "Yeah, Jasper. Just get her outta here. She's gettin' worked up, and we don't need her breakin' the vacuum—or the house."

"I heard that!" Bella shouted from upstairs.

-oOoOo-

My beloved mate, also known as the Slave Driver from Hell, calmly suggested I finish my online shopping while she had Rosalie manipulate her shining hair into a thick, neat braid. Then she darted upstairs, changed her clothes very slowly, grumbling the whole time about Peter and Emmett taking off and getting out of doing any housework, and vampires with pilot licenses. She appeared again with the laundry hamper. It was filled mostly with towels, since we tended to tear our clothes to shreds, and they usually weren't worth trying to salvage.

I really liked the deep red Henley she put on. I was glad that one had survived, so far. Between that and the boots she was wearing, I was ready to take her back upstairs and peel all those clothes back off her.

She insisted she could sort and start the laundry while I did the vacuuming. I knew better than to argue with her, but I felt like growling at Charlotte and Rosalie and their gloating smiles.

"Bella, you go ahead and go outside, and Charlotte and I will finish up in here."

"You just want to get rid of me," Bella said, pouting.

Rosalie gave her a sweet smile and patted her arm. "Yes, I do. See ya later."

Growling, Bella reached for the doorknob, but I hurried and opened it so she could get out without
"Adios, bitchachos!" she shouted as she waved and bolted through the late afternoon sunshine and into the trees.

"I think she's been hangin' out with Emmett too much," Charlotte complained.

I took off after my beauty and didn't catch up until she was nearly to Mud Lake, near the southwest corner of our territory.

It was almost too bad we didn't get tired at times. I thought my little newborn could sure use some quiet time. I recalled, with longing, the "nap" we had shared with Esme and Rosalie back in Forks, as I caught up to her and put my arm around her, slowing her to a walk.

"I've been thinking, Jasper," she said as she snuggled against my right side. "I should try and put the shield back around Felix now. That's a long time to watch your thoughts."

"It is." I hugged her to me and kissed the top of her head. "But I doubt he's been around Edward this whole time. Or Edward's been around him." Sighing, I looked ahead through the trees toward the lake. Reasonably sure Edward would not have listened to a word I, Carlisle, or Esme had said, I suspected he was on his way to Dubois. I was hoping for a phone call in warning but didn't want to risk calling Demetri.

"Okay, I think I did it. Maybe." She stopped just inside the line of trees at the edge of the pond. "I don't smell Felix here. I thought he said he ran around our borders."

"The pond is inside our marked lines, Darlin'. He would have run outside them." I pulled her to my chest and kissed her. "I'm sure you did put your shield around his mind again." Taking hold of the end of her braid, I slipped the elastic band off and began combing my fingers through the silky strands. "I love your hair." Trailing my lips over her neck to her ear, I was hoping to take advantage of our current solitude.

She planted her hands on my chest and pushed me away. "We should mark the lines some more."

I tried to move close to her again. "Peter and Emmett are running the lines."

She broke free and darted away, heading east. "But they probably aren't marking them!" she shouted, laughing at me.

It sure looked like my excitable mate just wanted to run. I appreciated the fact she wasn't running as fast, and I sure was appreciating the view. Her wavy hair fluttered out behind her and it swirled around her shoulders whenever she stopped to claw a tree and spit on it.

We'd gone nearly six miles, and were heading up another mountainside when my phone vibrated. Believe it or not, I was relieved to see Demetri's number. "Hello?"

"Major. Master Aro is near your home. I called him not long ago to make my report. He had surmised that Isabella would still be human, and instead of waiting for me to capture her and bring her to Italy, in his eagerness he decided to come to America. He was quite pleased to hear she is now a vampire."

I was stunned speechless.

What were the fuckin' odds?
Bella had stopped several yards ahead of me and was watching me with a puzzled look on her face. She cocked her head, her eyebrows lowered, and she started back toward me.

A low growl throbbed and worked its way through my chest. "How many? Who is with him?" As Bella stepped toward me, I swept my arm around her back and yanked her to me. "How close?"

Bella's eyes grew wide with fear.

"He has his usual contingent, Major. Jane, Alec, his shield Renata, and Chelsea. He brought no others because Felix and I are already here. The pilot of his jet is a vampire, but he will stay with the plane. Aro said he would meet us in Riverton, but he has moved. With his exceptional sense of smell-"

"Talk fast, Demetri. How close is he? How did he find out where we are?" Hissing, I crushed Bella to my chest, making her squeak. I eased my grip.

"Er, is that Isabella?"

At my growl, he sucked in a breath and continued. "Aro is within a few miles of your house. I told him that I had seen Isabella, confirmed that she was a newborn, and is your mate. Of course, he asked where she was. I merely told him she was with her true mate not far from Dubois. I felt it was best to speak as much of the truth as possible. As I said, he initially agreed to wait for us in Riverton, but Master Aro can be impatient at times. We had difficulty obtaining a car in Casper, and he left Riverton while we were acquiring it. Felix and I are on our way."

Astonished, I found myself not hating the idea of Felix and Demetri arriving. Then I remembered Bella's shield. "What else did you tell him about Bella? What about her shield?"

"I only told him that I still could not sense her. He did not ask about the other members of your coven or how many there were. When he asked about Edward and Alice, I did tell him that Felix and I had been in Alaska and had spoken with them. Aro did not ask any other questions about them as he believes he can get further details through my memories."

Bella's arms tightened around my ribs. "Demetri, did you meet Esme?" she asked, anxiety evident in her voice.

"I did, Bella." His voice softened as he spoke to her. "She is a lovely woman. She thinks very highly of you and the Major."

"I really like her, too, Demetri. I love her. She's like a mother to me." Bella pressed her head to my chest and sniffed. "Please don't chase her down."

"I will consider Esme and Carlisle as members of your extended coven, Bella. I do not wish to do her any harm."

Brushing my lips over Bella's forehead and combing my fingers through her hair and down her back, I wondered what he meant precisely by what he'd said. He'd had centuries to perfect an ability to misdirect. I didn't have time to analyze and worry about it. "Demetri, what do Chelsea and Renata look like?"

After a pause, Demetri cleared his throat lightly. "Chelsea is five foot three and has medium brown hair. It is about the same length as your coven-mate Rosalie's. Her robe will be black like Aro's. Renata is always close to Master Aro. She is five feet tall and has black hair. Her robe will also be
black, as she is Aro's personal guard."

"Is she a shield?"

"Her gift causes you to forget why you were after those she is protecting, and it will deflect you-make you go in another direction. Her range is minimal. At the most, she can protect Aro, Marcus, and Caius, but only if they are right next to him."

"Is there anything else I need to know? To protect everyone here with me?"

"Chelsea is not a strong fighter, and Renata relies exclusively on her gift. Aro has not trained in many years, though he was quite good. I could defeat Alec and Jane easily if they did not have their powers."

Bella rose up on her toes and spoke at the phone. "Thank you, Demetri. We'll see you soon!"

"Yes, we will, Bella."

I ended the call and hit the number for Charlotte.

"What's up, Jasper? You and Bella need clothes again?" she asked with a laugh.

"Charlotte. The Volturi are here."

..
I Visit

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

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A/N: Here, let me brag on myself. In the 2014 Fandom Choice Awards, in the Vampire category, I Live came in 2nd place for Best Bella Swan!

Satellite Heart Lament came in 3rd in the Best Quote or Passage! The, uh, “green dress” passage.

Thanks, you guys! I do appreciate it! I squealed and everything.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), and The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS)!

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

Silver Tongue by silver drip on FFN. This Bella is … strange.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You're a diamond stone

Overthrowing kings

Chapter 57, I Visit
Jasper’s POV

I had to jerk the phone away from my ear as Charlotte sucked in a loud, rasping breath. While I recovered, I sent my senses out as far as I could reach to try and detect the Volturi or anyone else that might be near.

There was a group north of Bella and me but still south of the house where Charlotte and Rosalie were. I couldn’t differentiate between the members of the group—a couple of them seemed to be blended. They were all projecting confidence and wariness, but there was a surge of happy anticipation along with fear.

Peter and Emmett were not within my range.

Charlotte suddenly found her voice. “I’ll be dipped in shit. That fuckin’ Demetri!” she exclaimed, her normally sweet tone low and deadly. “Rose! Shut all the windows and close the curtains. Turn on the TV. We gotta get outta here. Where are they, Jasper? Have you seen ‘em? How many?”

I could hear the strain in her voice. “Demetri called and said he didn’t tell them exactly where we are. I haven’t seen them yet. Group of five, south of the house. Two males, three females. Aro, Alec, Jane, Chelsea, and Renata. Bella and I are on the boundary line near where it intersects Long Creek Road. They’re about halfway between us and you. Go north to Bella’s pond. Rose knows where it is. It’s where we caught Felix. Where Peter and Emmett left clothes for us.”

Bella was trembling, her hands anxiously grasping and releasing my T-shirt, as I pulled her along with me, heading for the road.

Through the phone, I heard Charlotte rushing through the house, checking windows.

Rosalie’s strained voice came through loud and clear. “Charlotte? What is it?”

“We gotta get out. Go north. Jasper says Aro and four of his guards are here.”

Hearing Rosalie’s explosive, “Oh, shit” and the door slam, I was relieved they were out of the house and moving. “I don’t know where Peter and Emmett are. I called you first, Charlotte. I’ll call them next. We’ll try to meet you.”

“Okay, Jasper.” Her phone disconnected.

Bella and I crested the hill below the ridge, and I urged her to slow down as we made our way through the trees. Stopping next to a thick pine, I hit the number for Peter.

“Major?” He answered on the first ring, his tone puzzled.

“Captain, we have visitors. Charlotte and Rosalie have left the house. They’re heading north. It seems Aro is here, and he’s brought his guards Renata, Jane, Alec, and Chelsea. They’re south of the house. Bella and I are below them, almost to the road that crosses our line. Where are you?”

“Emmett and I are a few miles east of you. Only reason I got a signal. We’ll be right there.”

I shoved my phone in my pocket and started moving again toward the dirt road beyond the trees.
“Why did you tell Charlotte and Rose to go north to the pond?” Bella’s hands were still tugging at
my T-shirt, stretching it out. “Why would they turn on the TV?"

I was surprised she hadn’t ripped the shirt off me.

“The TV is just a stalling tactic. If the Volturi get to the house, they might think someone is inside. I
couldn’t take a chance on Rose and Char coming to us and running into Aro. He may have sent a
couple ahead to track our trails, though I don’t think any of the guard are very far from each other.” I
pried Bella’s fingers from my shirttail and held her hand. “Go slow through the trees. Listen and
scent the air. Just because I can sense them, it doesn’t mean I can’t miss something,” I whispered to
her. “I used the pond as a landmark that I know Rosalie knows about. Felix’s scent is there, but we
didn’t run directly from there when we had him. If anyone goes near it, Charlotte can handle
herself.”

“Maybe we should just call it Jasper’s Trap.”

Baffled, I gawked at her. “Call what … ? What?”

Bella glanced up at me and then continued to scan ahead through the trees. “You know … that pond.
I mean, you caught me there, and then you caught Felix there. It’s like a trap for vamps. It should
have a name. Maybe we’ll catch some more vampires there, and we can light ‘em on fire, and then
we’d have some place to dump their sparkly ashes. Vampire ashes aren’t poisonous, are they? Well,
if they’re poisonous, we can’t dump them in the pond, but—”

I was momentarily stunned again at the violent turn my sweet, little angel’s thoughts took; though I
shouldn’t have been. My venom had certainly enhanced her already strong sense of protectiveness.

It was just another example of how little any of us really knew her when she was human, or how she
had completely lost that filter between her brain and her mouth. “Darlin’, you really shouldn’t talk so
much right now. Please.” I cupped her cheek and kissed her, hoping she wouldn’t be too offended.

“I’m sorry.” Her head tipped down, and she looked up at me. “I’m a little nervous. What if my shield
on everybody doesn’t keep Jane from zapping them? What if Alec’s power works on us? Or
Chelsea’s? She could break us all up! They’re mine! I don’t want all our bonds broken, and—”

I stopped and yanked Bella into my chest. “Shh, Darlin’.” Holding her head against me, my body
curved over hers. “I’ll take care of Chelsea. She won’t break us all up. I won’t let her.”

Bella’s voice was a high pitched breath over my throat. “Are you … are you going to kill her?”

“She’s my first target.” I wanted to do everything I could to reassure my mate. My eyes kept moving,
checking through the darkening forest for a hint or sign of anyone approaching.

“But what if she has a mate? It would break his heart if she died, and he might come after us like
Victoria did.”

“I don’t care if she has a mate. If she does, and he tries to come after us, I’ll kill him, too.” I squeezed
her to me as her hands clutched at my back. “C’mon, Darlin’. We have to get down to the road.”

She nodded as her hands slid from around my sides. I brought her left hand up to my lips to kiss her
fingertips. “I love you. I’ll do whatever I need to do to keep you safe.”

Her grip tightened on my hand as we moved silently through the forest. Ahead, down by the road, I
thought I caught a small flash of light: a reflection of the rising quarter moon on some sort of vehicle.
It was sitting in a field beside the dirt lane. Signaling to Bella to stay quiet, we crept farther through
the trees and I could make out a large, black SUV. Bella stiffened when she saw it, but she remained quiet, even though her nose instinctively went up to scent the air.

Staying back from the edge of the clearing, we both studied the shiny Suburban. We saw no movement, and I sensed no one near it, until I picked up the alert and cautious feelings from Peter and Emmett.

Bella’s lips were at my ear. “Should we look through it to see who it belongs to?”

“No. There’s probably an alarm on it, so don’t touch it. I think we know who brought it here.”

Urging Bella behind me, I crept to the tree line and slowly stepped out from between the trees so I could be seen. Peter appeared from the forest across the road, Emmett right behind him, and they quickly moved to the SUV.

“Arrogant bastards,” Peter grumbled, as he stood in front of the vehicle. “They have a personalized plate on the front with a big V on it. Black on black. I guess that shit’s supposed to be inconspicuous.”

Did they have vehicles waiting for them in every country or was America just special? Maybe one of Aro’s guards was assigned the duty of carrying around and attaching those personal plates to rentals. “You had to notice they parked it right on our boundary line.” I gestured out across the field, and Bella broke from behind me, bolted toward Emmett, and flung her arms around him.

She practically disappeared in his embrace. He squeezed her until she grunted, and then he pushed her back, his hands on her shoulders, and he gave her a little shake.

Letting her go, Emmett studied her wide eyes, and then slapped his forehead and dragged his hand down his face. “Jesus H. Christ, Bella! Do you have a fuckin’ vampire magnet in your ass?”

In a flash, Bella’s little fists were propped on her hips, and she scowled darkly at him. “Lookie here, Emmett Dale McCarty. It’s not my fault Aro or any of the rest of them knows about me.”

He towered over her, but she began poking him right in the middle of his deep blue T-shirt. He held his hands up in surrender and started backing away.

She jabbed him again. “I never had any problems with vampires until I moved to Forks, and Edward thought he was in love with me. Then it seemed the moment I decided I wanted to be a vampire, they started coming out of the freakin’ woodwork.” She followed him step for step and thumped his broad chest. “Besides, Demetri called Jasper and told us Aro was here. If he hadn’t called, they might have caught Rose and Char in the house.” She yanked her hand back from his chest and clenched her fists. “And if that goddamn Edward shows up here, after Jasper told him not to, I’m gonna kick his ass! It’s his fault Aro knows about me at all!”

As she took another step toward the retreating Emmett, I caught up to her, threw my arms around her, and lifted her up. “Darlin’, I’m glad you’re not scared anymore, but you need to calm down a little bit. If you get any louder, they might be able to hear us. I’m goin’ to put you down now. You’re goin’ to be all right, right?”

She inhaled deeply through her nose. “Yessss.” She dragged out the word as I set her on her feet. “We need a plan.” She spun toward me and motioned for Peter to join us at the back of the Suburban. He wasn’t moving fast enough for her, so she zipped toward him, grabbed his wrist, and hauled him back to Emmett and me. “I think they’re looking for the house. We give them a little time to get there, then, like in Apocalypse Now, I say we hum Flight of the Valkyries real loud as we’re
“Running in and kick their asses.” Her bright eyes looked around at all of our stunned faces. “Not that one? How about Darth Vader’s theme?”

“The Imperial March?” Peter asked, cocking one eyebrow and folding his arms. His eyes slid to Emmett. “Did you always pick the movies you all watched?”

Emmett frowned at Peter. “Hey, don’t try to pin that on me. When Edward wasn’t all weepy over some shittily appropriate and suitable chick flick, our sweet little Bubba was all about the blood and guts.”

“Yeah!” Bella’s fist shot into the air. “A little action, with some shootin’, and some butt kickin’—”

I caught her hand and turned her to face me. “Darlin’, you need to get this out of your system. We can’t go in there all fired up with guns blazin’ even though they came to our place.” I smiled as she huffed at me in disappointment. “Aro didn’t bring a battalion of fighters with him. He didn’t even wait for Felix and Demetri to show up. This tells me he’s a little overconfident. He might whip some of that European charm on us while he has Chelsea try to bond us to him. He may have Jane torture one of us while Alec tries to subdue the rest until Demetri and Felix arrive. I have no idea what he’s really thinkin’, though I suspect he’s eager to see if he can read your mind even though he couldn’t before. Since you pushed your shield out and let Edward do it, you could probably do it for Aro, too. I’d prefer that you didn’t.”

Bella sighed and leaned against me. “I could probably put a shield around his mind to keep him from reading other people. If he touches me to read my mind, I could try it.” She stepped back from me and reached up to my face. “I could probably do it to Chelsea—keep her from binding anyone else to Aro.”

“She’s too dangerous, Bubba,” Peter said lowly. Over Bella’s head, he caught my quick nod, and he continued. “Covertly dangerous. At least with Felix, you know what you’re up against. Demetri might be able to find people, but he still has to fight. Chelsea’s sneaky and made slaves out of all those vampires, including your buddy Felix who would have stayed there anyway. You know Aro’s told her to try it on you or Jasper.”

Emmett’s darkened eyes were fixed on mine as he thumped Bella’s back. “Pete’s right, Bells. If vampires want to work for the Volturi, they should do it because they want to, not because she made them want to. We don’t even know if you can block her power like that.”

Bella covered her face with her hands and pressed her face into my chest. “They won’t hurt any of you. I won’t let them.” She began to tremble. “We have to kill them all. I could knock them all down, and then we could rip them apart.”

My hands slid around her, and I held her tightly, my fingers spreading over her back. “We don’t have to kill them all. Bella, listen.” I pulled her right hand from her face and tipped her head up to look into my eyes. “We don’t have to kill them all,” I repeated softly. “The Volturi serve a purpose. I don’t believe they are as evil as Edward tried to make you believe. They’re like police in a way. If vampires fuck up, they go in and clean them out. They’re good at it. I sure as hell don’t agree with all their tactics, but not so long ago, I wasn’t any better. In some ways, I was worse.”

Bella’s eyes began to shine with venom. “Oh, Jasper—”

“We can’t deny the truth.”

She sniffed, and her eyes were filled with sadness. “But, Jasper, you’re not like them.”
“Like I said, in some ways I was worse. I didn’t leave any survivors.” Sighing, I ran my fingers over her silky hair. We didn’t leave any survivors except the occasional, mutilated vampire we set free to spread the word about trespassing into Maria’s territory. “I still don’t think we need to kill them all. They have to be powerful enough to put a little fear into beings that aren’t usually afraid of anything.”

She sagged against me. “Victoria wasn’t afraid of them.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“But she was. She hid her identity from all those newborns she’d made. She set Riley up to take the fall if they were discovered. The only reason to do that was she knew enough about the Volturi to try and keep them from coming after her.”

Bella nodded and looked up at me again, worry etching her face. “So, you think they need Jane and Alec as their big guns?”

“I do.” My fingers traced lightly over her cheek and jaw. “Unless they refuse to see reason.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Hang on a minute while I look for them.”

As he always had, Peter watched me, his face tense as I concentrated on sensing where the others might be. I started to think it would be nice to have Demetri’s ability to pinpoint where others were. All I could tell was Charlotte and Rosalie were north of the larger group. I thought Aro and his guards were near the house. I couldn’t tell how close they were to it, but the feeling of exhilaration coming from them was hard to mistake. Someone was very pleased and it nearly covered the others’ anxiety and anticipation.

“Charlotte and Rose are north near that pond where you left clothes for me and Bella, I think. They’re both afraid, but they aren’t panicking. I think the others found the house.” Peter and Emmett’s relief was palpable—their mates weren’t with the Volturi.

Emmett nervously bumped his fist in the palm of his other hand. “So, where do we go first?”

“We’re going to get your mates and then see what Aro’s doing at my house.”

-oOoOo-

After running silently toward the northwest, staying in the trees and keeping the mountain peak between us and the house, we turned to the north and then northeast to reach Bella’s pond. I could feel our coven-mates’ increasing anxiety and impatience. Not wanting Charlotte and Rosalie to attack us, I sent them a thick wave of courage and reassurance as we crept closer. At first, Rosalie was alarmed, but Charlotte radiated relief as she dropped out of the trees beyond the north bank of the pond and rushed toward Peter. Rosalie was right behind her and launched herself at Emmett.

Bella was practically vibrating in her eagerness to see them. When they finished the kisses and whispered exclamations with their men, both ladies pulled away from them and raised their arms toward Bella, knowing she would want to get her hands on them.

She sprinted toward them, grabbing them both together in a frantic hug. “Oh! Oh, I was worried about you, but Jasper said you got out of the house, and you’d be all right because you would go north away from them, and Charlotte could handle herself, and—”

“What, and I can’t?” Rosalie asked with a crooked smile. “Remember, Bella, we are …”
“Wolverines?” Bella asked sheepishly.

“Not exactly, but we’ll go with it.” Rosalie laughed and rubbed her shoulder.

“I have to make sure you all are shielded. It has to work because nobody hurts my vampires!” Bella put a hand on each of their cheeks and closed her eyes. “If Jane attacks you, I don’t know what I’d do!”

“Well, you could slam her face in the dirt and make her stop it like you did to Peter.” Charlotte squeezed her arm and tried to catch her eye. “Bella! It’ll be okay, sugar.”

“But Chelsea might try to break us up! Jasper, Em, Peter, c’mere!”

She was quivering with agitation as I neared her. She released Charlotte and Rosalie, and then she latched onto me like a squid around a clam.

“Bella, take it easy. Bella!” I held her head and made her look up at me.

“What?”

“That’s a little tight, Darlin’.” I didn’t need her cracking my ribs before we went up against five other vampires.

“I’m sorry!” Her wide eyes stared up at me for a second before she twisted around to reach for Peter’s hand on Charlotte’s shoulder.

Emmett shifted in behind Rosalie, and like before, plopped his huge hand on top of Bella’s head.

“What is it with you and the group hugs, Bells?”

“Not that I mind gettin’ my hands on the ladies …” Peter arched an eyebrow, peering down at Bella.

“But she is starting to damage my calm.”

Bella blinked in surprise, snorted, and burst out with a chiming laugh.

Shooting a warning look at Peter’s gleeful face, I reached around and put my left hand over Bella’s mouth, stepping even closer to her. “Shh, Darlin’. Not so loud.” Gathering what tranquility I could, I shared it with her, hoping it would have some effect. Since everyone was in contact with everyone else, it might help take the edge off of everyone’s nerves. “Take a deep breath. Emmett, get your hand off her head. Thank you.”

Bella released a long breath as I pulled my fingers from over her mouth and slid my hand down her neck.

I kissed the crown of her head. “My plan is to approach the house from the north and try to determine where they are. I think they’re all together. Bella, stay behind me. Once we spot them and see what they’re doing, I’ll go into the clearing first, see how they react, and ask Aro what he’s doing in my territory.”

Rosalie chuckled. “Well, what you plan and what takes place ain’t ever exactly been similar.”

Emmett started to snicker and pulled Rosalie even more tightly into his side, planting a loud kiss on her cheek. Bella slapped her hand over her own mouth to cover another amused snort. The rest of them weren’t helping very much, but at least she was trying to be quiet.

I narrowed my eyes at Rosalie and tugged Bella’s back into my chest, taking hold of her hands and
crossing her arms over her body. “Demetri told me Renata is always right next to Aro. She’s five foot tall and has black hair. Chelsea’s five foot three, her hair is medium brown, and it’s about as long as Rosalie’s. We know Jane is a petite blonde and Alec is the only other male. We all know what Aro looks like from Carlisle’s painting. Keep your eyes on all of them. If any of you notice anything, let me know. Phones off. ”

Then it struck me what a stupid motherfucker I was. I had never asked Demetri if Chelsea had a limit to her range of influence. All he had said was she needed to be in the presence of someone to affect them. I shoved that miniscule bit of alarm away before Bella caught it.

Peter and Charlotte already knew the procedure. We’d been in many campaigns together and knew how to work as a team, long before there were cell phones to worry about. I hadn’t done any such thing with Rosalie and Emmett, and Bella being such a young newborn—she was still an unknown quantity. I had to trust that the protection she had around our minds would hold. Her shield had sheltered all of us from Demetri—I would hope it would also inhibit Chelsea from tying any of us to Aro or breaking our bonds to each other.

“Phones off?” Bella asked.

“We don’t need to take a chance on them making noise while we’re moving in.”

She nodded quickly. “Oh, yeah. Stealth mode. Got it.”

Placing my phone in my pocket, I turned Bella to face me and placed my hands on either side of her beautiful face. Her anxiety was ratcheting up again, and if I thought I could convince her to stay back in the woods, I would have done it. I might be a stupid asshole, but I wasn’t stupid enough to think that would happen. I knew she would be right beside me. The thought did send a swell of pride and love through me. Along with a trickle of worry that if worse came to worse, she would be right there in the thick of it and could be hurt. “We didn’t know it at the time, but when Demetri showed up, you had shields around all of our minds, and he couldn’t catch our … signals. Your shield kept Jane from hurting you when you were human. It’s only gotten stronger since you became a vampire. But if things should go south, we’ll handle whatever happens.”

“We’ll take care of each other. We’ll protect our coven,” she whispered to me, grasping my wrists.

I could feel her determination growing. “We will.” I bent to kiss her. “Remember. This is our territory—our home.”

Emmett clapped his hands together, his eyes lighting up with anticipation. “Shiny! Let’s be bad guys.”

-oOoOo-

From our hidden vantage point in the woods, I studied our five visitors.

Seemingly at ease in his perfectly tailored black suit, Aro was seated on one of the wooden rocking chairs to the left of the front door. His legs were crossed, his hands rested on the curved arms of the rocker, and a hint of a smile played about his mouth.

His personal guard, Renata, was standing, not-so-at-ease, just behind his right shoulder, and the other female, Chelsea, was at his left shoulder. As Demetri had said, they were both dressed in deep black.
robes that brushed the floorboards of the porch. I had to admit he looked rather regal even in an old, white-painted, wooden rocker.

The slight Witch Twins, dressed in charcoal grey robes, were standing together directly in front of the door, their hands clasped in front of them. Alec’s hair was much darker than Jane’s, and he was just a bit taller. It was hard to imagine that such small vampires could be so notoriously powerful.

Those robes would be more of a hindrance than a help in a fight.

All I could think was they seemed much too sure of themselves, and I couldn’t suppress the smirk. They were too used to intimidating everyone with their militaristic manner and props. I had to remind myself to guard against my own cockiness. The Volturi had won many conflicts over the centuries.

Aro turned slowly toward the twins and spoke, bringing his left hand up, his index finger touching his chin.

Jane replied to him, bowing her head.

Underneath his calm exterior, Aro was quite excited and bursting with eagerness.

It was a wonder Renata hadn’t fainted from her fear. She clung to Aro’s shoulder as if it were a lifeline.

Chelsea was so confident, it radiated from her, and a flash of anger passed through me, followed quickly by a slim ribbon of relief. She hadn’t bound Bella, Alice, and Edward to Aro when they had been in Italy, but her haughty look and self-assurance made me think she would attempt it as soon as she could. Briefly, I wondered if I would be able to feel it.

The twins were alert, their eyes constantly moving along the tree line, but one of them was annoyed—I just couldn’t tell which one it was. If I were a betting man, I’d have to say the irritated one was Jane. Her attempt to hurt Bella before had been thwarted.

The moon had risen quite a bit, and the Volturi were in deep shadow on the porch, but I had no trouble seeing the vivid red of their eyes or the glint from the rubies adorning the Volturi crests each of the guards wore. Aro had no such need. The simple ruby stick pin in his black silk tie seemed sufficient.

From our cover amongst the trees, I glanced at each of my coven-mates. They were tense, but I detected only a trace of fear. Even Bella didn’t seem to be frightened any longer, but her sense of possessive protection was a thick cloud around her. I hoped she didn’t become jealous of the females. I didn’t particularly want her leaping at any of them. I couldn’t help noticing that the sight of the two new males added a jolt to my own wariness, but, for once, my jealousy wasn’t ignited. I guess I wasn’t worried about them being rivals.

Bella was to my left, and I brushed my fingers along her arm, sending her my love.

She smiled at me and moved to whisper in my ear. “I swear Aro was wearing that same suit the first time I saw him. I recognize Alec and Jane, but I don’t even remember the other two.”

“All black suits kind of look alike, and that’s okay, Darlin’. We know who the others are.”

“Arrogant fuckers, sittin’ on our porch,” Peter mumbled in my right ear. “That Chelsea is lookin’ mighty damn sure of herself.”

I had to agree with him because she was also feeling rather superior. Glancing at Peter from the
corner of my eye, I nodded. “Then she’ll make a mistake.”

Not that I hadn’t made enough of my own.

The edge of his mouth lifted as one eyebrow began to rise. He returned my nod.

From my left, I heard Emmett hiss, “May God have mercy upon my enemies, because I won’t.”

I agreed wholeheartedly. Squeezing Bella’s hand, I asked her, “Ready?”

She gulped and peered up at me. “Yeah. I’m ready to find out what they’re doing on our porch. At least they aren’t sitting in our living room. That would be rude.”

More silent than the night around us, I rose from my position behind a thick pine and started toward the clearing. Bella moved to my right side, working her left hand up under my shirt and placing it on the small of my back. Her steps were as quiet as my own.

We were about ten feet beyond the edge of the forest before Aro’s head snapped around in our direction. A smile broke over his face, and he stood, bringing his hands together.

“Dear ones, it appears our patience is to be rewarded,” he said cheerfully.

Leading the others, Aro glided across the porch and down the four steps toward us. “Ahh, Major Whitlock, do forgive us for taking the liberty of enjoying the view from your porch while we awaited your return. I’ve been quite keen to make your acquaintance.”

No doubt he was. He knew about my history in the Southern Vampire Wars, and Demetri had told him Bella was with me. He was playing it well; addressing me before focusing his attention on Bella.

About five yards in front of the house, Aro came to a smooth halt, clasping his hands in front of him, while the others fanned out around him; except for his shield Renata. She maintained her position behind him and just to his right, her hand on his back.

Alec and Jane had moved to his left, while Chelsea took the right. If Felix and Demetri had been there, I wondered where they would be standing.

Who would they be standing with?

On a hunch, I stopped about thirty feet from them, Bella staying just behind me, the fingers of her right hand curling around my arm above my elbow. She pressed her body against mine and peeked around my arm. She’d done that practically since she had awakened, and I found it to be comforting.

Keeping my voice low, I asked, “Aro, what brings you and your guards to my home?”

His gaze traveled slowly over me, pausing at the visible scars on my arms and neck. That inspection was no different than any other vampire who hadn’t met me before, except Aro displayed no distress at the sight of them. His pleasant expression didn’t change until his eyes landed on Bella and remained there. His eyes lit up with pleasure, and his curiosity and anticipation grew as his small smile spread.

“As I’m sure you are aware, Major Whitlock, your young coven-mate, Edward—”

“He is not my coven-mate.”

Aro’s eyebrows rose, and he bent his head in an abbreviated bow. “Please excuse my error as I was under the impression you were part of my old friend Carlisle’s coven.”
I put my hand over Bella’s fingers on my arm and tipped my head toward her. “My mate and I are not part of that coven.” He was fishing for information. I would give him that much and let him know about my claim over Bella while I was at it.

“Yes, of course. I see.” Aro smiled again and raised a hand, fanning out his fingers. “After his … little indiscretion, young Edward was permitted to leave Volterra when I was assured Isabella would become an immortal. The thoughts of the seer were simply … fascinating.” Aro brought one finger to his lips. “I am quite pleased to see this has come to pass, although …” he raised his head and his eyes flicked between Bella and me “… Edward’s thoughts were adamantly against it. I found that to be quite puzzling since he was so insistent that the lovely Isabella was his mate.”

At Aro’s words about her being Edward’s mate, Bella flinched and pressed herself more firmly against me. I could feel her instant of anger, but she quickly suppressed it.

I rubbed Bella’s hand and murmured to her, “You’re doin’ good. I love you.” To Aro I said, “Edward was mistaken.”

While Aro was speaking, Chelsea slithered forward a few steps, a look of consternation on her face. I felt nothing different, other than her frustration. She must have been attempting to use her power on us and it wasn’t working. Perhaps there was a limit to her range, and she was trying to get closer to us.

Peter and Charlotte came up on my right while Emmett and Rosalie joined us on my left.

“Rosalie Hale and Emmett McCarty.” Aro smiled knowingly, and his fingers wove together in front of his chest. “Members of the Cullen Coven come to visit the newborn Isabella?”

“No,” I answered him levelly. “They are part of my coven.”

At the others’ approach, both Jane and Alec shifted uneasily, their eyes studying Peter and Charlotte. Aro extended his left hand toward them. “Peace, dear ones. It is natural that coven membership fluctuates and evolves over time.” He gestured toward Peter and Charlotte. “And it would seem that not only has Major Whitlock welcomed members of his previous coven, he has also been joined by his former compatriots.”

Oddly, Charlotte took a small step forward. “Charlotte and Peter Whitlock.”

Why had she moved forward, and why had she told Aro their names?

I soon found out why.

As she spoke, drawing the vampires’ attention to her, Peter’s left hand on his belt shifted, and he pointed his index finger to our left. At the same time, Bella’s fingers were digging into my arm and my back, and she was staring directly at Chelsea.

“She’s doing it,” Bella hissed. “I feel it.” Bella released my arm and shouted, “She’s trying to take you. I feel it!”

Her blast of rage fed my own. As one, we leapt forward. In my peripheral vision, I saw Peter and Charlotte hurtling toward Alec and Jane. Somewhere in my brain, it registered that neither of them dropped to the ground in agony.

Chelsea had taken another step forward, and her deep red eyes were staring fixedly at me. She was so absorbed in her mission; she didn’t react quickly enough to the imminent threat.
It was her last mistake.

Even if she had responded more quickly, it wouldn’t have done her any good. The little female’s eyes flew open with panic, and she twisted around to run. She didn’t make it very far. She crumpled against an invisible wall. My magnificent mate had trapped the devious guard within her shield. She couldn’t escape.

“Master!” Chelsea shrieked as she bounced back; right into my waiting hands. She spun to face me, and my right hand closed over her throat and my left clamped down on her shoulder.

Roaring, I wrenched her apart, ripping her head from her neck and her right arm from her shoulder. I slammed her head to the ground and backhanded her falling body, sending her limp torso toward the house.

Bella’s rippling snarl joined my roar. While I was separating Chelsea’s head from her body, Bella was a blur as she tore Renata away from the incredulous Aro. She hurled her to the ground and pounced on her. “Don’t move, or I’ll rip your head off.” She straddled Renata’s hips and roughly slapped her hand down on the middle of the little vampire’s back.

While Aro gaped at Bella, Emmett and Rosalie were on him.

Wisely, Aro didn’t offer any resistance when Emmett’s huge right hand went around his throat and his left caught Aro’s right wrist. Rosalie had both her hands on Aro’s left forearm, and she held it out away from his body.

Emmett lifted him enough that only his toes were in contact with the ground.

“Don’t even try to kick me,” Emmett warned him.

Peter easily subdued Jane, and his long fingers were around her neck, holding her up off the ground. Cracks were radiating up her jaw and into her face from the pressure of his grip. She was clawing at his hands until he snarled and shook her like a rag doll.

Charlotte came down in front of Alec, sweeping his hands away with her left hand as her right fist crashed down onto his skull, knocking him face first onto the ground. She stomped on his back as she jerked his arms up. If he moved, she would rip them both away.

I felt a surge of lust and looked to my mate. “Bella?” Apparently, my beloved liked it when I ripped other vampires apart.

It was neither the time nor the place.

“Jassper,” she hissed, her eyes blinking rapidly as she tried to control herself. “She was trying to tie us to Aro or break us all up! We gotta burn that bitch,” she said with a low growl, her teeth bared. She jumped to her feet, stared down at the quivering Renata, and pointed at her face. “You don’t move.”

Bella leapt to Chelsea’s body, flipped it onto its back, and snarled again in anger. She searched over the ground and picked something up. A thick, gold chain dangled from her hand.

It was Chelsea’s Volturi crest. Bella tossed it toward Aro, and the heavy, golden V bounced on the sparse grass at his feet. “Nobody attacks my mate,” she said to him, her voice rough.

I kicked the disembodied head closer to the arm and looked again to Bella.
Panting with her rage, Bella’s black eyes looked up at mine. “Do you want to take her to the fire pit or burn her here?”

My eyes moved slowly to Aro. “Here is fine, Darlin’, but we should move her away from the house. Vampire fires get pretty hot.”

Before I could move, Bella grabbed the female’s remaining twitching arm, dragged her toward me, and let go, dropping the body on the other parts, and letting the still-attached arm flop over the torso.

“She has a mate,” Aro’s voice rasped out. He wasn’t able to speak any louder because of the grip Emmett had on his throat.

Was he asking me to show mercy to the vampire who tried to enslave me and my mate to him? “I’ll ship him the ashes.” I held my hand out to Bella, and she was instantly at my side, taking turns glaring down at Chelsea’s body and up to Aro. “Or did you want to deliver them personally?”

Aro didn’t have anything to say to that.

I backed away from the headless guard and pulled my lighter from my pocket. I knew Bella wouldn’t let go of me so I didn’t want to get too close to the body. As I rolled the striker to spark a flame, I realized I only had one other and would have to order more. I lobbed the lighter toward the venom leaking from Chelsea’s neck and watched as the flames began to spread. It would take longer for her to burn because she hadn’t been torn to pieces, but I really didn’t give a shit.

It was then I realized I wasn’t picking up the full force of everyone’s emotions. I bent to Bella’s ear and whispered, “You shielded us? I can’t feel anyone but you.”

Peering up at me, she reached up and put her lips to my left ear. “Yes. The shield’s stronger around us—our coven. But not the physical one. I’m afraid to let go. What if Jane hurts Peter?”

“Then I’ll crush her fucking head. She can only hit one at a time. Ease up on it so I can feel them or knock them down if I need to.” My eyes went to Peter, who was still holding the little blonde off the ground. I stroked Bella’s head, hoping he took it as a message to prepare himself, just in case.

He winked at me.

Bella let out a slow breath, and I was inundated with a jumbled mass of panic, amazement, fear, envy, anger, uncertainty, bewilderment, determination, and protectiveness. But Peter didn’t fall to the ground.

I pushed back against it all and focused on Aro. He wasn’t as disturbed about losing one of his top guards as I thought he would be. There was a strange mix of regret, guardedness, and a touch of fear. What puzzled me most was the slice of relief cutting through it all. Could he have been glad to be rid of her?

Catching the eye of each member of my coven, I raised my head. “Let them go.”

Gathering her robes, Renata scurried toward Aro as Emmett and Rosalie released him and moved to stand guard behind him. Charlotte leapt away from Alec and was busily wiping her hands off on her jeans, a look of distaste on her face.

Then there was Peter. He lifted Jane even higher, let go of her neck, and jumped backwards, landing right next to his wife.

He never had been fond of Jane.
She dropped to the ground like a rock, landed on her ass and just sat there, stunned for a moment. Alec was growling and on his feet in a crouch when Jane let loose a furious shriek, scrambled to her feet, flipping her damn cloak out of her way. She and her brother both rocketed toward Peter.

I hit them both with a paralyzing blast of terror. A few yards in front of Charlotte and Peter, the twins struck the ground screaming, their hands clutching at their heads, as each of them curled into tight, little, charcoal grey balls.

As his dear ones howled in fear and dread, Aro’s eyes met mine. “Are they in pain?”

He was actually concerned about them, but he made no move to try and stop me. “No. Fear.”

Bella shifted against my left side, her arms squeezing my waist, and her hands digging into me. No one else would have heard it through the vampires’ shrieks and cries, but when Bella whimpered with sympathy for them, I shifted my assault to the old standby of lethargy and utter apathy. The twins gasped and their rigid bodies seemed to almost melt as their quivering muscles instantly relaxed.

Aro’s shoulders had tensed and inched up as he helplessly watched his little guards scream and writhe. When their bodies went limp, a breath whooshed out of him, and his shoulders dropped.

“Aro, I believe we have much to discuss. Have a seat.” I gestured toward the porch, turning nearly all of my attention to him.

He hesitated only a moment before he inclined his head, lowered his eyes, and walked smoothly toward the house, Renata close behind.

They had to realize that the tiny female wasn’t safe-guarding him—at least not against us—but the habit was so ingrained in her to protect her master; she couldn’t seem to help herself.

When Aro’s foot touched the first step of the porch, I heard stereo growls behind me. Bella twisted away from my left side, crouched, and snarled deeply. Alec and Jane had vaulted from the ground and were flying right toward us.

They slammed into Bella’s shield. When they hit the ground spread-eagled on their backs, Bella actually beat me to them. Her growl rumbled through her chest as she kneeled on the ground between them, her right hand on Jane’s throat, her left on Alec’s.

“I said …” she shoved their heads a little deeper into the ground “… nobody attacks my mate!”

Charlotte and Peter hadn’t moved. It was like they had been waiting to see what would happen. They were standing just beyond Bella and the powerless guards, smirks on each of their faces. They enjoyed watching Bella handle the pissed off pint-sized vampires as much as I did.

Charlotte crossed her arms, jutted out a hip, and looked down her nose at them. “For bein’ so old, both of ya’ll are pretty damn stupid.”

“They’re not used to gettin’ their asses beat—especially by a newborn.” Then he chuckled deeply. “Or by anyone.” He grinned at Bella and hooked his thumbs in his pockets. “It’s like they’re learnin’ shit, huh, Bubba?”

“They need to learn a little faster.” I moved closer to Bella’s left side. Peter and Charlotte couldn’t get through the barrier, but, once again, I went right through without a problem.

She must have been holding them down with her shield also. Neither one of them had tried to punch
or claw her.

I crouched down beside her and peered into her face. Her eyes were a glittering black, her teeth were bared, and venom was dripping down her chin. She was ferocious and beautiful, and the siblings were trembling with fear.

During their long lives, they must have seen how newborns behaved. Without the use of their powers, they should have been terrified. They were lucky Bella hadn’t bitten them, though if she gripped their throats any tighter she might just pop their heads off.

Reaching to place my hand lightly on Bella’s shoulder, I whispered to her, “Darlin’, let me and Peter have ‘em.”

She jerked them both up to a sitting position and took in a deep breath, closing her eyes. She was struggling to calm herself so she wouldn’t tear them apart.

“It’s okay, Darlin’. Peter and I will hold them. Just let them go.”

“In a sec.” Bella nodded her head, slowly opened her black eyes, and studied each of them. As she blew out a breath, her fury disappeared and her compassion and sympathy returned. The stiff, angry lines of her face softened.

Her eyes flicked quickly from Alec, to Peter and back to Alec. As she released her grip on the young-looking male, Peter bent down, clamped his hands on Alec’s arms, and snatched him away.

Gently placing her hand on Jane’s cheek and speaking softly, Bella said, “You have your whole death ahead of you, Jane. Don’t make us take it away.”

Jane flinched when Bella reached for her hand and cautiously rose from the ground, drawing the little blonde up with her. “We don’t want to hurt you. You can’t affect us with your power. Alec can’t either. You know this.” Bella slowly shook her head and grasped both of Jane’s hands. “You know we could have torn you both apart. Jasper, Peter, and Charlotte are very good fighters. You can see that. I know you and Alec were nervous when they came out of the woods and you could see their scars. Without your power, you don’t stand a chance against them. Oh, for future reference, you don’t scream and leap. You just, ya know, leap.”

“How … how did you do that?” Jane’s eyes were still dull black with her fear.

“You also know when I was human I had a shield around my mind. After I became a vampire, I put shields around my coven-mates’ minds to protect them. I could do the same for you and your brother. Aro wouldn’t be able to read your thoughts and memories.” Bella cautiously moved her right hand to cover both of Jane’s.

Jane’s eyes widened, and she drew in a quick breath. She tried to step back, but Bella held firmly onto her hands. “What did you do? I felt it. It’s like … it’s like a soft blanket around my mind.”

Alec began to fight against Peter’s hold. “What did you do to my sister?”

Bella turned her head slightly to look at Alec. “I didn’t ask if I could, but I put a shield around Jane’s mind.” Bella stroked Jane’s small hands and looked steadily into Alec’s eyes. “I could do it for you, too.” She guided Jane’s hands to mine so that I could hold them, and she stepped around her toward Alec.

When he snarled at her, Peter’s hold tightened around him, and Charlotte slapped his head back against Peter’s chest and held him there.
“No! No! It’s a trick!” Alec shouted as he struggled to break free.

Jane looked at her brother with resignation. “It doesn’t cause pain, Alec. It doesn’t even feel the same as when Aro touches us.”

“We don’t know what she’s actually doing! She could be enslaving us to them!”

“Enslaving?” I asked. “Is that what you really thought about Chelsea’s gift?”

Bella’s fingertips touched his cheek, and then she turned back to Jane. “I can take it away if you want. I’m not like Chelsea. It’s for protection.”

Once again, I felt a burst of pride in my mate. She was brilliant. She had put a shield around the minds of Alec and Jane, covering four of the Volturi’s closest and most infamous guards. I was beginning to think she should also shield Aro. Of course, we wouldn’t definitively know until they arrived, but I was fairly certain Bella had removed and replaced the shield around Felix’s mind while he and Demetri had been in Alaska. Perhaps it was something that could work in our favor.

Jane hadn’t moved at all while I held her hands. Her fear had drained away, but she did seem worried about her brother. His own panic was replaced with anger, and though I couldn’t blame him for being outraged and mistrustful, I didn’t need him trying to attack any of us again. “Charlotte, take Jane. Peter, let me have him.”

As soon as my hands were on the small male, and Peter let go, I hit Alec with a dose of submission and enough lethargy to calm him down, but not enough to drop him. “You need to settle down.” I took hold of the back of his neck. My eyes flicked back to Jane. “It had been rumored that Aro’s closest guards stayed of their own free will. We know that wasn’t exactly true.” I pushed the nicely sedate Alec toward the house. “Perhaps we should join your master.”

I knew Emmett and Rosalie had been keeping an eye on Aro and Renata, not that the short guard was anything to worry about, but she was at his right side as before, her fingertips on his shoulder. Aro was sitting in the rocking chair he had previously been in, and Emmett and Rosalie were flanking them both.

True sadness fell over Aro’s face as he watched us walk toward him. “Major Whitlock, are you going to end them as you ended Chelsea?”

I handed Alec back to Peter and came to an abrupt stop as I caught the slightest tickle of someone else’s awareness. When I turned my head toward Peter to tell him someone was coming, a snarl ripped through Bella’s throat.

Taking advantage of my moment of distraction, Aro had stood up and leapt toward us. His trajectory made it appear as if he was aiming at me. Bella was faster. She sprang from the ground; her right hand clamping down on Aro’s left wrist and spinning him as she gained height. As he twisted in the air, he swung his right arm around to capture her, but she grabbed his bicep, and I caught his right forearm with my left hand. Faster than lightning, Bella’s teeth were in his throat. My right hand shot out to force his jaw shut, and when we crashed to the ground, I shoved his head deeper into the dirt.

Emmett roared behind us. Aro’s entire body shuddered in pain as Emmett tore away his left foot and flung it toward the parking area north of the house, before he dropped into a deep squat and held Aro’s legs down.

Alec and Jane’s screams and threats were suddenly silenced when Peter and Charlotte wrenched their heads off and let their bodies slump to the ground.
Their terror and agony was a batteringram against me and then, as quickly as it had started, it stopped. I couldn’t tell if Bella was shielding me or blocking them.

Her furious growls filled the night as I quickly checked over her and my coven. They were all okay. Renata was the only Volturi who hadn’t had any appendages ripped off. Rosalie held her with arms like steel bands. The black-haired female was sobbing as she stared at her master flat on his back on the ground, covered with vampires.

“Charlotte. Peter. Someone’s coming.” I spread my fingers across the side of Aro’s head and squeezed when I realized he was growling, too. Closing my eyes, I forced my senses outward. Bella was blocking the twins—not me.

To the east, there were two beings. I picked up alertness, dismay, anticipation, worry, fear, protectiveness, vigilance, urgency. “From the east. I think it’s Demetri and Felix. They’re moving fast.” I looked over my shoulder toward Rosalie. “Renata, be quiet. Rose, if you think you need to, rip her head off so she doesn’t make any noise.”

Peter and Charlotte bounded to the porch roof and flattened themselves against the siding on either side of the center window, waiting for our next visitors.

I was reasonably sure Felix and Demetri would be joining us shortly; it was uncertain how they would react to seeing their helpless king maimed and on the ground, regardless of what attachment Demetri might feel for my mate.

Then there was the little matter of Bella pumping her venom into Aro. The jealousy that was formerly absent, decided to make an appearance. I shoved it aside.

“Bella,” I said firmly.

She stopped growling.

“Stop biting him. We’ll hold him down.”

She started growling again, and I felt the vibrations through my contact with Aro. I released his face and began stroking Bella’s hair and running my fingers down her back. I didn’t want to force calm on her. She needed to be alert, and it might piss her off again. “Bella, I’m okay. Everyone is okay. We’ll hold him.”

She snatched her teeth from his neck, but kept hold of his left wrist and sat back on her heels beside me at Aro’s right side. “He was aiming right for you, Jasper!” She dragged her right sleeve across her mouth and slapped her hand back down on Aro’s arm.

As soon as she moved her head, I had hold of his throat. “I think that was to distract you.”

For once, Emmett didn’t make a comment about Bella biting everybody.

I felt Aro’s Adam’s apple move as he tried to swallow the venom flooding his mouth. He spoke with a strained voice. “Your mate has exceptional control for a newborn, Major. She listens well.”

Bella glared at him. “Gee, thanks.”

Aro’s dark red eyes shifted to her. “That was not meant as a backhanded compliment, Isabella. I’ve seen quite a few newborns, and your control is quite good. You realize, of course, it’s because you found your mate as soon as you awoke. It is rare, but when it does occur, it has quite an effect on a newborn’s temperament.” A slight frown crossed his face. “I was unable to read your coven-mates,
and I am unable to read either you or your mate.”

“That’s because I have shields over them.” Bella huffed. “I don’t feel like I’m in control.” She glowered at him. “To answer your question, before you so rudely jumped off our porch, we don’t want to kill Jane and Alec. Jasper said you needed them.”

I spread my fingers over his jaw and cheek to turn him to face me. “You’re concerned about them, but you don’t seem very upset about the loss of Chelsea.” I sent a mixture of honesty and compliance to him. Bella would feel it, but I really didn’t have to worry about her being truthful.

“To be perfectly honest, Major, regardless of your subtle influence …” The corners of Aro’s mouth turned up slightly. “Chelsea, though useful, had become … too big for her britches, as you Americans say. Over the last few centuries, her demands were becoming more onerous.”

So, Aro could feel it when I pushed a bit at him. “But you had her bind the members of your coven and guard to you.”

“It seemed the more expedient way of encouraging others to join us and remain loyal to our noble cause.”

Emmett snorted. “Noble cause, my ass. It was how you got vampires with gifts to join you and stay even if they didn’t want to.”

Emmett was obviously feeling my influence also. Not that he normally had a problem with speaking the truth either.

“Shh. Listen.” I could just make out rushing footsteps coming closer.

Demetri and Felix darted around the north side of the house and skidded to a stop. They both looked to the smoking remains and the headless bodies of their comrades before they turned their eyes to Bella, Aro, Emmett and me.

Felix’s expression didn’t change, but I felt a definite wave of satisfaction and humor from him.

Demetri pissed me off. His eyes were trained on Bella, and the surge of love and relief from him was stronger than the blast of exhilaration from Aro.

Bella leaned against me. “The shield is on him.”

Aro was puzzled, but I knew what she was talking about. Felix was still covered by her shield. I hoped it meant she had been able to remove and replace it while he had been three thousand miles away. Somehow, I was sure she had done it.

I pressed my head to hers. “Very good, Darlin’.”

Then a phone rang. It was coming from Aro’s breast pocket.

“May I, Major?” Demetri asked.

Could I trust him? If it wasn’t answered, would the caller assume Aro was busy or in trouble? We didn’t have time to debate it. I nodded at Demetri, deciding I would take him at his word when he said he wouldn’t do anything to hurt Bella. He already knew I could knock him out without touching him. He darted forward, reached around Bella’s arm to the inner pocket of Aro’s suit coat, plucked out the phone, and backed away from us.
“Demetri here. Master Aro is indisposed. May I help you?” His eyebrows went up. “Which guard? Afton?” Demetri’s gaze moved to the smoldering ashes out in the yard. “If Master Caius directed you to capture and dispose of him, why was this not done?” Demetri’s eyes fell to Aro. “Master Aro is in negotiations and is in good hands. It would be inadvisable to disturb him.” His brow furrowed as he listened to the voice on the phone. “Dispose of Afton, quickly, before any more of the guard are dismembered or he breaks free and leaves the castle. I will inform Master Aro.” He snapped the phone shut and put it in the front pocket of his charcoal grey slacks.

Aro’s exhilaration plummeted to despair in the space of a human’s heartbeat, and the hopeful expression fell from his face.

Emmett began to chuckle. “A little chaos in the castle?”

Bella glared at him and turned back to Demetri. “What happened?”

“Inexplicably, Afton became enraged and fled through the castle, attacking other guardsmen and some of the servants. They managed to surround him before he made his way outside.” He glanced from Bella to the ashes and back. “Perhaps it is not so incomprehensible. Afton was Chelsea’s mate.”

“I’m sorry about her mate, but we had to kill her, Demetri. She was staring right at Jasper and trying to do something to him. I could feel it. I couldn’t let her do that. He’s mine.” Bella’s jaw clenched with a resurgence of anger and possessiveness. “As long as she was alive …”

“Bella, I understand,” Demetri said softly.

She forced down her anger and shook her head before speaking. “Was she a friend of yours?”

Felix walked forward and stopped a few feet away from us. “Not especially,” he said in a flat voice.

Aro cleared his throat. “Might I assume Bella has also placed shields around the minds of my captain and his lieutenant?”

My eyes snapped to his. “You assume rightly.”

Bella bumped me with her shoulder. “What do we do with him? Keep him on the ground?”

I smiled at my mate before returning a hard gaze to Aro. “As a show of good faith, I think we should give Aro his foot back. Shall we return to the porch to begin our negotiations?”

Peter and Charlotte leapt from the porch roof and landed silently behind the male guards.

Peter dusted his hands and grinned down at Aro. “We won’t be needin’ to ship Chelsea’s ashes back to Italy, I reckon.”

Charlotte patted his arm. “After they cool down, we’ll get ‘em swept up. Maybe spread ‘em around our border, along with the ashes from that red-headed bitch.”

After Felix retrieved and reattached his foot, Aro was back in his rocking chair, Renata huddling just behind his right shoulder, and Felix and Demetri were out in the yard, standing over the twins as the tissue of their necks knitted back together.

With Bella snuggling against my right side, her emotions flipping between wariness and guardedness, with the occasional spike of lust where her fingers would caress my back and my stomach, I held her right hand down against my belly as I leaned back on the porch rail directly in front of Aro. His anxiety clearly showed he was unhappy about the fact I wasn’t concerned about his
guards being behind us. Bella trusted Felix and Demetri, and I would trust her.

Still in pain from Bella’s bite and the reattachment of his foot, Aro nervously glanced to Emmett and Rosalie to my left at the north end of the porch, and then to Peter and Charlotte stationed to my right at the other end. “I believe the ball is in your court, Major.”

Chapter End Notes

“You’re a diamond stone, overthrowing kings” ~ from “When You Gonna Run” by Alpha Rev from the album Bloom.

“Wolverines!” ~ battle cry from the original Red Dawn movie with Patrick Swayze.

“She is starting to damage my calm.” ~ Jayne Cobb about River Tam in Serenity, the Firefly movie.

“Well, what you plan and what takes place ain't ever exactly been similar.” ~ Jayne Cobb to Captain Malcolm Reynolds in Serenity, the Firefly movie.

“Shiny. Let's be bad guys.” ~ Jayne Cobb in Serenity, the Firefly movie.

“May God have mercy upon my enemies, because I won't.” ~ General George S. Patton.

“You know this.” A little shout-out to BetterinTexas.

“Scream and leap” ~ the primary mode of attack by sci-fi author Larry Niven’s large, tiger-like aliens, known as Kzinti (plural) or Kzin (singular) in his “Known Space” series of stories, books, and the extensive group of books written by guest authors in the Man-Kzin Wars collection.
Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by Starpower31/Bella and Jcat5507 of Project Team Beta.

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A/N: Slacker has finally un-slacked and posted this chapter. I've barely begun chapter 59. {rolling eyes at self}

Over on Tricky Raven, my services as a writer were put on the auction block in the Second Annual Silent Auction. Lo and behold, somebody even bid on me. Can you believe it? Two folks won me.

At the Non-canon Awards dot blogspot dot com, some of my stories have been nominated in a few categories. Go check it out. Voting is on April 2, 2014. There's a link on my profile.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), and The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS)!

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 58, I Endear

Jasper's POV

Studying the self-proclaimed vampire king, I adjusted my position slightly against the porch rail but kept my hand over Bella’s. Her periodic flashes of adoration, love, and lust when she looked up at me were damn near making me want to purr with satisfaction, but were a little too distracting. It was gratifying to feel how much she loved and wanted me, but her slow, soft caresses on my stomach were diverting my attention from the dangerous business at hand.

Aro was much calmer than I would have expected him to be. However, he was three thousand years old. That was more than enough time to learn to mask or bury his emotions. He had kept them from me already.

Was he biding his time and waiting for another opening, hoping to get his hands on Bella? He had to realize that even if he did, between pissing me off, and Bella's shield and newborn strength, he would be in pieces in a matter of seconds.
Then there were Charlotte and Peter who seemed only too eager to tear apart some vampire flesh.

I guess it had been a while.

Rosalie looked determined, but her outward demeanor was hiding the river of worried apprehension pouring from her. Her black eyes kept shifting quickly between me, Bella, and the guards still out in the yard behind me.

With his dark scowl trained on Aro, Emmett was equal parts righteous anger, diligent wariness, and protective concern.

My gaze returned to Aro. "Like Bella said earlier, I don't think we need to end Jane and Alec, though they've been trying real hard to convince us otherwise." I lifted one eyebrow. "I don't want to, but I'll leave my options open." I inclined my head toward the ancient vampire as he tensely swept his hand over his jet-black hair, loosening more bits of grass before replacing it on the arm of the rocker. "It's my opinion that the Volturi serve a purpose and fill a need. You maintain a sense of order amongst a species that are very independent, seem to thrive on anarchy, and can be nearly impossible to control."

Aro sighed quietly. "Yet you, Major, were able to control dozens of newborns who were ignorant of the laws of our kind."

I let a small smile appear. "They were afraid of Maria, Peter, and me. They didn't know about you, but I knew enough to keep them from becoming too conspicuous. In any case, they only lasted about a year, and those that didn't follow orders didn't even last that long. The others learned quickly. As I'm sure you can understand." Shifting my position again, I crossed my left ankle over my right. "I'm curious, Aro. Why didn't you try to defend yourself?"

Aro's gaze dropped to the floor before returning to mine. "I must confess I was astonished that Isabella was able to breach Renata's defenses, though I was certain her ability would become stronger when she became an immortal." His fingers tapped lightly on the wooden rocker arm. "I expected that she would be able to block Jane's gift, as she had before. I, of course, had no idea that her shield would extend to others or be capable of blocking physical attacks." His eyes flicked to Bella, and a flash of envy shot from him. "She utterly astounds me. I've not ever encountered a shield so powerful."

His eyes lit with a dark light as they traveled over Bella. A tornado of greed, envy, and desperation billowed out from Aro and slammed into me. Because he was so close, I did the only thing I could to get Bella away from him. I whirled to the right, lifting and flinging my stunned mate out into the yard, managing to lose my stretched-out blue shirt in the process.

Nearly completing my spin, Aro was on me, his ravening snarl cut off by my fist, but it didn't halt the momentum of his lunge. We crashed through the porch rail, sending chips, pickets, and splinters flying.

He blocked my hand as I reached for his throat, but I recovered more quickly than him. Twisting to my right again, I brought my left knee up, ramming it into his right side, and grabbed both of his wrists as he tried to deflect my knee and reach for my throat.

Before we hit the ground, Peter loomed over us, his lips stretched over his teeth. His right hand closed over the back of Aro's neck and, quick as a snake, his left shot around to clamp onto Aro's forehead, preparing to wrench his head from his shoulders.

As furious as I was, I didn't want to deprive Aro of his head ... yet. As we plowed into the earth, I
shouted, "Don't!" at Peter so he wouldn't decapitate the Volturi leader.

We tumbled across the yard until Peter jammed his foot into the ground and stood, lifting us all up. He shoved Aro to his knees, knotting his fingers in the shining, black hair, and gripped his head, ready to tear it away.

I crouched in front of him, forcing his shaking hands up level with his face. "Aro, she is mine, and you cannot have her," I snarled at him. My eyes drilled into his matte black ones, and his burgeoning terror helped me control my own rage. "Emmett," I barked out.

Emmett was holding Renata off the ground in front of the porch, but he handed the whimpering female to Rosalie and was instantly at my side.

"Hold him." I stood slowly after Emmett's hands had replaced mine on Aro's wrists, looking over my right shoulder to scan the area and check on the status of everyone else.

Rosalie's eyes were black fire. She had a firm grip on Renata, her arms pulled tightly behind her back. It was the same hold she had used on me back in Forks when we'd been at the river.

Charlotte's talon-like hands were on Jane's slim shoulders. Her nails had punctured holes in the deep grey cloak.

Felix's large hand covered Alec's shoulder, and his fingers were splayed up the much smaller vampire's neck. Both of the Witch Twins were being prevented from coming to their master's aid, but with icy fear showing in their eyes, neither one of them seemed willing to do so.

And that fucking Demetri was behind Bella, his right arm across her upper chest, his hand clutching her shoulder. The fingers of his left hand were curled around her left arm, and despite her trembling fists and constant growling, he was whispering into her right ear, his eyes on me.

It took less than a moment to check on everyone else.

"How dare you place your hands on my person!" Aro snarled.

I whipped around, dropping to one knee in front of him and catching his jaw with my left hand. I jerked his head up so his eyes would meet mine.

"I don't want to end you, but you're making it very difficult." I adjusted my hold on him. "We dare because you are in my territory. I was willing to talk until one of your guards fired the first volley when she tried to ... what? Tie me to you? Break my bonds with my coven? Emmett, Peter, let him go." Before their hands were clear of him, I hit Aro with a barrage of fear. Adding dread to the mix, I raised my head and looked down my nose at him. "Aro, I can take the terror you were feeling and give it back to you." The dreadful fear twisted and grew, Aro's eyes widened, and he sucked in a rasping breath. "Yes, Aro," I said, breathing into his face so he would be bathed in my scent. "You already fear me, but I can make it so much worse."

Any other vampire would have been shrieking with the amount of terror I was pushing at him, but Aro maintained his silence, clenching his teeth against crying out. He wasn't as physically strong as I was, but his mental strength was impressive. Pulling back on the assault, I dosed him with a round of submissiveness and compliance, breathing into his face again. "Look at me, Aro."

He was fighting it-he was much stronger than Edward had been-but he would succumb to me.

The quarter moon was directly above us, casting Aro's eyes in shadow, but I saw when his pupils finally shrank to pinpoints in the dull black irises. "Aro, you're under my control. You can't escape
me. So far, you're still alive because I want you to be." I leaned closer to him. "I'm sure you had
given orders to your guards before you came to us. Tell me."

When he hesitated, I flooded him with truthfulness and obedience.

His voice was a mere wisp of air. "Chelsea was to bind Isabella to me. Alec was to ... immobilize the
remaining members of your coven. If required, Jane would apply her special talent."

I stroked his left cheek with my index finger. "Go on. Explain."

"I had been informed that you were her mate and coven leader. When reading Edward's mind in
Volterra, I had learned your empathic skills worked on Isabella even when he could not read her
thoughts. Like Edward, I was unable to see into her mind, but I surmised that Chelsea's gift would
work on her. Regretfully, I did not have Chelsea secure Edward, Isabella, and Alice's loyalty in
Volterra."

He gasped when the pressure of my fingers increased on his jaw. Just the thought of Bella being
under his thumb like that sent a hot flash of anger through me, followed quickly by relief that Aro's
arrogance had worked in my favor. It seemed he thought he would have plenty of time to bind Bella
to him.

Suppressing my own feelings, I released a cloud of meekness and subservience. "And ...?"

He quickly swallowed. "You were not to be harmed, unless it was unavoidable, so that Isabella
would be more amenable to Chelsea's talent. If she could not influence her, then Chelsea was to
focus on you. Once your fealty was assured, your bonds to your coven would have been dissolved. I
would have read their thoughts to determine if any seemed worthy of joining us. You and Isabella
would then accompany me to Volterra, where you would have received the respect and deference
you both so richly deserve as some of my most favored among the guard."

Raising one eyebrow in skepticism, I murmured to him, "And Felix and Demetri would have
remained behind with their usual order to eliminate any loose ends."

Aro remained silent, but no reply was necessary. I knew what he would have ordered them to do,
because it was what I would have done.

I only heard Rosalie's shocked intake of breath, because Bella had finally stopped growling to listen
herself. I couldn't hear his words, but Emmett began to speak rapidly in a soothing tone to Rosalie.

If Bella hadn't had such a strong shield, I was sure we could have defended ourselves, but at what
price? Who would have fallen to Jane's mental assault? Alec's weapon wasn't as fast as Jane's, and
he could have been taken out, but in the meantime, he could have held us back, and Chelsea would
have been at work. She wasn't able to break the bond of mated pairs, but if she had tied me to Aro,
would I have wanted to fight for Rosalie and Emmett, and Peter and Charlotte?

Bella's instinct to protect the ones she loved had saved us all. She had been protective as a human.
Was it her fierce desire to safeguard her loved ones that made her shield so strong when she became
a vampire?

When Demetri had first arrived, she had already protected us from him, and none of us had even
realized at the time she had done it.

Reluctantly, I had to admit, if only to myself, that Bella "befriending" Felix and Demetri had helped
to save the lives of our entire coven. How hard would they have fought against us if Bella hadn't
used her shield and then touched the Volturi guards' minds, breaking Chelsea's false bonds?
As a human, she had been a curiosity to them. If she hadn't been so appealing to them, would they have tried harder to acquire her for Aro?

Because I knew they cared for her, I gave them a chance and let them go. It was because they cared for her that they actually went to Alaska and didn't betray us to Aro.

Demetri wouldn't have phoned Aro and ... not lied to him, but misdirected him.

Had I ended Demetri, Aro would have missed an updated report from his tracker, and not being able to contact him, Aro would have brought a stronger force.

I could have subdued them all, but Demetri would have been able to catch the patterns of our minds. Chelsea could have bound me to Aro, and he could have seen everything in my thoughts and memories-unless I had killed them all.

They owed their lives to Bella, too. I honestly thought the Volturi were a crucial part of our world, but without Bella's shield and the effect she had on them, how many would have been lost?

Felix and Demetri hadn't attacked when they arrived. Because of Bella.

Demetri found her to be more than just appealing. He loved her.

The thought of him with his arm around her was eating away at me like acid, but I couldn't afford to be distracted, or even turn my head to see what he was doing. He was protecting her-from Aro and from herself. Bella's spinning emotions had nearly gone out of control, but Demetri had helped her to rein it all in.

She was pushing her love, support, and encouragement to me, though I knew hearing about what could have happened to everyone upset her. For the time being, she was relatively calm and out of Aro's reach. I had to make do with that no matter how badly I wanted her next to me so I could tell her how much I loved her, how proud I was of her, and get her away from Demetri.

All those thoughts flashed through my mind in an instant. I shoved them to the background as I focused again on Aro's eyes, watching the black begin to recede as he tried to lean toward me.

With a little help, he began to want to please me.

I fed into that desire. "As I told you, I believe the Volturi perform a service for ... our world, but Bella and I don't want to join you. Neither does the rest of my coven." I placed my right palm against his papery smooth cheek. It wasn't that he didn't understand the implications, but I had to choose my words carefully so he would understand, without a doubt, he still lived because I allowed it. My touch would help ensure that. "Your presence keeps the Romanians in check."

His eyebrows shot up in outrage at mention of his old enemies.

Leaning a bit closer to him, I said, "Yes, I know about them and the difficulties you've had with them." I let a smirk cross my face. "In order to discourage them, I know you need a force capable of defending against them, and one strong enough to enforce the law. I know how vampires are. Many don't adjust well to change, while others resist it. It's why it seems the most prudent course is for you to return to Volterra, even after you invaded my home and attacked my coven." I sent him a small amount of the protectiveness I felt for them, and then a sharp bolt of warning as I drew him closer to me. "I will protect them from any and all threats."

"As I strive to protect our species." A faint smile flickered over his lips.
"Of course." I couldn't keep the cynicism from bleeding into my voice. "In order for vampires to respect your authority, I've permitted Jane and Alec to live. I can feel their devotion and allegiance to you, even without Chelsea's influence. Felix and Demetri would remain with you and your brothers. I'm sure others would be honored to support and sustain you in your noble endeavor."

Behind me, I could just make out Bella and Felix hissing back and forth to each other. She wasn't angry; she was curious and then feeling a little smug. Felix was exuding satisfaction.

I wanted to tap into what Demetri was feeling, but his emotions were locked down. All I could get from him was curiosity and alertness.

Aro's eyes nearly glowed red, but his pupils blew wide at my words. He was flattered ... and relieved. "Yes, Major. We must protect our species-especially from the excesses of some of our own."

*How ironic.*

"I agree." I tipped my head down and gazed into his eyes. "You wish to be king of the vampire world. My coven and I wish for you to continue with a just and fair sovereignty." I stood slowly, drawing Aro up with me, and he placed his hands lightly on my wrists.

He was absolutely basking in my apparent praise. Or was he just relieved he would be able to keep his life and his greatest weapons?

A smile grew over his face. "Your gifts are extraordinary, Major. I've had opportunity to meet several with the ability of sensing the general emotional climate. But it seemed to be merely a case of heightened awareness-an enhancement of most vampires' ability of gauging the environment. But you ... your talent, your ... skill at manipulating and controlling ... It is utterly astounding. You and your mate. So young, and yet, so powerful." A dreamy hopeful look passed over his face. "You both have such potential. Wouldn't you prefer to join us in offering guidance to the uneducated and unenlightened? Help us in our honorable quest to preserve our way of life? Meanwhile, you could take advantage of the opportunity to strengthen and, perhaps, develop your gifts further."

Off to my left, Peter snorted in disgust.

Aro was laying it on a little thick. I was mildly surprised he hadn't tried to entice me with all the luxury and privilege being a member of the Volturi would entail. Perhaps, after comparing my less-than-palatial home to the Cullens' he realized that wouldn't work on me. He certainly would have seen all the homes and properties that Edward knew about.

Aro did seem to believe what he was saying. Or he believed all the lies and bullshit propaganda he'd spouted for centuries.

"I must decline. My mate and I prefer a quiet, less prominent existence." I raised my head, keeping my eyes trained on Aro as I released his jaw and slowly took his hands in mine, maintaining contact with him. "Bella?"

Bella and Felix's hissing abruptly stopped, and I heard her start to move, but then she paused. There was a whisper in Demetri's low voice, and his rigid hold over his own emotions slipped.

It was less than a second, but the flash of adoring love he exuded sent rage flooding through me, and the deep growl rumbling through my chest was instantaneous. Suddenly afraid again, Aro tried to back away from me, but I held him fast. We were too close to a resolution of sorts for me to ruin it with an explosion of jealousy.
Bella was puzzled at whatever Demetri had said. The eruption of apprehensive alarm from Demetri told me he realized what he had done. I didn't need to hear the words he spoke, because his emotions betrayed him. He knew he had fucked up.

Not that the growl had tipped him off.

As Bella came up beside me, I squashed my jealousy, shoved aside my rage, and breathed deeply of her loving, comforting fragrance, while I tried to ignore the lingering scent of the Volturi guard.

Try as I might, I couldn't help it. I had to know what he said.

Holding Aro's hands even more firmly as I bathed him in confusion to divert his attention from Bella, I put my lips to her ear, almost afraid of the answer, and asked, "What did Demetri say to you?"

Still mystified, Bella tucked my hair behind my ear and breathed, "He said, 'how you turn my world, you precious thing.'"

Thankfully, Bella didn't realize it, but the bastard had just declared his love to her. I should have been more suspicious of his choice of ID while in the United States. A name he chose to use on a mission to ascertain Bella's status, and that, coincidentally, happened to give away his sentiments for the object of his mission. Or object of his desire? Had the name Jareth Bowie been a subconscious choice, or had he chosen it deliberately to somehow feel closer to her?

I didn't have time to analyze it or beat him into a pile of dust. I couldn't speak-I was too busy gnashing my teeth together. When Bella rested her beautiful head against my shoulder and slipped her arm around my back, I took in another slow breath.

Her love flowed into me, seeping into every part of me, and loosened the constriction around my chest that I hadn't even noticed was there.

"Shield him," I told her, pulling back the confusion from Aro.

She took her hand from my arm, lightly touched Aro's wrist and replaced her hand, curling her fingers just under my bicep.

Aro gasped in surprise, and his eyes widened in wonderment as they darted from me to Bella. "What ... what has just occurred? It's as if a light cover has been put over my mind-an ethereally warm and glowing cloud. The touch was as gentle and fleeting as a feather-a mere wisp of contact-yet, somehow, Isabella, I am aware of your ... bright and shining presence."

"Waxing a little poetic there, Aro." Bella grumbled sarcastically. "I put a shield over your mind like I did with Jane and Alec. Edward won't be able to read you." She squeezed my arm, smiled as she looked up at me, and sent me a jolt of triumphant glee. Her eyes returned to Aro. "I can take it away and put it back from miles away."

So that's what she and Felix had been talking about. I had been sure she would be able to do that. It was nice to have it confirmed.

"Ahh. But first, in order to apply the shield, you must have physical contact with your subject." His eyes narrowed slightly and just one corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile.

Despite my influence, his self-satisfaction at finding a limit to Bella's shield shone through.

"But, I already have it on you." Bella tilted her head as she calmly gazed at Aro. "He confounds us all," she said mimicking Aro's lilting voice. She tilted her head to the right. "So what do we do with
you now?"

Aro's black eyes grew wide again as he gaped at her in disbelief. "You ... recall that! I said those very words to you when you were human ... and you remember them. Simply astonishing!"

Beneath the steady stream of docility and submission I was feeding to him, his underlying emotions began to shift and rearrange. Just like that, the covetous and proprietary envy bled away as a sense of paternal-like pride began to develop. His delight and satisfaction grew as his eyes roved over Bella's face.

He was looking at her as if she were a gifted child.

At least he wasn't staring at her with sexual lust. I might not have been able to stop myself from crushing his hands.

Again, I was stunned at the effect Bella had on other vampires, and how rapidly it developed. I couldn't attribute it to her venom in their systems, though Emmett seemed to think so. He had loved her like a sister practically from the moment he met her when she was human. All the Cullens had been attracted to her. Even Rosalie, in her own way, had tried to protect Bella.

It continued after she became a vampire.

Peter and Charlotte had taken right to her.

Demetri's interest in her had taken root when she had been in Volterra. Had it grown to infatuation in the following months and then love after she had bitten and shielded him?

Even Felix was feeling fond of her, and he didn't seem the type to like anyone.

Lucky for him, he had learned to suppress the lust he felt for her.

They were all males, except for Charlotte and Rosalie. Quickly reaching out to the others, I found Renata to be radiating nothing but distress. I couldn't tell if she feared for her master or herself.

The mostly recovered twins were wary, relieved, anxious, and curious. Digging more deeply, I realized both of them were exhibiting a blooming veneration-almost hero-worship. I wasn't quite arrogant enough to think it was for me.

Aro tried again to pull his hands away, and I flexed my fingers over his wrists. "She remembers quite a bit from her human life." I squeezed his hands to bring his attention back to me and hit him again with submissive compliance. "Aro, look at me. Do you understand what I am saying?"

He blinked several times before speaking. "Yes, Major. I believe we share some of the same goals. We both see the need for restraint and order in our world."

"Agreed. However, I, my mate, and my coven do not wish to become part of the Volturi in order to accomplish this."

"How you disappoint me, Major Whitlock. You and your mate would be formidable and impressive allies." He paused for a moment. "Let us not precipitously burn any bridges. One never knows when one might require the assistance of an old friend." Aro tilted his head and looked up at me coyly.

"Old friend?" I asked, raising one eyebrow. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought he was flirting with me. "We prefer a bit of anonymity. We want to live our lives as we see fit. Without interference."
"To put it bluntly, Aro." Bella batted her eyes at him. "As long as you and your brothers don't bother us, we won't bother you."

Aro's eyes twinkled as he smiled mischievously at Bella. "Your forthrightness is simply charming." Then he turned back to me. "Your current coven-mates?"

"There may be others that fall under our protection. As you know, it's natural for coven membership to fluctuate and evolve over time," I said, giving his own words back to him.

"Of course, Major."

"Shall we retire to the porch?"

Bella tugged at my arm. I didn't take my eyes off Aro, but tipped my head toward her. "Yes, Darlin'?"

"We need to clean up these pickets and stuff that Aro broke," she said, giving him the stink eye. "Then I think we should throw them in the fire pit and have a bonfire while it's still dark. We haven't done that yet."

"What a splendid idea!" Aro exclaimed, beaming at Bella. "It would also have a fire conveniently ready if it should happen to be needed."

"Aro!" Bella winked at him. "You read my mind!" She grinned at him maliciously, showing most of her teeth. "Peter, why don't you and Jasper escort Aro over to the fire pit? Aro, you don't mind sitting on the ground, do you? We don't have any lawn chairs yet."

The thought of my mate sitting near a fire while we were guarding ... prisoners, for lack of a better term, made me nervous. "Bella."

She grabbed hold of Aro's forearm and rubbed my arm with her other hand. "It'll be fine, Jasper. Aro isn't going to hurt me. None of them are going to hurt anybody in our coven." She turned her sharp gaze on Aro again as Peter walked up behind him.

How she could be so sure of that, I couldn't guess, but she had been right about Demetri and Felix. I relaxed my hold on Aro's hands and replaced the submission with a strong warning. "You will not even attempt to hurt her."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Major," Aro replied.

As Peter wrapped his hand around Aro's left arm, Aro gave him a quick once-over. There was a brief flare of curiosity before his gaze flicked to Bella, back to Peter, and then to me. "Your beautiful mate's frankness is a breath of fresh air, Major. It's quite endearing. And I do look forward to getting to know all of you better."

The flash of curiosity from him bothered me. It was rumored he had an exceptional sense of smell. Maybe he was picking up Bella's scent blended with Peter's. He'd find it in most of us.

The flash of curiosity from him bothered me. It was rumored he had an exceptional sense of smell. Maybe he was picking up Bella's scent blended with Peter's. He'd find it in most of us.

Peter and I turned Aro toward the barn to start walking to the fire pit, and Bella darted right for Renata and Rosalie, quickly brushing her fingertips over the shorter vampire's cheek.

"Oh! I ... I feel your shield. It's like Master said." Renata blinked at her and then continued in her high voice, "It's ... soft and not unpleasant, but didn't you tell Jane you could remove it?"

"I know I didn't ask permission, but when it comes to my mate and my coven, I'll do what I can to
protect them." Bella stepped back from her. "Yes, I can remove it."

"Then please do so." Even though she was still being held by Rosalie, she raised her head proudly. "I owe my life and my allegiance to Master Aro."

"Okay, Renata. It's gone." Bella patted her arm. "I can put it back if you want." The look on her face grew hard. "If you, or anyone, try to hurt any of us, I'll shield you. Hard." After Renata gave her a short nod, she ran to Jane and Alec, grabbing Jane's hand. "Jane. Alec. We're going to pick that stuff up. Felix, you can help us."

Charlotte hesitated at letting go of Jane's shoulders, and she looked to me for direction. "Bella, is this a good idea?"

Hearing they weren't going to be torn to shreds, and seeing their mentor and savior remain in one piece, appeared to have relieved their fears. They both were looking at Bella with a cautious admiration and a bit of surprise, as if they couldn't believe she would come near them or pay any attention to them.

How many vampires had ever just run up to them like that? Well, run at them and lived. Of course, their reputations were known far and wide. Everyone feared them.

Not without good reason.

I gave Charlotte a nod.

"They'll be fine, Char." Bella tugged Jane's hand. "Jane, you don't mind being near a fire, do you?"

Bella had misconstrued Charlotte's concern. Because Aro had saved them from being burned alive, she assumed the twins wouldn't want to be near the flames. I was sure it wouldn't bother them. Aro's protégés had most likely been present at many fires.

They both stared at her, baffled by her show of sympathy.

"No, I don't mind, Isabella," Jane said softly, her eyes wide, as Bella led her back to the house.

"Oh, good. Just call me Bella. It should be fun to have a fire that isn't lighting somebody up for a change, right?"

Alec's mouth dropped open in shock while Emmett snorted a laugh.

-oOoOo-

My excitable little newborn had ridden herd on Emmett, Rosalie, Jane, Alec, and Felix until every single, little splinter had been picked up and brought to the depression in the ground for the inaugural fire making, after she and the twins had run inside to find blankets and towels for everyone to sit on. She had even snagged Chelsea's Volturi pendant from the ground and dropped it into Aro's hands before she dashed off again.

Demetri had wisely chosen to stay with the rest of us. I was seated so I could see the barn and easily watch Bella run back and forth. He had positioned himself directly across from me, his back to the barn.
When Emmett had mentioned some scrap wood in the barn that wasn't pressure treated, Bella had darted inside to gather it up, with Jane and Alec right on her heels—without their charcoal grey robes flapping behind them. They had peeled them off halfway through cleaning up the debris from the porch. Their dark grey clothing wasn't much of an improvement, but at least their robes weren't getting in the way anymore.

Aro clapped his hands together and let out a small chuckle. "Your mate is utterly charming, Major," he said from my right. "I've not seen Alec and Jane smile so freely in decades. Possibly centuries. Wouldn't you agree, Renata?" He smiled over his right shoulder at the petite vampire.

She didn't seem very pleased at sitting on a towel on the ground, but she was able to keep in contact with her master, and that kept her happy enough. "Yes, Master," she whispered.

Aro rested his hands on his knees. "Of course, their reputation precedes them. Many fear them, even if they have not had occasion to experience their special talents. Even I once asked Jane to test her power on me." Aro squeezed his eyes closed and shuddered dramatically.

Demetri rolled his eyes in derision, but then his features returned to their blank façade, and he trained his eyes on anything but me.

Aro laughed heartily and leaned toward me. "It is something I shall never do again. It is very like the agony of the vampire transformation."

Peter was standing a few feet behind Aro and let out a disgusted huff. "Why the hell would you do that? She coulda kicked your ass."

"She very well could have, Peter, but she and her brother are quite devoted, and they just happened to be surrounded by numerous members of the guard." Aro turned to look up at him. "She was very reluctant to afflict me in such a manner, but I insisted. I felt it was important to know the extent of the pain that could possibly be inflicted on others."

"Possibly be inflicted." Peter snorted rudely.

Across the growing pile of wood leavings, Charlotte raised one eyebrow at Peter before clearing her throat lightly. "Aro, I heard you saved the twins from being burned at the stake. May I ask how old they were?"

"We are unsure of their precise age, but we believed them to be thirteen or fourteen years old at the time. They could even have been just a bit older. You must remember that humans did not grow as quickly or as tall as they do now. Alas, no one from their village remained alive for us to ask."

"Quite unfortunate," Peter murmured.

At the sound of four voices laughing in the barn, Aro's eyes widened, and he gracefully lifted his right hand, his index finger pointing at his ear. "Do you hear that? How marvelous! I've not heard them laugh like that in centuries." He leaned toward me again. "Your mate has had the most wondrous effect on them. And here they are!"

Bella, Jane, and Alec ran out of the barn, carrying a few more scraps of wood. All three of them stopped at the edge of the depression, the twins flanking Bella, and tossed in the pieces. Emmett and Felix moved at a more sedate pace, but they seemed eager to get started also. I couldn't miss the mischievous twinkle in Emmett's eye.

Whatever they were up to, I wished they would get on with it. I'd been away from Bella long enough. I needed to feel her next to me.
Looking like gargantuan bookends, Felix was on one end of the line while Emmett stood at the other.

Bella cocked her head up at Emmett. "Rock on with your bad self, Em," she said, flicking her hand at the center of the fire pit.

"Everybody ready?" Emmett asked, grinning and glancing at each of his fellow wood gatherers.

Alec and Jane nodded jerkily, working their mouths as if they were chewing on taffy.

"Okay!" Emmett held up his fingers and counted off. "Three ... two ... one!"

In unison, all five of them leaned forward and spit on the wood pile.

That had to be Emmett's gift. He could make anything into a game.

While Rosalie groaned in exasperation and dropped her forehead onto her hand, Emmett plucked a large wooden match from the box he produced from his pocket, making sure his pinky was extended. With a great flourish, he struck the match on the side of the box, and with a wide sweep of his arm, flipped it into the scraps.

As the venom caught fire and flared up, Bella's eyes grew wide. "Wow. The purple in the flames sure is pretty." She poked Jane with her elbow. "See? I told you a regular old fire would be nice. Emmy's been wanting to do this forever. Too bad we don't have any driftwood from the ocean. Those flames are pretty. You can see blue and green in them."

"Yes, it is quite pretty," Jane answered quietly, her eyes on Bella. "But aren't we very far from the ocean?"

"Yeah," Emmett replied. "But if we want color, we can just spit on it again. If we had some Borax, that would make the flames kinda greenish-yellow. Epsom salts would make them white-ish. There's some other chemicals we could use, but we don't have any of that stuff."

Alec looked up curiously at Emmett and turned to Bella with a shy smile. "Even without all the colors, it is a very nice fire."

The admiration the twins had felt before was growing. All I could do was gawk at them in amazement. Earlier, they had both been filled with rage, wanting to attack us. An hour later, they were looking at Bella as if she were their hero.

It had to be her touch on their minds. The fact that they hadn't been able to drop any of us certainly hadn't hurt, either. If they had, I wasn't sure what she'd have done to them. I thought they would have received more than bites.

She finally ran around the circle, dropped to the quilt next to me, and snuggled into my left side, causing me to let out a small sigh in relief. She was closer to Aro than I wanted her to be, but I didn't think he'd try to get his hands on her again.

Like puppies, the twins followed her, but before they were seated on the ground next to her, Aro raised his hand.

"Might I have a moment, Major? I am very curious about the effect Isabella's shield has on my own ability."

He was being polite and asking only because I was sitting within reach of him and Peter was right
behind him. That was a good enough incentive for manners.

"We've experimented a little, Aro, and I do remember how curious you are." Bella grinned at him again as she ran her right hand across my back and nestled under my arm.

Without hesitation, the twins walked in front of Bella and me and held their hands out toward Aro. I thought it was interesting that he hadn't wanted to read Demetri's or Felix's minds.

He enthusiastically reached for the small vampires, closed his eyes, and bowed over their hands. Shaking his head slowly, he clucked in disappointment. "Nothing," he said quietly as he raised his head. "I get nothing. It is truly astonishing the power you have, Isabella," he breathed as his eyes flicked to her.

"Bella?" Jane asked. "Would you remove the shield from Alec and me? We ..." She glanced at her brother and he nodded. "We would prefer not to be shielded."

"It's like a separate shield on each of you, but sure, if you want," Bella said, shrugging. She studied them for just a moment, and Aro's eyes lit up with excitement. "Again, I am astounded." He beamed at Bella. "You are so gifted." He turned back to Jane and Alec, looking up at their pleased faces. "As it does to you, her shield feels the same to me. Like a cashmere blanket has been wrapped lovingly around my mind." Then his smile fell away, his eyes grew wide, and a look of shock spread over his face.

Bella patted my thigh and sent me a shot of satisfaction. "Aro, I reinforced the shield around your mind."

It hadn't occurred to me yet, though we had talked about it earlier, but my beautiful mate was on the ball. We didn't know if a stronger shield like that one would hold up over a great distance, though there didn't seem to be a reason for it not to, but we just learned she could block the source of a vampire's power.

Fear crept over the Volturi leader's face as he continued to hold the hands of his favored guards. If I were him, I'd be afraid of that loss of power. He did seem to be, but as he looked at Bella, no sense of anger or retribution emerged.

Bella cleared her throat and Aro's eyes grew wide again.

"And you've removed it," he gasped. "I was unable to see into their minds at all." He snatched his hands back from them and held his fists in front of his chest. "But then I could. I felt you pull your shield from my mind. As before, it was a mere wisp of sensation." Only the very edges of his lips turned upward and his fingers uncurled. "And I must acknowledge the fact I am experiencing a sense of loss at its removal. How curious to have such an effect. It's almost as if-" He turned to the small vampire at his right side. "Renata?"

She slipped her hand into his. "Yes, Renata. Without creating a fabricated loyalty, Isabella's touch does appear to engender a sense of ... affiliation. Though I shall miss the efficiency of Chelsea's gift, she and Anton's absence from the castle should not be a hardship. Thank you, Renata."

Of course, he said that out loud for a reason. I figured I'd ask. "Speaking of Chelsea ..." I began quietly, as I hugged Bella to me. "You've had use of her talent for centuries, Aro."
Emmett had sat down on a blanket just beyond Aro, placing himself between the king and Rosalie. "But you don't seem real broken up about us killin' her, and Demetri told 'em back in Italy to kill her mate."

Aro waved his hand at the twins, dismissing them. "You may be seated." He tugged lightly at the lapels of his suit coat. "Er, no, I am not broken up about it as you say, Emmett. Her usefulness did begin to wane some hundred years ago or so. Her first demand was that we allow her mate in the castle, and though he was a shield of a sort, it was quite useless as a defense as he could only shield himself."

Rosalie's head jerked up. "But don't you let mates stay together?"

"Mrs. McCarty, most vampires do not have such strongly devoted mates as yourselves. Your coven is quite unusual in that respect. True mates as some choose to refer to them ... they are rare in our world. Almost creatures of myth and legend. Much like among the humans and their search for the elusive soul mate." Aro smiled faintly and flicked his fingers. "Many vampires choose companions for some mutual benefit and do grow quite fond of one another. They even love one another and may spend many years together. Marcus' talent allows him to see the bonds between coven members and some are quite strong. Through him, I've learned to discern some of the signs of such attachments." He cleared his throat. "As Caius is fond of saying, those sorts of attachments can be a liability." His eyes moved slowly over the group surrounding the fire pit.


"Possibly," Aro conceded. "Marcus has suffered the loss of his mate for centuries."

I cocked my head to the side and smiled at him. "You and Caius keep your wives in the castle."

"There are those who would attempt to use them against us."

"And that mustn't be allowed."

He was slightly uncomfortable and guarded, but his emotions remained constant and that was surprising to me. The thought of anyone trying to take Bella from me caused a sharp ache to shoot through me and Bella leaned into me more firmly, wanting to be even closer to me. They didn't show it, but the rest of my coven had a similar jolt of alarm. It made me think the king's consort wasn't quite the true mate we assumed her to be. He would never admit that.

Aro adjusted his cuffs and then rested his hands on his knees again. "Chelsea flaunted her status and her mate, causing some dissension. Anton was merely an adequate fighter. Chelsea did not see the need to learn offensive skills—which, I'm sure, she came to regret, however fleeting that regret may have been." He gave a little cough. "As the decades went by, her demands for larger and larger accommodations and her disproportionate love for scandal and gossip caused some resentment among the guard. She was not always ... pleasant."

Leaning toward me slightly, his fingers fluttered over his knees. "I've often thought the effects of her gift would linger after her demise since she seemed to affect the brain physically. Because I've not received any urgent calls, I would assume that to be the case. Yet Isabella's touch was able to break that bond." He peered around the circle of vampires. "No matter. Her presence shall not be missed." He flicked his fingers dismissively toward the crackling fire.

He wasn't lying, but he was holding something back. Chelsea must have been holding something
over him, and her death removed that threat. Unfortunately, I had no idea what it could have been. Getting rid of the hazard she posed to my coven was what had mattered to me.

"Even if she could fight, it wouldn't have helped her against Jasper," Peter's low voice rumbled. He shifted from his left foot to his right and crossed his arms over his chest as he stared down at the back of Aro's head.

"I would have to agree with you, Peter." Aro craned his head up enough to smile at Peter. "I've seen memories of the Major's prowess, and he did not disappoint. I'm quite pleased to have seen an exhibition of his skill—even against myself." His eyes moved slowly over the vampires circling the fire pit again. "Major, I would hazard a guess that you've given instruction to your coven-mates?"

"He'd be a damn fool not to," Charlotte said. Like Peter, she was still on high alert. They weren't used to having so many strange vampires around. They'd been nomads a long time. "As I guess you know, Peter and I were with him for a while in the Southern Wars. We survived." She cut her eyes up at Demetri who was still standing back from the fire, and then to Felix who was sitting between her and Alec. "None of your guards got a hit in."

Not that Bella knocking them on their asses had anything to do with it.

Felix smiled faintly in chagrin as his eyes flicked to Bella and back to Charlotte.

Demetri's expression didn't change from the bland, politely interested mask he'd been displaying since we'd settled around the fire. He'd been struggling to keep his emotions under wraps, and he still wouldn't look me in the eye.

"You are right, of course, Mrs. Whitlock. It is certainly to the coven's advantage that all members are able to protect themselves, and newborn Isabella has shown remarkable restraint and self-discipline."

Aro might have been desperately greedy enough to try to grab Bella, but he wasn't a complete fool. Showing respect to a man's mate was always a good idea. Calling Charlotte Mrs. Whitlock and Rosalie Mrs. McCarty did just that, and Bella had been doing extremely well for a newborn.

"Uh, thanks." Bella rubbed her hand over my thigh again. "We've been practicing, though I don't always have enough restraint and self-discipline."

"It will come in time." Aro's gaze lingered on Demetri across the crackling fire. "Did I notice new scars on my Captain?"

"Bella bites everybody," Emmett said matter-of-factly. A wide grin spread over his face when Bella's mouth dropped open.

I tightened my hold on her just in case as I glared at him. Emmett would have to try and test her self-control.

"I do not!" she squawked indignantly. "I didn't bite them!" She gestured forcefully at Jane, Alec, and Felix, and then pointed at Renata. "I didn't bite her either."

"Emmett," I growled at him in warning. Right after Rosalie jabbed him in the ribs.

"But you bit Aro."

"That's because he was attacking Jasper!"

While I was considering whether to beat Emmett's ass or not, my little newborn was up and had
plopped herself down on the ground between Aro and I, and was holding our hands. Her grip on mine was quite tight, and I thought she was forcing it down on my thigh to hold me down. I rolled toward her and was up on one knee beside her, staring down at Aro.

Bella's head remained turned toward him, even though I knew she was surprised that I'd moved. "He won't be attacking my Jasper anymore—will you, Aro?"

Aro may not have detected the hint of threat in Bella's voice, but I did.

To the vampire's credit, he didn't even flinch at the sudden movements of the others or at the appearance of Peter's hands on each of his shoulders.

It was a very good position from which to remove his head.

Emmett was standing in front of Rosalie. Charlotte was on her feet, but she was watching Demetri and Felix who were poised as if they were about to leap over the fire. My guess was they would have protected Bella.

Jane and Alec hadn't moved, but they were watching everything with rapt attention, their eyes wide.

Aro's eyes quickly surveyed his surroundings, flicked up to me, and then settled on Bella. "I assure you, Isabella, I would not attack your Jasper again," he said smoothly and reassuringly. "He is quite the warrior, and I can readily attest to your coven's proficiency."

"We've been working on the fight training. Even playing war in the woods was part of it." Her grip tightened on his hand. "They all mean a lot to me, and we'll protect each other." Bella gave him a quick nod. "I kind of like you, Aro, and I think we can be good friends."

From the mischievousness leaking from her, I knew she was smirking at him.

His eyes widened and his eyebrows rose. "Ahh, yes. I believe our newfound friendship could be mutually beneficial."

"Good." Bella nodded. "I think you all can have a seat. I'm calm, as long as Emmett behaves himself." She glared at him. "We're good here." She pushed at me with her shoulder and shook my hand. "It's okay, Jazz."

Those who had been seated before straightened their blankets and returned to their former positions, and Demetri and Felix relaxed their stances. I lowered myself to the ground, tugging Bella closer to me, but she kept hold of Aro's hand.

Peter slowly removed his hands from Aro's shoulders.

Bella and Aro genuinely did like each other, but I wasn't going to completely trust him. Neither was Peter or Charlotte.

Aro glanced around the group and smiled at Bella. "Perhaps when you are past your newborn year you could pay us a visit in Volterra? See more of the sights, since you were there such a short time before?"

"It might be nice." Bella nodded at him noncommittally. "I didn't get to see much of it last time. I was a little stressed out. I'd like to travel, I think."

She squeezed his hand, and he smiled at her again, a feeling of affection blooming around him. Unfortunately, it looked as though she had gained another admirer. I was watching him like a hawk.
and was relieved his emotions were leaning heavily toward what a mentor would feel for a favorite student. It was better than his wanting to possess her.

I was so focused on Aro and Bella I missed the surge of distressed emotions. I didn't realize someone was heading right for us until Demetri hissed and spun around to face east down the mountain.

"Demetri?" I asked.

"Someone is coming."

Then I felt it. Fear, worry, panic.

Everyone who had been seated was on their feet. Bella was at my side, growling. Aro had stepped away from her, but instead of watching for the approach of the intruder, he was watching Bella with anticipation.

Peter moved up until he was nearly between Bella and Aro.

From the night dark shadows of the trees at the edge of the yard, came a pale flash of movement. Bella stiffened and hissed. I felt that slight change in pressure that signaled she had thrown out her shield. I couldn't tell if it was just around us.

Being on the front line, Emmett, Demetri, Felix, and Charlotte, each dropped into an attack stance.

I didn't think anyone realized it was Edward until he ricocheted away from the barrier Bella had erected and landed flat on his back.

I swept Bella into my side and grunted, "Emmett."

Emmett started forward, his hands reaching out in front of him. With nothing stopping him, he pounced on Edward. Demetri snarled and followed. Edward was still stunned by running full force into an invisible wall at a high rate of speed, and they easily subdued him. Each of them had hold of one of Edward's arms and they yanked him to his feet between them.

"Ugh. Edward." Bella groaned with repugnance, and her tense form relaxed against my side.

He wasn't a danger to any of us, but anger and disgust began to boil within me. "You were told not to come here."

"But Felix and Demetri-" Edward's strained voice was silenced by Charlotte placing her index finger under his chin and snapping his mouth shut. He was trying to say something else, and Charlotte impatiently rolled her eyes and pushed a little harder on his chin.

Peter started chuckling behind us and, from the corner of my eye, I could see Rosalie cross her arms and give Edward a disgusted look.

Felix strolled behind him, studied his quivering body for a moment, and then wrapped his large hand around Edward's neck.

Both of the twins were displaying haughty smirks.

Very lightly, Aro cleared his throat to get my attention. He seemed pleased.

"Major. Isabella. Although the young Edward has arrived uninvited, he is, technically, your guest." Aro clasped his hands together. "Would you be averse to my ... greeting him?" A calculating gleam shone in Aro's eyes as he gestured smoothly toward Edward.
"Pffft! Greet away!" Bella tugged me toward Aro and then proceeded to nudge him with her elbow. Edward's wild eyes grew even larger with his alarm, and he tried to jerk his head up and away from Charlotte's finger. "Bella! You're in danger!"

Charlotte clamped her fingers around his chin and forced him to shut up.

I had no qualms at all with Aro wanting to see into the depths of Edward's mind, though Edward might not be open to the idea. He never had a problem trying to dig through anyone else's. With a smile, I dipped my head toward Aro, offering my permission as if he needed it.

As the first light of dawn began to show in the east beyond the trees surrounding us, Aro's eyes shined as he turned to the little vampire at his right side.

"Do not be concerned, Renata. I don't believe Edward has any intentions of harming me. I'm sure Demetri, Felix, Emmett, and Mrs. Whitlock are more than capable of containing him." Aro patted her hand on his arm and walked sedately in front of Bella, Peter, and me to circle the dying fire.

As he neared them, Charlotte released Edward's chin and backed away, distrustful apprehension quivering at the edges of her alert and wary emotions. She wiped her hand on her jeans and walked quickly to us to be near her mate.

Peter wrapped his arms around her and gave her a loud, smooching kiss on her forehead. "That's my girl."

"C'mere, Rose." Bella called to her, lifting her right arm toward her.

As soon as Rosalie was close enough, I pulled her to my left side and held her close to me. Bella rubbed Charlotte's arm and then reached across me to rest her hand on Rosalie's.

Considering everything that was going on, Bella was surprisingly calm. In contrast, Rosalie's nerves were about to make us all begin vibrating. I pressed a kiss to Rosalie's head, kissed Bella's, and reached for Peter to draw them both closer to us. Everyone was on edge, and I tried to soothe them the best I could while I kept my eye on Aro and Edward.

When Aro was almost close enough to touch him, Edward began to struggle frantically to get away from his captors.

"No!" he shrieked just before Felix clamped his left hand over Edward's forehead and forced him against his broad chest.

As if they had trained and served together for years, Emmett and Demetri each stomped down on one of Edward's feet to prevent him from kicking at Aro.

His desperate struggles were doing him no good against the much bigger and stronger vampires. Demetri gripped his wrist tightly and shoved his hand out.

Aro gave Demetri a nod. "Thank you, Captain." He clasped the trembling hand. "How nice to see you again, Edward."

Edward's eyes squeezed shut, and he let out an anguished groan.

"Ahh," Aro exclaimed quietly as he placed his other hand over Edward's, closed his eyes, and bowed his head. "Edward. Tsk, tsk. You've been quite the naughty lad."
Chapter End Notes

"How you turn my world, you precious thing." ~ Jareth the Goblin King to Sara in Labyrinth.

"She confounds us all. So, what do we do with you now?" Aro to Bella in New Moon.
I Bargain

Chapter Notes

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Beta services provided by bigblueboat and jennej/Jenny of Project Team Beta.

Pre-reader services provided by happyghost.

AN: I know! It's been forever since I updated. Well, since March 2014. Some stuff came up, then some other stuff happened, and ... yeah. Stuff happens.

I wrote a couple other little things in the meantime: Tell-Tale Heart; Brown Sugar; Trigger Warning; and Wild, Wonderful West Virginia, which won 3rd Place in the 2014 Get Your Southern On anonymous story contest.

Um, yes. I've switched from first person to third person because I realized, quite a few chapters back, that I had written myself into a corner and have not been able to work around it-unless I switched to third person. I've been editing previous chapters-slowly. Yeah, I'm an idiot. And a slacker. You know this.

I haven't actually begun writing the next chapter.

Have a decent New Year.

I Live is posted on FanFiction, Archive of Our Own (AO3), and The Writer's Coffee Shop (TWCS)!

Age 18 and over, please. Thank you.

So you have to read this one! Happyghost wrote it for me. I've always liked truckers.

Feels So Right by: happyghost on FFN.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

01/05/2015

Chapter 59, I Bargain

*Jasper*

Aro was still and silent for several minutes as he sifted through Edward's mind.
Unsure of how long the process usually took, Jasper became concerned when Demetri, at Edward's right side, and Felix, who was holding him from behind, looked down at Aro's bowed head with apprehension.

Again, Edward attempted to wrench his hand away from Aro, but Demetri's grip tightened even further on his forearm, sending hairline cracks shooting through his pale skin.

Emmett, at Edward's left side, became anxious and his eyes shifted nervously from Felix to Demetri and then to Aro.

Bella made an impatient noise. "Okay, I can't remember everything about being in Volterra before, but I don't think this usually takes so long." She looked up to Jasper, worry shadowing her face, and started to step away from him.

He held her more firmly against his side. "Don't."

"But something might be-"

"Do not fret, Isabella," Aro murmured, raising his head and turning slightly to look at Jasper and Bella over his shoulder. "I've had many years of practice determining the difference between thoughts, wishes, and ... yearnings." He raised his head and peered into Edward's fear-filled eyes. "Delving more deeply into Edward's memories is a challenge, but nothing I can't overcome. His mind holds his own memories and those of others he has heard over his existence. That's the term you prefer, isn't it, Edward?" Aro stepped back from him and cocked his head. "Countless times you wished to partake of Isabella's blood, and you found the strength to resist, but when you finally did, it was contaminated with the venom of James and the bitter morphine Carlisle had injected her with. You began to dream of the day when you could taste the untainted elixir—even going so far as to regulate her diet to ensure its purity," Aro ended with a whisper.

"No!" Edward shouted. "I would never-"

Edward's protestations were abruptly cut off when Emmett's large hand clapped down over his mouth. "Bite me, and I'll break your fuckin' jaw again," he said, his voice deep and menacing.

He wasn't the only one who was growling. Low angry rumbles sounded from everyone circling the dying fire—except for Bella.

She reached up and stroked Jasper's cheek, urging him to face her. "We already knew he only wanted me for my blood. I just didn't ... I never realized he was fattening me up like a prize cow." Bella blinked several times and shook her head sadly. She reached for Charlotte and Peter and pulled them closer. "Is this a new thing? Or was he planning it the whole time?" Bella asked Aro plaintively.

Aro's eyes swept from Bella back to Edward. He raised his head to search Edward's terrified expression. "Oh, this is new information since your too brief visit with us, Isabella."

Rosalie's quiet growl morphed into a rippling snarl, and her muscles tensed as if she were going to attack. Jasper squeezed her against his left side. If anyone was going to kill Edward, it would be him. He began listing the many different ways he'd be able to accomplish it.

"But that was merely a passing thought, was it not, Edward?" Aro asked, turning to face them, but still holding Edward's hand with his right.

Edward's panicked eyes were ringed with white. He was terrified.
He should have been.

Jasper wondered what Aro hoped to accomplish by divulging that information. It wasn't like everyone didn't already know the true reason behind Edward's obsession with Bella.

Aro's left hand drifted to cover his own chest where his heart once beat. "A mere fleeting consideration, and you feel you shouldn't be judged harshly for such. Yet how many have you condemned for their errant musings? Does a momentary thought reveal a man or woman's true self?" A devious smile spread across Aro's face. "Major, I see Edward never realized that you fed him a rotating group of memories over and over again. And Mrs. McCarty maintained thoughts only of herself and her own exceptional beauty? I assume to block him from reading your minds?"

Having a difficult time battling everyone's fury in addition to his own, Jasper could only add his silent assent to Rosalie's.

"Very wise. Edward never caught on to your ruse. All of you seem to have developed your own methods of blocking his intrusive prying. There have been some intriguing musical selections you've employed." Aro indicated Emmett with a tilt of his head, and his smile widened slightly. "It's also enlightening to see that Edward, if he was diligent and concentrated very hard, could shut out the sound of other minds. Not completely, of course, but he could knock it down to a bearable roar. All in the name of offering privacy to his family." Aro pursed his lips as if he were in deep thought. "Possible, but rather difficult for him, and he would have missed something after all. It's very nearly a crime he missed so much anyway. However, I believe with the proper training, he could become rather adept at it-if he wished."

Aro took another step away from Edward and released his hand. A thoughtful expression crossed his face. He tented his fingers, as if he were praying, and bowed his head. "Oh, Edward. You should have believed Isabella's negative reaction to you and the positive one to her Major at her awakening, yet you still required further proof she was no longer yours. In fact-never was. Even the opening of her mind to you didn't convince you as you dismissed her declarations. She was rather angry. With her being a newly awakened vampire, you were quite fortunate to receive only a few scars. Intriguing ploy she used to distract everyone. And losing an arm to a newborn? Amusing." He steepled his index fingers and tapped his lips. "Over the decades, you had ample opportunity to train with the Major, yet you refused, believing yourself to have the upper hand in any confrontation because you could read minds. Isabella and the rest have disproved that theory. Who truly thinks consciously about each and every movement they make? Perhaps when they are learning new skills, but not experienced warriors or those who are battling for their very lives. How fortunate you were to have Major Whitlock's protection for so many years."

Edward's brow furrowed as he mumbled urgently through Emmett's hand.

"It would seem Edward disagrees. Would you allow him to speak, Emmett?" Aro tilted his head toward them.

Emmett let out a long-suffering sigh, rolled his eyes, and gradually slid his hand down Edward's face until he was cupping his chin.

Edward sneered. "We certainly haven't needed Jasper's protection from anyone. No one has-"

"I beg to differ." Aro clucked his tongue and pursed his lips in disapproval. "His mere presence would be enough of a warning to most vampires, and you've not met many. Not even during your quaintly named Rebellious Years where you slaughtered humans whose thoughts you judged to be evil. You avoided coming into contact with others of our kind that drew near to you. A wise choice on your part-you may not have survived the encounters unscathed. But, I digress." A coy smile
played about Aro's lips. "I've learned that a few nomads have avoided interaction with your family simply because they heard the major was a member and were unwilling to ascertain if the rumors were true. It was quite the deterrent and kept your lives relatively peaceful. You, and your entire coven, owe him a debt of gratitude."

Resentful irritation began to slither through Edward's fear and humiliation. "We owe him nothing! He came to us!" He jerked against the hands gripping his arms and face. "He was hiding behind Carlisle's reputation and-"

Aro grasped Edward's fingers. "He and his lovely companion, you mean. The one the nomad James had taken quite an interest in back in Mississippi. You have always been quite fond of Alice, and she has proven her worth to your coven countless times. In fact, they both were quite the addition. You've certainly enjoyed the trappings of wealth, yet you seem oblivious to the benefits you gained having the Major reside with you." Aro quietly cleared his throat and turned back to Bella. "Even still, his desire for your blood makes me quite thirsty. I believe if you had stayed human any longer, and he continued to resist its siren call, it would have driven him insane."

"Driven him insane?" Charlotte said scathingly. "He's been dancin' on the border of Crazytown since I met him."

Though he made no sound, Peter's mirth billowed out and around them. The release of tension at Charlotte's tart remark was more than welcome. Even Rosalie's rigid form relaxed slightly. What continued to puzzle Jasper was Bella's reaction—or lack thereof. She snickered at Charlotte's snide comment, but she was the only one who still didn't feel some sort of anger at Edward.

Aro's eyes twinkled as they surveyed Jasper's close group. "Edward has finally come to realize—"

"I can't read anyone's mind but Renata, Alec, and Jane! What's going on?" He zeroed in on Bella, and his sense of alarm suddenly skyrocketed. "Bella! Your wrist! More scars? If anyone of these ... these friends of Jasper's have hurt you I'll—"

"You'll what?" Bella asked. "Give them a stern, long-winded tongue-lashing before you let them beat your ass?" She blew out a disgusted breath. "Why would you automatically assume one of them did it? And why would I ask such a stupid question?" She raised her right arm and regarded the healed wound from Victoria ripping her hand off. "It was one of your mistakes that caught up to us, but Jasper did a good job fixing it. It kind of covers the scar from the first time you screwed up when you tried to protect me." She rested her hand on Jasper's bare stomach. "Weird, I know, but Victoria happened to find us."

"Yeah." Emmett grunted as he forced Edward's mouth shut once again. "You know Bella has that monster magnet in her ass."

Jasper shook his head at him, hoping to keep him from going any further. Edward didn't need to know any details about what happened with Victoria.

Edward's eyes grew wide with distress again as Emmett went on like it was no big deal. "She showed up, and we had to clean up another one of your messes. Her ashes are blowin' in the wind. We should have taken care of her and James back at the baseball field, but—"

"But better late than never." Rosalie slid out from under Jasper's arm and folded hers across her chest as she glared heatedly at Edward. "That would be another example of surface thoughts not telling the whole story. My God, I can't believe we trusted our safety to you for so many years!" She flung her hands out and then angrily propped her fists on her hips. "You know, Edward, we were so lucky that Alice and Jasper just happened to show up. We should have listened to him during that baseball
game debacle instead of you."

"Rose, Rose." Bella tried to soothe her. "Mistakes happen. It kinda sucked in the meantime, you all should have listened to the experienced vampire, but it worked out. We know better now." She rubbed Jasper's stomach and smiled playfully as she tipped her face up to his and sighed. "Now I know why I was born. You feel my feelings one by one, and I found where I really belong. Nobody loves me like you do."

Returning her smile, he winked at her and declared, "My love is all I have to give."

Bella almost giggled at that.

His envious resentment and disappointment growing, Edward rasped from between Emmett's fingers, "But Bella, you're my first, my last-my everything."

Puzzled, Bella cocked her head to the side and stared at him.

"He's quoting Barry White at you." Rosalie's voice was rough with disdain.

"You know. Dr. Love, the Prince of Pillow Talk?" Emmett very nearly cracked a smile. "Rose has some of his songs on her iPod."

"So does Peter," Charlotte added.

"Dr. Love? Seriously?" Bella groaned, dropping her head. "What bullshit. Edward, don't even-"

"Bella, I can change." Edward, being Edward, had to make another last ditch attempt to sway Bella's mind. "We ... we can try again. I understand it was merely your newborn rage speaking before, but once you're past this first year-"

"Oh?" Instantly, Bella's body stiffened. Her icy scowl would have frozen the hearts of even greater men.

Jasper didn't know what she was doing to Edward, but the restrained vampire gasped, squeezed his eyes shut, and the hands that had been detaining him had to scramble to hold him up.

Aro's eyes widened. His eyebrows nearly reached his hairline as he turned to gape incredulously at Bella.

Pressing his lips to her ear, Jasper asked, "What did you do?"

She straightened against his side and raised her head up. "I think I forced the memory of what we did to Chelsea and Victoria at him," she said, sneering. "Well, that's what I was trying to do. And it wasn't my newborn rage speaking, Edward. It was me. When are you going to realize I have thoughts of my own, and that Jasper is my mate?"

Edward slowly shook his head from left to right and groaned out, "What have they done to you? Such vicious ...You used to be so kind, loving, and giving ... forgiving, and Jasper and these ...these ...They've turned you into a mon-"

"Don't even say it," Bella warned. "What? Were we supposed to invite them into the house and have a nice little chat? Or maybe we should have rolled over and let them kill us? Victoria needed to be gotten rid of a long time ago, like Jasper said, and Chelsea had to be taken out to protect my coven." She gulped and wiped at the venom that had leaked from her lips. "And it's not what my coven has done to me-it's what they've done for me. You tried your best to keep me weak and
dependent, and like a stupid little mouse, I let you. Jasper, Charlotte, and Peter have shown me how to be strong and protect myself and the ones I love!" She swiped roughly at her mouth again. "Edward, you and Alice constantly did things to me like I was a ... a brainless thing ... a toy!"

Edward swallowed thickly. His eyes stole open, revealing a dull black. "No. All those things we did for you were because we loved you. So much."

"No, you really didn't, Edward. I don't know why I didn't see it before. All those things you did to me were for Alice-to make her happy. You deluded yourself into thinking you were protecting me for my own good and Alice helped. She was sure that if she shoved enough designer shit down my throat I would come to love it. But that's not me, and it was never for me. It was all for Alice."

She angrily brushed a few stray hairs away from her face. "You tried to keep me locked up to protect your toy. They," she said, gesturing toward Peter and Charlotte, "have taught me how I can protect myself!"

"But Bella," Edward crooned softly, his voice full of regret, "you could have gone on to live a fulfilling human life-with children and grandchildren. Jasper's stolen that from you."

"Arrgh! Are you an idiot?" Bella's hand slapped her forehead. "Is that all women are to you? Helpless, stupid little baby incubators? Just because I was a human female doesn't automatically mean I had a burning desire to pop out babies." She raged, "Jasper didn't steal that from me. I happened to almost kill myself wrecking my truck, remember? I wasn't living when I was in your cage-I was being manipulated the entire time. You know what else they've done for me? They really love me for me, and they've taught me how to live." She sagged against Jasper's chest, seeking comfort from his scent.

"Bella." Edward's voice cracked. "I'll try harder. I can change. I will love you more than that."

Jasper couldn't help but growl.

Bella's head snapped toward him and another flash of anger radiated from her.

"Edward, you don't get to quote the Backstreet Boys at me," she said with a disparaging tone. "What you really love is gone and there won't be anymore." Pausing a moment, she frowned in thought. "How did you know the lyrics? You must have seen I had some of their albums in my bedroom back in Forks. Renee gave them to me, by the way." Her frown darkened, and her eyes narrowed dangerously. "I already know you don't like them, since they're beneath you. And you can change? Or do you mean try harder to change me? You're the one that would say whatever it takes to keep me blind. It's all you ever did, so ... quit playing games with my heart. All you're doing is pissing me off." She leaned into Jasper and inhaled deeply. As she exhaled, she forced her ire away.

She was struggling, but Jasper was impressed with her control. Besides a few meandering thoughts, Bella was keeping it together. But then it struck Jasper what she was feeling for Edward—indifference with a heavy dollop of annoyance that grew when he tried to persuade her again. While nearly everyone around her was trying to keep themselves from tearing Edward apart, she just didn't care about him.

Many people considered the opposite of love to be hate. But Jasper, constantly aware of the emotions of others, knew better. They were wrong—the opposite of love was apathy.

Bella drew in another breath. "Don't you dare try that again," she continued roughly. "So, in the immortal words of the Backstreet Boys-forgive my honesty, but you gotta go. I don't want you back. Got it?" She patted Jasper's chest again. "Besides, it's because of Jasper and his heinous friends that
"I'm still here. No thanks to you." She flashed her teeth at him and then smiled brightly at Aro. "Aro, feel free to continue exposing Deadward Sullen's deepest, darkest thoughts. You can skip over the ones where he wallows in self-pity and calls himself a monster. He thinks everyone is a monster."

"Deadward Sullen." Emmett snorted loudly right in Edward's ear.

Charlotte and Peter tried but couldn't contain their spluttering laughter. Felix's and Demetri's eyes glowed with humor, but they maintained their stony, attentive expressions. Jasper felt appreciation from Alec and Jane, but they were as still as the other guards.

Centuries of practice would do that.

"So perceptive, Isabella." Aro's eyebrows rose, and he smiled indulgently at her. "You may not be enamored with knowing all his secrets."

"Pffft." Bella flapped a hand at Edward in scorn. "He's a little weird, but I don't think he was killing babies or puppies."

"What else could there be?" Rosalie asked with a crafty twinkle in her eyes. "We all know he took off for a few years and killed humans. It is what vampires do, after all. Even I killed a few." She raised her hand and examined her nails. "I just didn't drink any of their blood." She shot Edward a haughty look.

"Quite." Aro's smile dimmed, and the amused sparkle in his eyes sharpened into a harsh glint. He searched Bella's face for a moment and then turned his attention back to Edward, whose nervousness was eclipsing his envy. "Major, your state of undress has been disturbing young Edward."

Jasper suddenly knew, without a doubt, what Aro was about to disclose next.

He probably should have mentioned it to Bella sooner.

Her utter indifference for Edward had been unexpected. It was then he realized he had no idea how she might react to a new revelation.

"Disturbing?" Bella was bewildered. "Jasper's been shirtless practically since I woke up." She lowered her head in embarrassment. "I keep ripping them off him, but I have gotten better. Aro ripped the last one off him." She shook the thoughts away. "Never mind about that. Is it the scars? I guess those imperfections make people not good enough. Edward has a few of his own now to be disturbed by."

"Tsk, tsk, Edward. Such conflicting emotions you harbor for the Major and his mate." Aro gripped Edward's hand more tightly and turned completely to face him. "Your initial reaction to him was fear, but, at the same time, you couldn't help but notice his comeliness. Your abhorrence at your own fascination with him set the tone for your decades' long antipathy." Aro glanced over his shoulder at the dumbfounded looks on Bella's and Jasper's faces. "Your disgust with your attraction was well in place by the time you learned of his ability. You kept it well concealed. Even when you met his comrades, Peter and Charlotte-"

"What the hell?" Emmett exclaimed. "See, Rose? I always said he was gay."

Bella's mouth fell open. "Edward's gay?"

"He's warm for Jasper's form? I knew it." Peter barked out a laugh, but then the grin dropped from his face. "Wait. What did ya mean when ya said 'even when you met his comrades, Peter and Charlotte?'"
When the spark of amusement darkened to a calculating gleam in his eyes, Jasper realized Aro had been making another play for Bella by revealing the skeletons in Edward's closet. He may have been doing it just to observe how she would react, but the devious shift in his emotions said differently.

Bella was as stunned as Jasper at the revelations. It only lasted another second before he felt her astonishment combust into jealous rage. Having been warned by the tenor of Aro's emotions, he was prepared. As Bella gathered herself to leap at Edward, he threw his arms around her and crushed her to his body.

"Jasper's mine!" she snarled.

In an attempt to keep her from kicking him to get at Edward, he hopped away from Rose, Peter, and Charlotte and dropped to the ground on top of her, pinning her arms between their bodies and rolling away from the fire.

Before he could get out the first word to calm her down, Aro let out a throaty chuckle. A thin strand of disappointment joined his devious aura.

He raised his voice to be heard over her growls. "Isabella, I believe you have no need to be concerned. It seems his interest in males has, thus far, been limited to the Major and his Captain. Battle hardened warriors do hold a certain appeal."

"Only me and Jasper?" Peter began as he brushed his hair back from his face. "Well, I am so fuckin'-"

Charlotte slapped her hand over his mouth. "If ya know what's good for ya, don't even say it."

Glaring at Aro's self-satisfaction, Jasper murmured quickly into Bella's ear. "Aro only said that to piss you off, Bella. You know I'm yours. There's nothin' to worry about."

"But it's true!" she hissed.

"Yes."

She stopped struggling but her low growl continued to vibrate throughout their bodies.

"You knew."

"Only recently. It was when I dazzled him back in Forks to find out if he'd hidden anymore of your blood. At the time, I thought it was just because I was touching him."

"You be-dazzled him?" She strained against his hold again. Her deep rumbling growls grew into snarls. "I've had it with that asshole! I need to kick his ass! He shouldn't be here anyway."

Jasper pressed his jaw to hers, forcing her head down. "No, he shouldn't be, but listen to me! I've never felt his attraction. Primarily, what I have felt is disgust. I just thought it was because of my scars and the memories of my time with Maria." Shifting his lips to her ear, he spoke softly to her. "Bella, you know Aro is trying to manipulate you. Don't let it work."

She clenched her teeth and took in several quick breaths. "Okay. You're right. I know he is. He's always playing games. I just need a sec." She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and then they flew open. "If Edward thinks you and Peter are sexy, what does that say about me?"

Leave it to Bella to put that spin on it.
Rosalie and Charlotte started laughing, and Peter's guffaw rang through the predawn chill.

"What'd she say?" Emmett was feeling left out.

"It means, Bella," Charlotte began, still chortling, "that Edward likes big, strong, battle-scarred blond males and pretty little brunette females."

"I can't tell you how relieved I am he doesn't like blonde females," Rosalie said with a smirk.

Charlotte wholeheartedly agreed.

Edward's mortification grew by leaps and bounds while a sly grin grew across Aro's face.

Bella twisted beneath Jasper and craned her neck to catch the conniving King's eye. "Aro, I don't care if you embarrass Edward, but I won't let you manipulate me. Remember?" she said trailing off, her eyes hardening.

Aro's hand rose to touch his temple. "Isabella, wouldn't you prefer it if I could read his mind?"

"Yes, I would, but you're pushing your luck."

Low enough that no one else could hear, Jasper asked Bella, "Can you block Edward from reading anyone?"

Her lips brushed over his ear. "No. I already tried. I guess I have to touch him first. But I already touched him. I don't know why I can't shield him."

Her power had strengthened since Jasper had brought her to Wyoming. Luckily, it had grown enough to prevent Demetri from being able to track any of them before they were even aware of that ability. "Well, you were kicking the shit out of him, and that was before we came here. I think you getting to know Peter and Charlotte made you feel more protective of everyone, and you automatically shielded us to protect us. Have you felt protective of Edward at all?"

She snorted. "No. Ugh. I'm going to have to touch him."

Drawing a hand from beneath her back, Jasper smoothed her hair away from her face. "Now's a good time, while he's being held. But don't trust him or Aro."

"I don't."

Smiling at her, he kissed her nose. "Good. Are you calm enough not to attack him? You know you have nothing to worry about. I'm all yours. I'll be right next to you."

"Do you know how it makes me feel to hear my ex-boyfriend wants to date my current boyfriend and his brother?"

"He ain't man enough for me, Bubba." Peter winked and grinned.

"Well, then it's a good thing you're already spoken for, though God alone knows why. Now stop it." Charlotte smacked his arm before turning to Bella. "Folks just like who they like, sweetie."

Lifting Bella up from the ground, Jasper started brushing off her clothes and picking grass out of her hair. The instant he let go of her arm, she was only a blur as she leapt over the low fire and landed with a loud thump in front of Aro and Edward.

She gripped Edward's arm below Demetri's hand and squeezed. "Now you can't hear anybody."
Jasper was midway through his flight across the fire pit when he saw Aro's eyes light up, and he reached for Bella. Demetri snatched his hand from Edward's arm and tried to sweep Bella away.

They all flopped bonelessly to the ground when Jasper hit them with a powerful surge of lethargy and indifference. The ground shook when Felix and Emmett hit it.

Jasper did notice Felix still had his arms clamped around Edward. He was a good soldier.

As his feet touched down, he scooped Bella up into his arms. Knowing his second was right behind him, Jasper spun and shoved Bella into Peter's arms. He swiftly kneeled between Edward and Aro, wrapping the fingers of his left hand around Edward's neck and the right around the seemingly unconscious king's.

"At least your aim's gotten a hell of a lot better," Peter groused. "Used ta be you'd knock everybody out within a hundred yards."

"He was younger then," Charlotte said, hissing.

She was guarding Jasper's flank from Renata and the twins, but there was no need as none of them had moved.

Rosalie started in surprise, and then dashed around the fire. "Could I get Emmett out from under Aro?"

"Grab and toss," Jasper barked at her. "Char, move Demetri and Felix out."

It took less than a second for Rosalie to dislodge Emmett from under Aro while Charlotte ran around Jasper to kick Demetri away.

As hard as she booted him, one would have thought she still didn't like him much.

So she wouldn't end up on the ground, Jasper eased up on his emotional assault while Charlotte pried Felix's hands from Edward. When she had him clear, Jasper refocused on Aro and Edward before they had a chance to move. He didn't need their drama interrupting what he had to say to Bella.

She was squirming in Peter's arms, but she couldn't break his hold. His hands were secured around her wrists, and he had her arms crossed over her body.

"Isabella! What the fuck were you thinkin'?" Jasper was incapable of suppressing the growl in his voice. "I said I'd be right next to you when you touched Edward. In case you didn't notice, Aro almost-"

"He didn't grab me!" She thumped the back of her head against Peter's chest, making him grunt. "Though Peter could let go of me now."

Jasper couldn't help wondering why she hadn't raked her heel down his shin or tried to hook her foot around his ankle to pull them both down.

"No. We had both just said we didn't trust Aro, and you go and jump over a goddamn fire and put yourself right next to him!"

"But my shield-"

"Was your shield up?" Jasper adjusted his grip on Aro's and Edward's necks as he stared down the love of his life.
She dropped her head to her chest in shame as she admitted, "No."

Demetri, Felix, and Emmett moaned as they sat up, each bringing a hand to their heads.

Jasper's darkening eyes still on Bella's downcast face, he sucked in a lungful of air. "Just because you like him doesn't mean he is trustworthy. It doesn't mean he won't keep trying to get his hands on you and your power. Aro didn't seem to care that he'd lost Chelsea, but he liked using her gift well enough. And if you think about it, supernatural creatures who meet you are drawn to you ..." His voice faded out as he had another one of those brain-jamming epiphanies concerning Bella.

Why hadn't he seen it before?

Peter's eyebrows went up in question.

"They're drawn to you," he mumbled. "Aro doesn't need Chelsea, and he wouldn't need to have his guard enslaved to him if he had you and a slew of vampires ready to protect you. He'd only need you near him!"

Bella's head jerked up, her eyes wide. "No. Wait. But he said-"

"He's a damn liar, Bella." Exasperated, Jasper's throat tightened around his words. "You don't get to be over three thousand years old by-"

Peter snugged his grip on Bella. "By bein' stupid, naïve, and gullible. Or believin' every damn thing you hear."

"Or by being cocky," Jasper added. Bella opened her mouth to speak, and he cut her off again. "Yes, Aro is confident and self-assured, and he has reason to be, but he bit off more than he could chew when he came here. He'd heard about my reputation, and he was cautious enough to question it, but he should have kept it in mind. He knew you were a shield, and he expected it to get stronger when you became a vampire, but he didn't expect it to become so much stronger. I've become stronger since I mated with you. Aro was so sure his gifted vampires would subdue us he didn't bother to bring reinforcements. He must have expected an out-of-control newborn surrounded by her new, distracted mate, and a bunch of ungifted vampires. He didn't make any contingency plans." Jasper glared down at Aro and back to Bella. "And some of our success has to be attributed to luck."

"Luck?" Bella asked in disbelief.

"Yes. We were lucky he didn't bring more vampires with him. He could have swarmed us-overpowered us with numbers and skilled soldiers. We were lucky Chelsea was so sure she could bond me to him she wasn't paying attention to anything else until it was too late. We'd have still gotten her."

Emmett jumped to his feet and crushed Rosalie to his chest in a tight hug. "But not if they'd brought a couple dozen vamps or more with them. Your shield might have held them all off if you got it up fast enough, but for how long? All they'd have to do is wait us out."

Felix rose to his full height, agreeing with Emmett's words, and began brushing dirt and grass from his sleeves and suit coat. "As you Americans say, 'I'd rather be lucky than good.' Though being good at what you do doesn't hurt." His gaze fell to Jasper and he winked.

Jasper caught Bella's eye again. "You got too cocky. You jumped right at him and left yourself wide open."

Peter cleared his throat to get his coven leader's attention. "My right hand's itchin'."
Then Jasper remembered. "Just fuck *me.*" He groaned. "How many?"

"I'm thinkin' it's Poindexter's Mommy and Daddy come to collect the prodigal."

Of course, it would be. It would only make sense. He should have remembered.

"How long?"

"Don't know."

*Shit, shit, shit.*

Bella slumped in Peter's hold. "I'm sorry, Jasper. All I was thinking about was touching Edward and shielding him because once I do it then I don't have to touch him again, and I wanted to hurry up and-"

"Bella," Jasper with a sigh, trying to staunch the verbal flood. "We'll discuss it later. At this time, I'd like for you to unshield Aro *and* Edward. Aro is hiding something about Chelsea, I just don't know what. She *must* have had something on him. He was strangely relieved when we got rid of her. My guess is she was blackmailing him somehow." As he was speaking, he quickly studied the guard members. They were ... not *surprised,* but puzzled. He didn't think any of them knew what it could have been. It didn't matter. Aro wouldn't miss *Chelsea,* but he *would* miss the use of her gift. He *would* not be replacing her with Bella. In the meantime, with both of them unshielded, maybe Edward would pick something up.

Not that it would do any good if Edward didn't mention it, and Aro was smart enough to cover his thoughts.

Jasper would take his chances with that.

If the impending guests *were* Esme and Carlisle, they'd want their boy back. They were trying, but Jasper didn't exactly trust them to keep Edward reined in. They hadn't been able to prevent him from coming to Wyoming. Jasper had a solution to that problem, but only if he could keep himself from ending Aro.

"Peter, let Bella go and get ready to hold Aro down. Charlotte, you hold Edward. Emmett, Rose, back 'em up." As they moved into position, Jasper looked to Bella. "Darlin', I really need you to stay back. Don't touch them no matter what I say."

She started nervously tugging at her fingers. "What are you going to do? Aro didn't actually get his hands on me. I mean, he tried to grab me, but he didn't, and ..." She snapped her mouth shut and crossed her arms. "What are you doing?"

"Killin' two birds with one stone."

"You're going to kill them?" Bella's hands flew up to cover her mouth.

"No, Darlin'." He chuckled. "They can both be useful to us."

Charlotte and Peter each gave Jasper a nod, letting him know they were ready to hold down their current guests. Jasper stood and moved away from their feet and then released Edward and Aro from his power. Peter and Charlotte pressed their hands down on their shoulders, pinning them to the ground.
Aro recovered first, and when his eyes opened, he found Jasper immediately. "Major-

Holding up one finger to silence him, Jasper spoke, his voice as cold as ice. "That was your last mistake, Aro. You won't survive another."

Peter smirked. "Guess you're lucky he's grown. Used ta kick ass, take names, and leave toe tags-or dust, as the case may be."

Jasper shot him a shut-the-hell-up glare and returned his attention to Aro. "If you want to continue your existence, you will respect our wishes. Bella does not want to join you."

"Pity. She reminds me of my beloved sister whom I miss terribly," Aro said softly.

"Didyme?"

In his peripheral vision, Jasper saw frowns form on Demetri's and Felix's faces. Edward's eyes narrowed as if he were concentrating.

"Edward?"

Despite his antipathy toward Jasper, he answered. "She was very beautiful and-

Aro drew in a quick breath. "She had been brutally murdered. I was the unfortunate soul who came upon her ashes and had the dreadful task of informing Marcus of the loss of the love of his life."

"Isabella looks nothing like her," Demetri murmured. "Major, Didyme was lost before my time, but there are many portraits of her. Master Marcus himself has painted several."

"Marcus is quite the artist when the spirit moves him." Aro lightly cleared his throat. "No. Isabella does not resemble my dearly departed sister physically. It is the ... aura about her. Those who were fortunate enough to be in Didyme's presence basked in her shining happiness and grew to love her. It was as if they were enticed to her by her inherent joy. Isabella appears to possess a similar trait. Those who move within her influence seem almost predisposed to be fond of her and wish to remain close." Aro's eyes moved unhurriedly over the Whitlock coven members. "Others seem compelled to guard and protect her." His eyes flicked to his own guardsmen. "I am unsure as to the extent of that particular power as I've not been able to read Demetri and Felix or your coven members."

"You're not going to either," Bella piped up. "So that's a gift?"

"Oh, yes." Aro smiled at her. "Much like your mate's innate charisma. Again, it is similar to our Heidi's gift--"

"Of drawing in dinner and keeping them from getting too upset about it or wondering what they're getting into?" Jasper asked sarcastically. "Or maybe like Chelsea being able to manipulate bonds?"

"Er, yes. Similar." Aro became a little uncomfortable. "I've not yet come across two powers that were exactly alike."

Curious if Aro would answer truthfully, Jasper wondered aloud, "So Didyme had a way of ... getting people to like her-creating a sort of bond. Bella has this. And Chelsea could manipulate others to be bonded to you."

Aro examined the tall blond as if he could, somehow, manage to dig into his mind. "Chelsea could consciously bind others to herself or others, or break existing bonds. Didyme had no such control. As it seems your Isabella does not."
"Like I said," Emmett spoke in a low voice. "Bella's got that supernatural monster magnet in her ass. Guess she just can't turn it off."

Bella hissed at him, but otherwise didn't say anything.

"That's it!" Rosalie exclaimed, as she stared down at Edward in her astonishment. "Edward always said she had no sense of self-preservation, but she does! Humans weren't really drawn to her, but when she came in contact with supernatural beings-"

"Sucked 'em right in like a black hole and they wanted to take care of her. Even Peter, and he doesn't like anybody," Charlotte said bluntly. "No offense, Bella," she added as an aside, scrunching up her nose.

Peter and Bella frowned at her.

That attraction being a kind of power explained a lot. Even James' coven had been drawn in. He hadn't wanted to protect her, however.

There was something else there, but that was enough discussion about talents, minor or otherwise. Aro seemed to be using it as a distraction. If Esme and Carlisle were on their way, they could show up at any time. Jasper had already decided they weren't getting Edward back.

"Aro, as I said, you've made your last mistake here, but I'll let you go—this time. Edward has received several object lessons already, but you seem eager to extend his education."

Eyes narrowing shrewdly, Aro peered up at him. "I believe, with the proper guidance—"

Jasper waved his hand as if he were shooing a fly. "Take him. Keep him."

Edward had been quietly watching and listening, but his eyes flew open at the dismissive offer to the Volturi king. "You ... you have no right! I'm not your chattel. You can't just pack me off to Volterra like some sort of—"

"Oh, really, Edward?" Rosalie stepped away from Emmett and sauntered forward, crossed her arms, and studied Edward as if he were a stain on a Persian rug. "Maybe they'll pick your clothes out for you and let you know who you're allowed to associate with. They might even decide what your diet is going to be." She loomed over him. Her lips pulled back from her teeth in a devilish grin.

Peter reached over and slapped his jaw. "So, Jasper's not the boss of you? Is that it? Any of that shit comin' out of your mouth ringin' any bells, Eddie-boy?"

Edward's shock at the slap and their biting words only lasted a moment before he decided to act. Charlotte ripped his shirt from his back as he spun away from her and lurched to his feet. He was headed directly for Bella, who was standing beyond Demetri, a smirk plastered across her face.

When he bounced back from the invisible wall of Bella's shield, Jasper caught him by the nape of his neck and flung him to the ground. Charlotte pounced on him, flipped him to his stomach, and wrenched his arms up behind his back. She had hold of both of his wrists and her booted foot was planted firmly between his shoulder blades.

"And I'll bet your daddy's goin' to hear all about it." She ground her heel into his back, forcing a pained, wheezing cry out of him. Then she turned to Jasper, feeling apologetic. "Sorry, Jasper. I should've expected him to try and bolt. It's what he does."

"Not your fault, Charlotte. He is fast, especially when he's runnin' scared." Jasper placed himself in
Edward's field of vision. "There's a few things you need to learn about vampire etiquette, Edward, since either Carlisle never bothered to teach you or you didn't think you needed to learn. You came to my territory, uninvited, and attempted to lure my mate away—knowing she's mine. All this after you'd been warned to stay away. Your coven leaders understood this, and I'm sure they passed the information along. You disobeyed. As leader of my own coven, I have every right to do with you what I will."

With a grunt, Charlotte tugged at Edward's arms until everyone could hear the faint sounds of crackling. "And we don't take prisoners."

Peter bared his teeth in a malicious grin. "Too much trouble to watch 'em-unless we rip their arms and legs off."

Cringing, Edward hissed. "You wouldn't!"

"Sure we would. Ask Demetri and Felix." Charlotte yanked at his arms again. "And I like you even less than I like them."

Even through his obvious pain, Edward glowered at Jasper. "You do not own me. I am part of Carlisle's family. You have no right-"

"Shut up, boy. And yes, I do. Doesn't matter what you call it, you left Carlisle's coven and trespassed against mine." Jasper signaled Peter to release Aro.

As Aro gingerly rose from his prone position on the ground, Bella came up behind her mate and rested her hand at the small of his back in support. Jasper continued, "Aro, the sun'll be up soon, and you have far to go." Narrowing his eyes at him, he took the small ribbon of fear he felt from him and tweaked it up. "How would you prefer to transport Edward? In pieces?"

Aro smoothed the front of his coat with both hands and cleared his throat. "Er, that won't be necessary, Major." His eyes darted around and settled on Alec and Jane who were several feet beyond Jasper. Renata appeared at his side, and he gave her a tremulous smile. His wary gaze returned to Jasper. "I believe my dear Alec will be able to keep him contained until we reach Volterra."

"Splendid idea." Jasper replied with a smile displaying his sharp teeth. Aro gulped and took one step away from him. "Bella, can you block Edward from reading anyone's mind and still let Aro read him?"

"Maybe. I'll try."

"No, Bella! Please-ahhh!" Edward shrieked as Charlotte ground her heel into his back again.

Jasper patted the fingers Bella had wrapped around his arm and looked over his shoulder at Alec. "Alec, be ready-

Even though Charlotte was itching to pull his arms off, Edward still managed to run his mouth. "No! Not Alec! You'll regret this, Jasper! When I-"

Alec appeared beside Edward, and Charlotte leapt away. He merely placed his hand on the side of Edward's face, causing him to go limp and silencing the empty threat.

Still not trusting Aro, Jasper kept him within view as he asked, "Alec, can you handle him?"

"Yes, Major. Now that he is subdued, he will be no problem."
Jasper nodded and stalked toward Aro until he was close enough to take hold of his jaw. "Listen up, Aro. This is your final warning. I've allowed you to live, in spite of your attack on my coven and your attempts to capture my mate, and I have given you Edward Cullen. Personally, I don't care what you do with him, but it might ruin your friendship with Carlisle if his first companion were to be... damaged extensively." The pupils in Aro's deep red eyes blew wide. Jasper glided closer to him and reiterated, "Since I've already enshrouded you, you'll be even more susceptible to it, and don't forget Bella can control the shield she placed around your mind from thousands of miles away. You will never try to capture her again."

"But we can be friends, right?" Bella asked softly.

Jasper looked heavenward and sighed. "Aro, my coven can be considered your allies. You will never cause harm to Bella or put her or her coven in danger."

"Of course not, Major," he answered breathily.

"I don't care how long you keep Edward. He's got a lot to learn."

Bella was patting Jasper's arm, trying to get his attention again.

"What is it, Darlin'?"

"Aro can keep him, but if Edward doesn't want to eat people..."

Only Bella would really care about that, but Jasper had to agree with her. As much as he hated the arrogant little bitch, Edward should still be able to choose how he fed. Aro would be keeping him on a short enough leash.

"Yes," Aro said with a dazed smile. "My new charge will be able to maintain his current diet, if he so chooses."

Jasper could imagine Aro applying a little pressure in that area. "As I said before, I expect."

"A just and fair sovereignty. I recall every word, Major."

Irate hisses rose from Peter and Demetri, and Jasper flung his senses out to pick up who was approaching. Near panic and sharp concern stampeded ahead of them, and he was sure it was Esme and Carlisle. A third set of emotions, that were extremely wary, split off from them. His guess-Alice. Carlisle would have recognized Aro's scent, and Alice wouldn't have wanted to run straight into the lion's den. None of them had any idea what might be waiting for them.

Bella's fingers squeezed Jasper's arm, and a look of determination grew on her face when she saw Jasper's attention shift to the woods. Alec dragged the senseless Edward closer to them, while Jasper increased his grip on Aro. Everyone else fanned out around them as if they'd performed the maneuver a hundred times.

Carlisle broke through the trees beyond Demetri and Felix and skidded to a stop, throwing his arm back to halt Esme, who was right behind him. At first, he looked bewildered by the sight before him-Aro in Jasper's grasp and everyone else guarding them.

Jasper was certain Carlisle had never imagined seeing the head of the Volturi in such a position, or under Jasper's control.

Carlisle remained baffled as he took in the rest of the mind-boggling tableau. His eyes darted over everyone, and when they landed on Edward's unconscious form, his face crumpled. He sighed
heavily, and his shoulders slumped.

His sad gaze slowly rose to Aro's somewhat disheveled appearance and flicked to Jasper's black eyes. "Jasper?"

Carlisle wasn't stupid or uninformed. He had taken in the scene and interpreted it correctly. He was well aware of the protocol he should follow.

Jasper couldn't help but feel pride at how alternating members of his coven and Aro's guard had circled them, blocking anyone from attempting to get to them, or from reaching Alec as he knelt beside Edward. He pierced Carlisle with his steely gaze. "Your old friend Aro and some of his guard decided to pay us a visit. We've had a very mutually beneficial discussion." Jasper increased the pressure on Aro's jaw for an instant and then drew his hand away, shooting him a look full of warning.

The entranced haze over Aro's eyes cleared, and he quickly took in the situation. Studying Jasper, he nodded, brought his hands together, and increased the distance between them.

"Carlisle, my very good friend. It's been much too long. This must be your lovely wife, Esme?" Aro's eyebrows curved upward, and he smiled engagingly.

"Er, yes." Awkwardly, Carlisle cleared his throat. "Esme, I'd like to introduce you to my ... old friend ... Aro."

With venom-filled eyes, Esme smiled nervously and peeked around Carlisle's shoulder. "Hello." Her voice was shaking. "It's ... it's nice to meet you." Her hand gripped Carlisle's arm. "Edward?"

Aro gestured toward Jasper, and then answered the worried pair. "As the Major said, we were having the most enlightening encounter when young Edward decided to join us. Meeting him again was most informative." Aro's smile widened. "Might I ask where the charming Alice is?"

Before Carlisle could come up with a reply, Jasper touched one finger to his temple and said, "She's around."

"You can sense ...?" Aro's eyes grew round with wonderment.

"Yes." He noticed Esme hadn't been able to pry her anxious attention from Edward's still form. It was time to get down to brass tacks. Jasper pulled Bella more firmly into his side and whispered cautiously into her ear, "Is your shield ready?"

"Yes," she answered quietly. "What-?"

"I don't think we'll need it, but nobody touches Edward unless I say so." Straightening to his full height, he raised his head and scrutinized Edward's former coven leader. "Carlisle, I'm sure you advised Edward that he wasn't welcome here. He disobeyed you and me by trespassing on my unmistakably marked territory and against my coven. He's, once again, made an attempt to coerce and lure my mate away." Bella slid her arm around his back and leaned into him, curiosity radiating from her-probably due to the unexpected use of the more formal language.

Carlisle, like all the rest, understood Edward's infractions were being laid out for all to hear.

His sadness deepened into despair, and he winced as he clutched Esme to his side. He nodded erratically, knowing the next thing he would hear would be the judgment that had been decided upon. He well knew interfering with someone's mate could be punishable by death.
A rather large part of Jasper regretted promising Bella he wouldn't kill Edward, but he thought time in Volterra would be an even better punishment. "As Edward is clearly lacking in certain areas of conduct," Jasper explained in a low voice. "Aro and I have reached an agreement. He has graciously offered to remedy this oversight and assist with Edward's further education."

"But he has several advanced degrees," Carlisle began, a pleading note entering his tone. "You know he's been to-

"His education in vampire etiquette and rules, Carlisle," Jasper clarified. "When it suits him, his manners are impeccable in the human world, but he's not human, and he never will be. He's had over eighty years to learn the customs of his own people, and he's chosen to ignore them, thinking those rules didn't apply to him, or that he was above them."

Peter shifted from one foot to the other and hooked his thumbs in his belt. "It's only dumb luck that's kept him from comin' across more real vampires like James and Victoria, and ya gotta admit, the boy has a knack for pissin' people off. If he wants to stay in one piece, he'll have to learn how to deal with his own kind, not just humans he can enthral to his will." Jasper could tell his captain was wound up by the way his eyes flashed as he jabbed a finger down at Edward's slack face. "The punk needs to learn some more, like how to apply the basic rule ‘if it ain't yours, don't touch it.’ Then there's some of those other ones he picks and chooses from. How about thou shalt not covet?

Esme's sharp intake of breath drew everyone's eyes to her, except for Bella. She continued to stare at Peter with concern.

Reaching beseechingly toward Jasper, Esme gasped, "But he's just a boy. He needs to be with his family. Can't-

Jasper cut off her pleas with a brusque, "No."

Bella leaned forward and interjected. "And that's his main problem. When Carlisle changed him, he was just a boy. When Jasper and Emmett were changed, they were men, living men's lives. Rosalie was a young woman about to be married and take over the responsibility of running her own home! Alice and Edward ..." her voice faded, and then her head jerked up in surprise as she realized something obvious that had, none-the-less, eluded her for so long. "Edward might have been tall, but he was a pampered only son who took piano lessons and was a junior in high school, trying to wheedle his mother into letting him drop out to join the Army!" She emphasized her heated words by slapping her thigh, and started talking faster. "When he took off for his Rebellious Years, he wasn't a grown up starting his own life, he was a kid that ran away from home! And you've been letting his temper tantrums dictate your lives! He needs to grow the hell up and learn how to be a real vampire, like my coven is teaching me. It'll be good for him!"

"Out of the mouths of babes," Emmett muttered.

"Stick a sock in it, Em." Bella glared at him. "Edward said vampires don't change. They do if they have to, just like humans, and now he has to! Aro will protect him while he's learning, right, Aro?"

"Without a doubt, Isabella." Aro bowed his head.

Carlisle murmured something unintelligible to Esme and then said out loud, "Jasper, we can speak to him and stress to him the importance-"

"No," Jasper's clipped tone silenced them. "Talking doesn't work. His mind reading has made him think he's above everyone else, and he doesn't have to comply."
Charlotte spoke quickly. "The boy's been a danger to our coven, and himself, because he doesn't know how to control himself."

Carlisle's eyes widened. "His control-"

"Sucks." Peter spat. "Since he doesn't know when to shut the hell up."

Esme stepped away from Carlisle, her palms outstretched imploringly toward Bella and Jasper. "Please, Jasper, Bella."

Jasper lifted one hand. "Esme, I feel your disappointment. I know you've spoken with him, but he's disregarded everything anyone has said. If he is to survive, he needs this. Others won't be as merciful as I have been." His discussion with them had come to an end. He glanced at Aro. "I'm sure there are matters in Volterra that require your attention."

"You are so very right, Major." Aro smiled brightly and clasped his hands. "As much as it would please me to stay and catch up with you and your beautiful wife, Carlisle, we've been away too long. Duty calls, and we must be on our way. The terms of Edward's apprenticeship will be well thought out and duly recorded. Copies shall be delivered forthwith to all parties involved." He spread his arms wide. "Come, dear ones, we have a lengthy journey before us."

As Alec gathered Edward up and slung him haphazardly over his shoulder, Jane darted toward Bella. "Alec and I were so glad to meet you, Bella."

Bella took hold of her hands. "It was good to meet you, too, Jane." She grabbed Jane in a tight hug. "I'll be calling you soon. And you can call me on Jasper's phone. I don't think I'll be getting one just yet."

Jasper handed his phone to Jane. "Put your numbers in. I already have Demetri's and Felix's."

"Ah, yes, Demetri and Felix?" Aro asked, spinning toward them.

Jasper saw and felt an instant of longing pass through Demetri before he answered his king. "We shall be right behind you, Master," he replied with a slight bow. "Isabella, Major, I am honored to have met you."

Before Jasper could stop her, Bella darted toward the guard and hugged him, released him, and grabbed his wrist. She yanked him toward Felix and then threw her arms around him, as well. "It was good to meet you guys, too." She was patting and rubbing their arms. "It was a little rough at first, but it turned out all right. You'll have to let us know how things are back at the castle."

Demetri started to reach for her hand and stopped, his fingers slowly curling into a loose fist as he brought it back to his side. "We will, Isabella."

Esme stepped forward, "Can't we even say goodbye to Edward? Does he even know?"

"Alas, dear Esme, in my experience, it would be best if he awakens in Volterra." Aro smiled sadly, but the gleam showed brightly in his eyes. "He is aware of our arrangements." He extended an arm toward the break in the trees where the driveway came through. "The sun rises, dear ones. Let us be off."

Rosalie waggled her fingers and said with a broad smile, "In the unforgettable words of N-Sync, 'bye, bye, bye.'"
And just like that, they disappeared down the gravel drive.

Peter groaned loudly as he pulled Charlotte into his arms. "Thank God and Greyhound they're gone."

Bella hissed. "Stop it, Peter!"

He shrugged. "Just throwin' out some song lyrics like you all were doin'."

Bella fell into Jasper's arms and sobbed. "I'm going to miss them, Jasper. Except for Edward."

Her sadness flowed over and around him, and he held her securely to his chest. "I know, Darlin'."

Staggered at the abruptness of the Volturis' departure and the disturbing sight of his unconscious first son and companion being hauled away, Carlisle stuttered, "J-Jasper, if you would, I think Esme and I would appreciate knowing what ... what happened."

"My coven can fill you in. I need to take care of my mate."

Chapter End Notes

Credits:

"Now I know why I was born. You feel my feelings one by one." ~ "It's Gotta Be You" by the Backstreet Boys from the album Millennium.

"My love is all I have to give." ~ "All I Have to Give" by the Backstreet Boys from the album Backstreet's Back.

"You're my first, my last, my everything." ~ "You're the First, the Last, My Everything" by Barry White from the album Can't Get Enough.

"I will love you more than that." ~ "More Than That" by the Backstreet Boys from the album Black and Blue.

"Quit playing games with my heart." ~ "Quit Playing Games (with My Heart)" by the Backstreet Boys from the album Backstreet Boys.

"... you would say whatever it takes to keep me blind ..." ~ paraphrasing from the song "More Than That" by the Backstreet Boys from the album Black and Blue.

"Forgive my honesty but you gotta go. I don't want you back." ~ "Don't Want You Back" by the Backstreet Boys from the album Millennium.

"Deadward Sullen" ~ I'll give ChrissiHR credit for that one. Saw that over on Tricky Raven and cracked right the hell up.

"be-dazzled" ~ a little howdy-do to BetterinTexas

"Thank God and Greyhound they're gone." ~ paraphrasing "Thank God and Greyhound (You're Gone)" by Roy Clark
"Bye, bye, bye" ~ by N-Sync from the album No Strings Attached.

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