

# Ithaca is Gorges

by

Giselle-lx

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# Disclaimers

This is a work of derivative fiction (fan fiction), based on the book *New Moon*, part of the *Twilight* saga. The world and the characters which appear in this manuscript are the property of Stephenie Meyer. Dialogue and information copied from *Twilight*, *New Moon*, and the draft of *Midnight Sun* available on Stephenie Meyer's website, [www.stepheniemeyer.com](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com), are used for continuity purposes only. No copyright infringement is intended.

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Happy Reading.

giselle-lx, December 2009  
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# Preface

My flair for the overdramatic, my family had always called it. Even I had to agree that this was a bit excessive. Why I hadn't just walked out from my enemies' chambers and directly into the square, I couldn't say. A part of me knew that if I moved at high noon, the hooded demons would strike just that much faster—delivering me, finally, from six months of agony. But truthfully there was some other force pulling at me. Urging me to wait here in the shadows for the right moment.

The mob on the square was too absorbed in its revelry to notice a man standing alone in the shadows. But I doubted that even a single one of them would fail to notice once I was no longer in the shade. What would they think? Humans—they rarely suspected danger when it presented itself; they might think I was some sort of apparition. I hoped that I would be left alone; I wanted the Volturi guard to have as unfettered access to my body as they could. The faster they took me down, the sooner this would all be over.

Would I see her? That was the only thing that worried me. If my father's estimate was sound, then the answer was yes. If I was right instead—well, could there be anything worse than the hell I was already in? There was no world for me without her. The only thing left tying me to my own existence was hers, no matter how many thousands of miles away she lived it out. Now that was gone. There was nothing to hold me here.

"I love you, Bella," I whispered.

Above me the clock began to toll.

## Chapter 1: Mortality

“Dr. Cullen, you have to call it.”

I looked up from the patient under my hands into my colleague’s eyes. Dr. Rosales was staring back at me, her expression sad but firm. I drew a deep breath which brought with it a number of scents: the saltiness of the patient’s blood; the cloying nitrous oxide flowing through the oxygen mask; the pungent iodine; the dead tissue of the suture thread. This was the part of my job I loathed, the part I would childishly avoid whenever possible, leaving a patient on a ventilator for four extra hours until the next physician’s shift. Let him do it. Every doctor said they hated it, every doctor said they got into medicine to avoid it, but they all dealt with it. Of course, no one knew the real reason why I had this particular aversion; why I hated this moment more than any doctor who’d ever walked the earth before me. It was the very antithesis of my entire purpose. No one could possibly hate it as much as I.

Exhaling, I yanked my mask down and checked the clock overhead.

“Time of death, one twenty-seven A.M.,” I announced quietly, and beckoned to the two interns who were assisting. “Dr. Taylor, Dr. Merrick, close him up, please.”

“Yes, Dr. Cullen.” The two moved in on the body like a pair of carrion birds, eager for a chance to make the unnecessary sutures that would seal the incisions for the undertaker’s convenience. Cayuga Medical Center wasn’t the flagship teaching hospital in the area—those were down in Manhattan—but we had our share of new doctors to educate. Most of the time I found it useful, as you could leave interns to do things like sutures while you spent your time caring for patients in more serious condition. But days like today I wished they weren’t around. What I really needed was a little privacy, the ability to clear my head for a moment before running back into the crush of the hospital. Closing this patient myself would have afforded me that.

Instead I found myself before the scrub sink, stripping out of my gloves and gown and washing my hands. Dr. Rosales was beside me at the sink, the olive color of her arms obscured by the white lather.

“You okay, Carlisle?” she asked as I bent to take off my shoe covers.

“Yes,” I answered. “I’m fine. Just” —how did I put this?— “having a bad day is all. You just don’t need a surgery like that when everything else is going wrong. I had to call a code this evening on a patient I’ve been treating for a week, and—” I stopped. *And* these days was always one thing: Edward. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about him, worrying about him. I wished that I had a human brain capacity so that it would be possible to use work to actually distract myself from the despair that shrouded my home. As it was, I simply added my concern for my patients to the deep anxiety already gnawing at my core. I ripped off my surgical cap and ran a hand through my hair. “I could use a cup of coffee,” I added lightly.

Dr. Rosales nodded, my answer satisfying her concern—I was merely tired, like every other doctor in the universe. I had not yet mentioned Edward’s condition to her or anyone else at the hospital; I knew what would come of it. Back when I’d begun practicing medicine, there was no thought that there might be a biological basis to anything emotional. Now selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors were prescribed like candy—for sleeplessness, for anxiety, even for shyness, in addition to the debilitating depression for which they were originally intended. Given the slightest indication of Edward’s melancholic state, an SSRI would be what they all would suggest. And then how was I to explain that my son had no serotonin?

We both donned our white coats and exited the operating theater together. “You doing the family, or am I?” she asked quietly.

“I’ll get it,” I answered. As much as I despised allowing a patient to expire on my watch, talking to the family was always something I could handle. I envied them, humans, with their full range of emotional expression. If only Edward were able to cry, perhaps he would be able to cope with Bella’s absence. Although of course if Edward were human, none of this would have existed in the first place—we’d never have left Forks, he’d have taken Bella to senior prom, they would graduate and go to college just like every other high school couple we knew.

For the four-hundred sixty-seventh time since we’d arrived in Ithaca (I’d been keeping track) I considered again that I had perhaps made a mistake in allowing Edward to demand that we relocate. I had promised him that we would, six months ago, when he’d been in danger of

possibly biting her. *We'll come with you, of course. You only have to ask. They won't begrudge you this*, I'd told him then. But then it had all changed or rather, Edward had been changed. And after we'd dealt with the threat of James, the ensuing months had been glorious. Edward, my normally brooding son, had exuded so much joy that Jasper hung at Edward's side any minute he wasn't with Alice, basking in his brother's emotions. It had been good for us all.

Edward had forgiven Jasper for the incident at the party—offered him sincere forgiveness, beyond a shadow of a doubt. But of course, Edward was completely incapable of extending that same forgiveness to himself. No matter what any of us said, including Bella, he couldn't let go of the notion that he was personally and solely responsible for her danger. No amount of pleading from me could convince him to stay in Forks, and so I'd acceded to his will. The very moment that my mind had first formed the words *my son* to describe Edward, I'd promised myself that I would never force him to do anything. I had taken away any choice he might have about whether to live or die—I would never take another choice from him for the rest of time. He'd probed my thoughts, and I'd fervently imagined how utterly torn to pieces I would be if I ever left Esme. But the image of my brokenness hadn't stopped him—if anything, it had only strengthened his resolve. He was more than willing to suffer so that she wouldn't be subject to the dangers he perceived. And she was human, she would forget him.

At least, we both hoped to God she would. This was the last thing gnawing at me—Bella Swan was no vampire, despite her continued demands to join us. Yet her bond to Edward seemed every bit as irrevocable as his to her. I hoped it was not. I hoped that Bella would vent loudly to one of the girls from school, that they would draw Edward's face and throw darts at it (he unfortunately hadn't left her any photos to destroy for catharsis), that she'd listen to terrible melancholy pop music and cry for hours and then finally, angrily, decide her life was better off without Edward Cullen.

But I couldn't ignore my suspicion that across the country I had my mirror in Charlie Swan: that he, too, was watching his child live each day in agony, powerless to do anything to help.

I was still considering all of this when I rounded the corner into the surgical waiting area. I had nearly forgotten how young my patient was, but as I saw his family, I felt a stabbing pain in my gut. His parents were young—maybe in their late forties. I pulled up the memory of his chart in my mind, visualizing myself flipping the page, getting the boy's statistics. Justin Moeller, 22



years old. He'd laid down a motorcycle at seventy miles per hour, shredding his body and sustaining third-degree burns from the bike's exhaust system. We couldn't stop the hemorrhaging; he'd bled out under my hands.

The woman looked up as I approached. Her eyes were already bloodshot from crying. I could almost see her appraising my clean appearance, my white coat over my scrubs. I watched her register the fact that I was clearly not returning to the operating room. Her lower lip quivered, and then her mouth yawed wide as she began to wail. Her husband took her in his arms and looked up to me to confirm his wife's reaction.

I nodded. "I am so sorry," I said quietly. "We did everything for Justin that we could. I am so very sorry."

It would be a lie to say that saying these words didn't affect me; how could they not, when what I strove for more than anything was to atone for the sins of my kind through this work that I was called to do? But I was always careful to insulate myself from the pain of my patients' families. I didn't have to worry about Edward falling off a motorcycle. My children were all but indestructible. And yet somehow, in the wet eyes of Justin Moeller's father, I saw the reflection of my own grief, and the thing pulling inside me finally snapped. It frightened me. My son could not die. What on earth was I channeling that made me feel that I had something in common with this man?

The boy's mother looked at me. "Can we see him?"

I nodded. "One of the assisting doctors will be out in just a moment and they will take you to him. In the meantime, may I send a counselor to you?" Like most of the hospitals now, CMC had a full cohort of grief specialists, who were supposed to be called upon by the doctors.

This remark just made the woman cry harder, but her husband nodded, mouthing *Thank you*. I nodded.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

The woman shook her head, but the man caught me with a hard gaze.

"Do you have children, Dr.—"

"Cullen," I supplied. "Carlisle Cullen. And yes, I do." How did he know what I was thinking?

He shook his head, his eyes flooding over. “Take care of them,” he said, his voice shaking. “Just—take care of them.” His composure broke, and it took everything I had not to break down there with him. Instead, I merely nodded, swallowing deeply.

“I am sorry,” I whispered again. He nodded.

My feet felt strangely unsteady as I moved toward the nurses’ station and away from my patient’s family. I requested the grief counselor, and the nurse, one whose name I did not know, called the psychiatric floor after trying to give me the most seductive look she could manage. Disgusted at being hit on when I was so worried about my family, I made a deliberate show of the splayed fingers on my left hand as I thanked her. I could depend on my wedding ring to stop those few that didn’t pay attention to their gut reaction to the unnaturalness of my being. Sure enough, the nurse looked the other way.

Stealing one last glance at the family in the waiting room, I crossed the hallway to the back stairwell. My office was upstairs. As I crossed the hall I listened for anyone who might be coming my way—the din of a modern hospital was incredible. I heard the squeaks of dozens of non-slip nurses’ shoes across the linoleum tiles. The creak of the doors separating wards from each others. Conversations overlapping each other, whispered, spoken, shouted. A doctor in one of the operating theaters, asking for a scalpel. I could zero in on any of these to distract myself, but I found I couldn’t get my mind to focus. Seeing the utter torture in the eyes of my patient’s parents had unhinged something within me, and I could only think on one thing: I had to know how Edward was. Now.

Ascending the stairs at a human’s pace was agonizing, but I never knew when someone might burst into the stairwell. My office was, as usual, dark—the hospital had chosen red and grey for its colors, and so my office was decorated in a dark charcoal and burgundy that made it foreboding. Esme had softened the décor a little by adding several lamps (this was also to offset the shades which were drawn on every sunny day), and I complemented her work by hanging two large black-and-white sketches from my collection. They thankfully were never recognized for what they were, as Aro had acquired them directly from da Vinci well before the man’s work was recognized for the genius it was. Aro was quite fond of me even though he found my lifestyle perplexing, and he had sent the art to my home in Massachusetts about forty years after I had come to the New World. It was a much appreciated gift, and I’d always kept them nearby—they had hung in my bedroom in Forks.

I closed the door and in the same instant was across the room at my desk, listening to the sound of the telephone as I waited for my wife to pick up. She reached the phone in our house halfway through its first ring.

“Alice said you’d be calling.” No hello. I didn’t care.

“And?” I didn’t need to say anything else. Alice would have seen everything—my patient’s death, my conversation with his father, my reason for calling Esme. But Alice or no, nothing could have prepared me for the heartrending plea of her response:

“Carlisle, he needs you. Please come home.”

## Chapter 2: Because Moving Hurts

We'd never lived in Ithaca. New York State, yes, on two other occasions. There had been Rochester, when Carlisle had stupidly rescued the town darling, hoping that Rosalie Hale would become my Esme. That had not turned out all well; although even I had to admit that our family would be less than complete without Rose and Emmett. Then after the last time we'd left the Olympic Peninsula, we had moved to Oneida Lake, just outside of Syracuse. That had been our most beautiful house by far—it was three stories tall and Esme had spent weeks tearing out the walls of the house and replacing huge sections with glass, until we had a fully unobstructed view across the lake. I could leap from my bedroom into the water—a glorious, forty-foot dive that was absolutely exhilarating.

The house here was gorgeous and old—Esme's favorite kind to work with. It was on the national register of historic buildings, having been built around the time Carlisle was born. Yet it had been unoccupied when we'd arrived, and no one was taking care of it. Esme had fallen in love, and Carlisle had gone to the negotiating table with his checkbook open. He felt bad for making her move. That, and he would do anything for her.

Well, almost anything.

The afternoon after Bella's party, while she had been at work, I had met my father in his study and told him firmly that our family had to leave. He'd looked up at me with an expression of defeat. *I thought that this might be your reaction.*

"Do you have *any* idea what that will do to Bella?" he whispered, standing up from his desk and approaching me cautiously.

Did he really think I was so stupid as to have not considered that? "She's human. Her memory is like a sieve. She'll get over me, just like every other heartbroken teenage girl." The words tore at me. Bella was *nothing* like other teenage girls. That I'd even made the comparison was insulting to us both. I knew I would hurt her. And she would stay hurt for a long time; I had

no doubts about that. But she was undeniably human—wasn't that the point of keeping her away from us to begin with?—and she would eventually get over me. Especially if I never, ever, set foot in her life again, which was exactly what I had in mind.

Carlisle's gaze was hard. Just to be on the safe side we'd all hunted before Bella's party, but his eyes, while golden, were absolutely on fire. *I'm not that worried about Bella*, he conceded. He agreed with me that she would probably recover, eventually. *Edward, you are my son. I can't bear to see what you'll be like without her.*

I swallowed, but met his eyes. "I'll be fine."

My father's brow furrowed. "I don't believe that." He straightened and put his hands on my shoulders, but I flinched away, glancing up at him quickly to see the shock and immediate worry I heard in his thoughts flash across his face.

"If your presence was putting Esme in danger..."

*I can't realistically consider that.*

"But you *would* leave her."

His face twisted, his eyes filling with pain. From his mind I plucked his image of himself, sitting alone in his study, his head in his hands, with a medical book open before him that couldn't hold his attention. I could see that he was tortured by despair so deep that it had rendered everything else in his life meaningless. He'd quit his job. He'd been locked in the study for days. Everything about him, or rather, about his projection of himself, absolutely exuded misery. I understood immediately and felt my fury begin to burn.

My voice came out unexpectedly low, almost a growl. "You wouldn't leave her," I said in disbelief. "Even if she was in danger." I could feel the rage starting to boil. I had expected Carlisle, my selfless, giving father, to understand. He would give his immortal life for Esme in an instant. How could he not choose as I was choosing? "Even if you were the reason she was in danger!"

*Your presence—our presence—is not putting Bella in danger.* His mind darted quickly to James, and then to the burning dance studio. *In fact, you might be putting her in more danger without us...*

"Did you *miss* the part where Jasper almost killed her?" I hissed.

His memory flashed before me: Jasper lunging at Bella; me, leaping between them to knock my brother off his trajectory and simultaneously throwing Bella backwards into the pile of

plates. If I hadn't seen Jasper's intention a second before he attacked, I'd never have stopped him in time. In Carlisle's mind, I heard the snap of Jasper's teeth at my shoulder, saw the bloom of Bella's blood as it began to soak the floor, and watched myself crouch low in front of Bella, growling at my family, until Emmett had Jasper properly restrained.

"I don't miss things, Edward," Carlisle said evenly.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Then you know we have to go."

Carlisle drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. It was a habit of his, picked up during almost four centuries of perfecting his human charade. The mask was effortless for him now; I envied him that. "Why don't you think this over," he'd said gently. "I'm not saying no. But please don't do this to her based on half a day's consideration. Go over to Bella's. Spend the night. If you still feel this way tomorrow morning, we'll leave with you."

I hated to disobey Carlisle, but I did so that night when I told Bella I wouldn't stay. I spent the night running at full speed through the forest, finally choosing at nearly two AM to run up Mount Olympus. I took out a black bear that I accidentally startled out of her sleep on my way to the top, my feet finding purchase on the glaciers where her paws did not. But feeding gave me no solace. Finally standing on the summit beneath the brilliance of the Milky Way, I could see all the way to Seattle. Bella and I had never made our trip there, and we never would. For as the wind whipped past me on the frozen mountain, I made up my mind. I would be stronger than my father. I would endure whatever pain I had to in order to keep Bella safe.

~|+|~

If being trapped as a monster for all eternity wasn't hell, then being trapped as a monster with *parents* certainly had to qualify. It didn't help that the Ithaca house was much smaller than the one in Forks; there were only three bedrooms plus Carlisle's study. When Emmett and Rosalie returned from their latest honeymoon, Carlisle and Esme planned to buy a second house for them. Maybe I could move there.

Somewhere, deep down, I knew my parents were trying to help. I could hear the worry in their thoughts, although they tried valiantly to keep it from me. But I really just wanted to be left alone and they weren't having it. Esme's favorite game was to have me serve as her personal scaffolding and hold her up while she refurbished the crown moldings and the ceiling embellishments throughout the house. Her line of thinking seemed to be that if she could

somehow keep me busy enough, I wouldn't think of Forks and Bella and the life that I had summarily tossed in a dumpster. As though distraction was going to work for a vampire!

Carlisle's tactics were very different. While he was at home he didn't try to engage me in conversation, or ask me to help him, or do anything overt. But it had only taken me a few hours to notice that he kept eerily showing up wherever I was. If I was sitting on the couch in the living room, he would appear in one of the chairs. If I went to his study, he would suddenly and inexplicably need to read a book from his collection. The only respite I had was my bedroom, and even when I was in there either he or Esme seemed to find reason to walk past my door periodically. So I had taken to seeking out spaces where we couldn't both fit.

The house, by virtue of its age, had many dark corners. My favorite was the turn of the main stair—the staircase made an almost 90-degree shift halfway up, leaving a corner shrouded in shadows no matter how desperately Esme tried to light it (and she tried relentlessly, especially after I claimed the spot). I sat there a lot, wedged between the radiator and the wall, contemplating the deep pain gnawing at my chest. It was as though someone had taken a knife and sawed out a chunk of me, throwing it where I would never find it. I spent hours crouched against the staircase, willing the pain to either consume me or to go away. It did neither, instead licking at me like a flame that refused to reduce me to cinder, preferring to keep me smoldering slowly to maximize its effect.

*Bella. Bella. Bella,* chanted my mind as I laid my cheek against the radiator. My heroic effort at normalcy was fading fast; I could no longer stop myself from thinking her name. At first I'd been able to stand being with my family, and I'd even gone hunting in the White Mountains with my brothers two weeks after we'd arrived. It had at first been almost normal, almost joyous watching them hunt. Emmett with his usual lack of decorum, playing with the bear he found. Jasper was quicker, more precise, but still gleeful as he bounded after his prey. I had killed two bobcats and a moose in quick succession, and then sat on a rock to watch my brothers hunt.

I had never felt more separate from them. They were good about it; they said nothing to me about the move, or about the circumstances that had led to it. Jasper even avoided trying to alter my mental state, though I knew my pain was hurting him immensely. When we'd first arrived in Ithaca, I had felt calm in his presence for exactly thirty seconds before I asked him to please leave me be. He had done so, even though I could hear in his thoughts that he hated to leave me in such a state.

My sisters were a different story. Rosalie looked on me with pity, yes, but also with an air of self-satisfaction. She had never given up thinking that my relationship with Bella was bad for us both, and she was delighted to see me do something so rational in leaving her. She thought that our departure would bring her family back together the way she had liked it. Her quiet, inward gloating had been uncomfortable to take for the two weeks before she and Emmett left for Europe.

Alice wasn't angry with me per se, and she would never show anything other than sororal affection for me in my current state. Nevertheless, I knew she was hurt by having to leave Bella without so much as a goodbye and worried about the swath of despair in which I had left her best friend. This had come to a head when I asked her to go shopping for me—my clothes were absolutely saturated with Bella's scent, and there was no laundry detergent that would rid them of the smell thoroughly enough for the nose of a vampire. She shocked me with her polite refusal, telling me aloud that she thought it might be good for me to keep them. But I had plucked the angrier thought behind her words from her mind: *You made this bed, Edward, and you might just have to lie in it.*

I burned my entire wardrobe in a bonfire behind the house.

Thus I sat, crouched in the darkness under the stairs like the demon I was, dressed in a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt that I had taken from my father's closet. My resistance was wearing away with every passing second. A month ago, it had been much more bearable. My thoughts of Bella had been abstract, unfocused. I'd been able to think of her smile, convince myself that she was happier without me, or at least that she would be. I had been able to imagine her with the friends from Forks High: Jessica and Angela taking her shopping for dance dresses; Mike and Tyler overjoyed that freaky Edward Cullen had finally let go of his hold. But as the days wore on, I had spiraled into more and more specifics—the perfect beauty of her face in sleep, the first time we had kissed, her unfailing and undeserved trust in me. And worse thoughts still: her face, looking up at me that night in the woods, the last word I'd heard in my love's voice: *Wait!*

It was agony. The gap within me yawed wide and I felt dizzy with pain, accidentally allowing a moan to slip from my lips. Mistake. Esme appeared in the split second it took me to stifle the sound, her face twisted with concern. She knelt beside me, her hands cupping my face.



“Edward,” she murmured. “Edward, please talk to me.” *I don’t know what to do anymore. I can’t stand this any longer. Edward, please, please say something. Maybe I should get Carlisle...*

Oh, no. The last thing I needed was an in-person reminder of how much I was letting down my father. I pulled away, at the same time registering the shock and hurt that welled from my mother’s mind. I knew she wanted me to be happy. I knew that I was hurting her. I felt sick. Was there anyone I cared about that I *wasn’t* making absolutely miserable right now?

As if to answer my question, Jasper and Alice appeared on the stairwell. Jasper’s expression, too, was straining with my despair. This was absurd.

I did the only thing I could do: I banished myself to my room. Brushing past first Esme, who let out a little sigh of sadness, and then Jasper and Alice, I achieved my new couch in an instant. It was black leather, like the one I’d had in Forks. I lay down on my side and curled up as small as I could manage. The gap inside me slashed itself further open, a monster delighted that I was finally giving in.

Bella swam in my mind; not happy Bella, not the Bella that I could force myself to conjure a month ago. Bella on that awful afternoon, in the woods behind her house. For once I had been glad that she was the exception to my gift. Her anguish was written on her face, and that alone was torture enough.

Her hesitating, stammering voice: *You don’t want me?*

And my own response: *No.*

As though there had ever been anything that anyone, ever in the history of all time had wanted more. I wanted her so badly that I could hardly manage to keep upright knowing that she was out there and not with me. What a liar I was. What a monster I was. Her face then was burned into my memory; I saw it every time I closed my eyes. Her shock, her dismay—and my own hurt at realizing that she *believed* me. How could she have believed me? Thousands of times I had told her she was the very center of my universe and still she believed me?

I clutched at the couch with one hand, my fingernails slicing deep lines in the leather. “Bella, I was *lying*,” I whispered to the darkness, becoming still as I allowed the pain to take me victim.

## Chapter 3: Paternity

Esme met me at the door. Walking to my car at a human's pace had been excruciating; so, too, had been driving through town. Forks had been so nice with its remote roads—now it took me twenty minutes to get clear of the city before I could comfortably floor the accelerator. Not that I was actually in danger of hitting anyone, but the car was sure to be noticed. So I'd driven home slowly, my panic rising with every second that passed.

I took my wife into my arms, kissing her face. Her usually gentle countenance was marred by worry, making my stomach turn. It was horrible of me to leave her all night alone with Edward's misery. I knew how it pained her not to be able to do anything that seemed to help him. Our son, this beautiful young man we both loved—he was wasting away before us, and Esme had no break from his pain.

"How is he?" I murmured, not releasing my grasp.

Esme shook her head sadly and I felt my body tense.

"He's gotten worse," she said. I must have looked surprised at her volume, because she shrugged and added, "He knows exactly how we're feeling—there's no reason to speak quietly." I caught her meaning immediately—he knew how we were feeling and yet did nothing. It was wholly unlike Edward not to try to placate us with at least some semblance of normal behavior.

"What do you mean by worse?"

She gestured to the stairs. "He's in his room. Go see."

I climbed the stairs with trepidation and at a human's pace. Edward had spoken to us only a handful of times in the month we'd been in Ithaca so far. Emmett and Jasper had managed to get him out hunting once, a couple of weeks earlier, before Emmett and Rosalie left for Europe. The rest of the time he spent cowering in the corners of the house, curled up into a ball. When he moved, he went so silently through the house it was as though he were a ghost. The piano—a beautiful baby grand I'd had delivered the day we'd closed on the house—sat silent; the boxes of music were still sealed beside it. Even Edward's vast audio collection had gone to no use, as far as I could tell. Could there exist a gradient for this level of sorrow?

I entered Edward's unlit bedroom. A human would have had trouble making out his shape on the couch, dressed as he was in a black hooded sweatshirt and dark jeans. The hood of the sweatshirt was pulled up over his hair, and he lay on his side in the fetal position with his hands jammed into the front pocket of his sweatshirt. He wasn't breathing; his eyes did not move. He was behaving, for all intents and purposes, like the dead man he believed himself to be.

Esme was right. This was worse.

"Edward," I called softly, but he made no acknowledgement of my presence. "Edward. Edward, son, please." With each word I took a step toward him, landing finally on my knees before him. He did not look at me—his pitch-black eyes stared blankly forward, unfocused.

I choked on my incoming breath, and reached forward to him. Gently, I pushed the hood down from his head, expecting him to grumble and replace it. He did nothing. I ran a hand through his thick hair—again, nothing. As far as I could tell, he hadn't moved at all. I continued stroking his hair, feeling each strand race its way through my fingers.

My relationship with my son did not very often manifest itself physically, and when it did, it was usually in the form of a pat on the back or a hand on his shoulder. Even embraces were rare—with his gift, much love was expressed between us without anything overt on either of our parts. But seeing Edward lie there, his face frozen, his body unmoving—I couldn't bear it. And so, before I even really knew what I was doing, I did something I'd not done since that night in Chicago so long ago: I picked him up.

Hooking one arm under his knees and the other under his shoulders, I lifted Edward to my chest. We were the same height, and I could gauge he was just shy of my weight. Yet he might as well have been an infant, so natural it felt for me to be cradling him. I sat out of habit, and Edward sank into my chest, shifting his position so that his head lay on my shoulder. The action brought back that moment, eighty-seven years ago, when I last had held in my arms this young man who would become my beloved son. He had been so light in my arms as we raced together over the rooftops, I would barely have registered his presence if it hadn't been for the unnatural heat of his raging fever as he lay against me.

The flat I'd lived in then was on Michigan, in a sixth-story walk-up, three miles from the hospital. I'd lived sparsely then—my home was little more than repository for my books, with one wall given over to the modest art collection I'd built, and a small bed that I'd bought in case a neighbor ever happened to peer in. It was there that I laid Edward as I recreated the injuries I'd

sustained in the attack that should have ended my life centuries before. Even now I felt the need to pull him close out of contrition for the unnecessary pain I'd caused him then. Now I knew better—by the time I'd turned Emmett I'd figured out the physiology of it all. Edward's turning took considerably longer than my own because my inexperienced administration of my venom meant it took a long time to reach and strengthen his influenza-ravaged heart. We spent four days there in that bed, my arms tight around his strengthening torso as he thrashed in pain. I stroked his hair and told him about the only thing I could think of—my life, my offer of a pitiful explanation for why he was going through this.

Unbeknownst to me, the venom had reached his brain in fewer than twelve hours, and so he had quickly become privy not only to the words I was speaking, but also to the internal monologue that ran parallel to the story I told him. I unintentionally laid myself bare to Edward as he was being changed, revealing to him my deepest emotions: the crushing pain of my loneliness, my terror that he would despise me for his entire existence, my fervent hope that he might someday know me as a companion, perhaps even as family.

By the time he awoke, Edward knew me better than I did. And then he quietly stepped in to fill the void he saw in my still heart.

So to stand by him now, in the depths of his hurt, was the least I could do to repay him for eighty-seven years of each day of my life being better than the last. I had no idea how much he was allowing himself to perceive, but I filled my thoughts with my happiest memories of my years with him just in case. Private conversations, hunting together, sitting beside him on the piano bench while he composed, him at my side as I bound myself to Esme in marriage. The unmitigated joy I'd felt receiving Alice's revelation, shortly after Edward had returned from Denali, that he had found his mate.

Paternal love was a strange animal. Romantic love was simple, or at least it was for a vampire. One moment I had looked at Esme and found that my entire being was flushed with an undying and immutable love. Eighty-four years later, it was still like that every time I laid eyes on her, even if I'd looked away for only a fraction of a second. My love for Edward was completely different, intermingled with a whole host of feelings: regret, pride, worry, admiration, fear. Esme was no more capable of hurting me than I was her. But Edward—it was possible for him to stalk out the door carrying the chunk of my heart he'd claimed as his. He'd done that to me once before. Now he'd done it to Bella.

I understood, at least on one level, where Edward was coming from. He *was* a great danger to Bella; even I couldn't disagree with that. Alice had made that clear to all of us. But on the other hand, if he did hurt her, he would irreparably damage himself in the process. I felt this was protection enough for Bella. She had a greater danger from others of our kind than she did from us, and she deserved our protection. And moreover, I had faith in my son. He was far stronger than he gave himself credit for—wasn't the very fact that we were three thousand miles from his mate proof enough of that?

My arms began to vibrate and I realized that Edward, hearing my thoughts, had begun to growl quietly. I shifted thoughts back to him, running my hand once more through his hair. Well, that was good; at least I was generating some semblance of a response from him.

"I'm sorry, son," I whispered. "Just because I disagree doesn't mean I don't support you wholeheartedly. I will try to think about something else."

He growled again, but this time it was quieter. I continued to stroke his hair. I didn't know yet if Edward had indeed made the right choice. That would have to play itself out. But I was nevertheless floored by my son's resolve. He was so strong. We had all discounted his worry for Bella as overprotection, as his usual tendency toward pessimism and theatrics. But his decision to move away from her, despite whatever pain it might mean for him, proved us all wrong.

A scent from the doorway caught my attention, and I looked up. Esme was standing in a rectangle of cool moonlight, her concerned expression haunting and yet perfectly beautiful at once. She smiled sadly as she took in the sight of me with Edward in my arms. Esme got away with far more physical affection with our children than I; there had been many an afternoon when I had found Edward at the piano with Esme behind him, caressing his hair or rubbing his shoulder. She was pleased to see me in such a loving embrace with our son.

I raised my eyebrows at her, and she understood.

"I heard him growling," she explained in a whisper.

Ah. It was no wonder she looked anxious. Esme lived in a constant and misplaced fear that at some point her family members might literally tear each other apart. Whenever Emmett and Jasper got going in a wrestling match, she would inevitably put a stop to it out of her concern for their personal safety. I found her worry endearing; our sons largely found it annoying.

“We’re fine,” I answered her, pulling Edward a little closer. “He’s okay.” He may not be pleased that I didn’t agree with his course of action, but he certainly wasn’t going to attack. I wasn’t entirely sure he *could* attack in this state. That was something I would have to think about. Edward hadn’t hunted in several weeks, and now it seemed it might prove difficult to get him to perform the actions necessary to feed himself. Perhaps I could kill for him, and then let him drink—we would have to see.

Esme nodded, appraising Edward’s utter lack of movement. She then mouthed to me, *We need to talk*. Her golden eyes were sad. In the time it took me to nod and shift my gaze back to Edward, she was back downstairs.

I stood again, keeping our son in my arms, and crossed the hallway to my own bedroom. Esme always insisted on dressing our bed in the most luxurious linens she could lay hands on that were in keeping with the character of the house. I never failed to indulge her, although frankly it made no difference to either of us—we could just as soon be intimate on a bed of nails.

Today, though, I was thankful for the softness as I pulled back the down comforter and laid Edward between the silken sheets. He gave me a brief surprised look, and I smiled. At least there was a little acknowledgement. I pulled the covers up to his shoulders and replaced the hood of his sweatshirt on his head. “I’m going downstairs for a bit,” I whispered to him, “but I will be back to check on you.” I briefly rubbed his back and he grumbled something that sounded like *overprotective*.

I smiled. If he was all the way back to criticizing me, things were looking up. “Yes,” I replied coolly. “Like father, like son.”

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Esme paced the length of the living room before me as I sat cross-legged in the middle of a paint-spattered canvas drop cloth. It made me tense to see her this worried. She so far had said nothing; I would have to draw her in.

“The sitting room is looking terrific,” I said, and I meant it. She was in the process of making it look exactly as it must have in the 1640s when it had been built. There lay a thin layer of plaster dust over the cans of paint stripper and the stepladders, the result of tearing down the false ceiling that had been imposed over the original beam work some two hundred years earlier. Now she was carefully stripping the paint from the beams, intending to use some replication stain that she had ordered from a museum supply to restore their original color.

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My comment had its precise intended effect. Esme dropped to the floor beside me, laying her head on my shoulder.

“Carlisle, I don’t know what to do about him anymore,” she murmured.

I sighed, putting my arm around her. “Nor do I.” I could sit and hold him every day; there was no problem with that. I would quit my job if necessary. But I just wasn’t sure it would actually help.

Esme sat silent beside me for several more minutes. When she finally spoke, it was in a voice so low only a vampire could possibly have heard it. “I’m ashamed of what I thought today,” she said. “He was sitting by the radiator in the hallway—you know, that spot he keeps going to—and he wasn’t moving. It was before Alice and Jasper went down to the university, so all three of us were here with him.” She drew a shaky breath. “He’s *killing* Jasper, Carlisle. You should have seen him there.”

I closed my eyes briefly. I knew this. It was hard to miss that Jasper did everything he could to avoid his brother these days. Edward had asked Jasper not to alter his mood and Jasper, ever the Southern gentleman, had agreed. But of course that put Jasper squarely in the force of Edward’s despair. “Is *that* why they aren’t here.”

My wife nodded. “Alice wanted to do some research, and Jasper thought he’d read up on Kant.”

“I thought he was reading Aristotle?” Most improbably, Jasper had decided to take up the study of ethics while we were living within reach of such a great university. I wondered what he drew from the texts after his century of warring. Studies of virtue must speak in a very different way to him than they did to me. He seemed to be enjoying his studies, however. I made a mental note to spend some time talking to Jasper about his readings; philosophy was a subject I enjoyed almost as much as medicine.

“You’re trying to change the subject,” Esme said. “You know better than I how Kant and Aristotle fit together.”

She was nothing if not sharp. “I’m sorry. So the three of you were here, and Edward was in the hallway.”

“He started moaning, and I tried to hold him—that’s why I was so happy to see you with him; I thought he might never let us touch him again—and Jasper and Alice came downstairs.

Edward just blew us all off and went up to his room.” She gestured to me. “Then he got into the state you found him in.

“Alice told me you would call and you would come home when I asked you to. And that you’d get him to come back around a little. But—” she cut herself off, as though she couldn’t think to say the next few words.

“What?” I probed quietly.

She shook her head sadly, leaning into me with more force. “Carlisle, what would happen if we suggested...that he leave?”

I felt as though I’d taken a blow to the gut. I had been gone a lot since we’d arrived here, between working nights and the Epidemiology seminar that I’d been roped into teaching at Cornell. I had been negligent, grossly negligent, in caring for my family. Seven months ago, when Edward had suddenly disappeared to Denali for only a few days, my wife had been beside herself. For Esme to even reach the point where such a thing had crossed her mind—I felt terrible for putting her in a position whereby she had been caused that much pain.

Yet even as I registered my incredible sadness and guilt, another emotion crashed over me. I had just spent nearly an hour cradling my son, wracking my brain for any solution to his unending grief. Esme was my mate, my soul, my heart. My love for her was undying. But it had been Edward who was first responsible for permanently ending my own sadness almost a century ago. If it weren’t for him, there would be no Esme, and I certainly would never have been in any shape to love. I was bound to him. I promised him that I would help, that I would support him in this, whatever he decided. I would not go back on that word. I could no more ask him to leave than I could tear myself to pieces.

My feet were beneath me before the idea to stand occurred in my mind, and an unforgivable growl ripped from my throat. I realized in an instant that I had jumped into a crouch, ready to spring, and Esme, despite her perfect, beautiful human nature, had instinctively mirrored my action. Her expression was a mixture of confusion and fear, and it was the panic in her eyes that swiftly brought reality crashing back down upon me.

Oh, my God. Had I really just prepared to attack my *wife*?

Collecting myself, I stood straighter. “Esme, my love, I’m sorry,” I said immediately. “You caught me off-guard.”



She straightened more warily, appraising me cautiously. “I thought this might be your reaction,” she said slowly.

Of course it would be my reaction. “We’re not—” I paused, swallowing. “I *promised* him. He’s my son. My oldest son.”

“And our youngest,” she added, quietly. “But he’s not our only child. We have five. Nearly six. We have to think about them all.”

Six. I frowned. Esme had mated Edward off the moment Alice had her vision, and the last several months had been the happiest of her existence, seeing Edward so unguarded. But to consider Bella as our child—that was a place I simply couldn’t handle allowing my mind to go at the moment. If I had to worry about Bella as well...God only knew what she was going through right now. I couldn’t bear to think about it.

“We shall not ask him to go.”

Esme’s response was immediate. “Then we should go back to Forks.” Aha. I recognized her preferred solution at once. She thought we should take Edward back to Bella and reunite him with her missing daughter. All would be solved.

I shook my head. “This is Edward’s choice.” I had spoken my piece; he had made his decision. I wasn’t going back on my word.

My wife rolled her eyes. “For heaven’s sake, Carlisle! Edward all but invented the concept of the overreaction! And he’s in love! Don’t you think that his decision-making abilities might be a little clouded?”

I opened my mouth but found I had nothing to say. She was right. Hadn’t I just been doubting Edward’s decision a few hours earlier? Unable to argue, I stupidly dug in my heels.

“He will *not* leave this home,” I said firmly.

“Oh, yes I will,” a voice growled.

We both whirled. Edward stood at the foot of the stair, looking monstrous. The hood of the sweatshirt cast his face into shadow, and his black eyes shone in the early morning light as they darted back and forth between us as he breathed, his nostrils flaring. For a split second it was I who briefly wondered if our son might attack.

Before either of us had time to fully form a coherent thought, however, he shot past us and out into the dawn.

## Chapter 4: The One Option Left

Fighting. Carlisle and Esme were *fighting*. I had seen them disagree before, but never like this. It had been Carlisle's growl that drew me downstairs; I knew the three of us were alone and I was worried that perhaps there was an intruder. I never would have imagined that I'd find him ready to attack *Esme*. He'd recovered himself with his usual speed, but that didn't change the fact that he'd been prepared.

How could I have done that to my father? Or rather more importantly, how could I have done that to my *mother*? Too lost in my own misery, I had not heard what incited the near-altercation that I'd witnessed. But based on the ensuing conversation, I had deduced that Carlisle's ferocious reaction had its roots in Emse's suggestion that I leave.

Esme wanted nothing more than to keep our family intact—even Emmett and Rosalie traveling was only acceptable to her because it was a necessary element of the charade that her children were growing older. I *knew*; I had heard in her mind how much my withdrawal from the rest of the family was causing her pain. But clearly I had grossly underestimated its degree.

I wouldn't be winning any "son of the year" awards; that was for sure.

My feet slowed beneath me. Light was breaking through the woods maybe two miles ahead—there was some huge opening in the forest. The faint rays bounced wildly, and it took me a moment to recognize that the sun was bouncing off a large plane of water—I'd run all the way to the shore of Cayuga Lake. I stopped myself, coming to complete stillness in the dark. There might be people on the lake; early-morning fishermen, or tourists. Better not to risk being seen in the sun. The last thing I needed to do was to force my family to relocate again; I had no doubt that given the opportunity, Esme would march everyone straight back to Washington.

Leaning against a tree, I turned my thoughts to what to do. My presence was causing pain for everyone around me; there was no denying that. Even Carlisle this morning had taken me by surprise—the force of his emotion was so unexpected that I had at first not recognized it for what it was. When I'd finally unearthed the pain that lay beneath his love and worry, I had been startled to realize that my father was grieving for me.

Was this what I was doomed to? Hurting Bella, hurting Carlisle and Esme, hurting Jasper?

A roar of frustration slipped past my lips, and I uprooted a small fir tree with one hand, throwing it like a javelin through the forest. The sound reverberated as it struck a much larger tree, which snapped in two with a satisfying crash.

“Was that really necessary, Edward?” a bell-like voice called from above me.

I snapped my head upward just in time to see Alice spring from the branch thirty feet above, where she clearly had been waiting for me. I had been too lost in my own thoughts to hear any of hers. She landed delicately before me, a faint smile playing on her lips.

“How long have you been here,” I grumbled.

“Since right after I told Esme that Carlisle was going to call.” She stepped around me cautiously. *You look awful.*

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks.”

Alice tilted her head. *What Esme said hurt you. I thought it might.*

Hurt me? “I didn’t even hear her ask,” I admitted. “I only figured it out from the rest of their—conversation.”

She caught the word I’d stumbled on. *You saw them fight.* Her concerned look bore into me.

I shook my head. If they had been any other set of people, what I’d witnessed would barely deserve the word. Carlisle hadn’t once raised his voice; Esme had just barely done so. But I’d never seen them so completely at odds. Even when they were having what might be termed an argument, they could never keep their hands off each other. It was weird, actually—they’d be having some heated disagreement while holding hands and looking soulfully into each other’s eyes. Yet that was the norm in our home, and that was what I was used to. So to come down the stairs to find them squaring off at each other in the living room was beyond disquieting.

“All I really caught,” I answered, “was Carlisle telling Esme that he wouldn’t ask me to leave.”

Alice cocked her head. *Carlisle can be so stupid when it comes to you.*

“So you’re with Esme on this one.” I rolled my eyes. I started to walk away, but her hand caught me.

“No, Edward. What I mean is, sometimes he lets what’s best for him color his decisions about what’s best for you. You know that. He can’t bear to see you go.”

“But you think I should leave.”

*I think you should do whatever is best for Bella.* Her mind flickered to the same image that it had shown me for the better part of a year, now—her arms around Bella, Bella’s around her, both sets pale white and granite-hard. Bella’s eyes were a deep crimson...

“No!” I cried, pushing Alice away. “That is *not* what I want.”

*Calm down.* “I know that’s not what you want. I’m not showing it to you because I think that it’s what you should do.” *This vision hasn’t changed. Nothing you’ve done so far has had an effect.* My sister’s eyes were full of concern for me.

“So—it’s still going to happen.”

“As of right now, yes.” Alice laid a hand on my shoulder. “If you want to change it, you’re going to have to work harder.” *Your being here isn’t doing what you wanted it to do.*

I sank to the forest floor, putting my head in my hands. What was I missing? I couldn’t imagine turning Bella into a monster. The very thought made me want to tear myself apart. So who would do it? Another frustrated growl slipped from me; Alice didn’t flinch.

“How do I stop this?” I asked her.

She shook her head. *I haven’t got a clue.* She hopped to the ground next to me, putting an arm around my shoulder. “I miss her too.”

“But you want—you want her to be—”

“*Happy,*” my sister answered forcefully. “I want you both to be happy.” *She’s your Jasper. Only you waited even longer for her. I don’t care if she’s a vampire or not. But Edward, right now she’s not happy. And she’s not going to be.* An image of Bella, curled into a ball on the bed we’d both lain in for so many nights. She was asleep, but her slumber was fitful. And she wasn’t mumbling in her sleep, no, she was screaming...

“For God’s sake, STOP!” Her vision made the gash within me stretch even wider, and I involuntarily threw a hand across my midsection.

*I’m sorry!* Alice’s arms came around me. *I can’t help it...I don’t mean to hurt you.*

I answered through clenched teeth. “Then don’t look for her. I told you not to look for her!”

*I don’t mean to see her. But you made me look after her so closely for so long...I just can’t help it.*

“She’ll get over it.”

*Yeah. The way you're getting over it?*

Ouch. "Sarcasm doesn't become you, you know."

Alice rolled her eyes, but she moved her hands to my shoulders. "Look. I'm not going to tell you what to do. Or, really, I've already told you what to do, and you're not going to listen to me, so I'm just going to be here and support whatever else it is you decide to do. But if I were in your shoes—"

"You're *not*," I growled, and she held up a hand.

"If I were in your shoes, then I would do whatever I could to make sure that Jasper was safe and happy. That's what I'd do. That's all I'm saying, Edward." *I'm here for you whatever you do.* She stood and inhaled deeply. *Carlisle is about a mile away. I'll leave you two alone.*

"What?!"

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Edward, did you think he was just going to sit at home and twiddle his thumbs?"

I, too, inhaled. She was right; my father's scent was growing steadily stronger along the path that I had taken. From the scent—and the sound, as I could hear him now, too—it appeared he was running at top speed. Nevertheless, I could outrun him easily with this much of a head start.

Alice frowned as she saw my decision flicker in her mind. *Don't. Carlisle just wants to talk to you. He's not going to force you to stay.*

She was right, of course. Carlisle had never forced me to do anything, and I knew he wasn't about to start. At that moment Carlisle's mental voice broke through to me, repeating over and over, *Edward. Please don't run from me. Not yet.*

I sighed and nodded to Alice. She squeezed my shoulder and whispered, "I'm behind you, Edward. Whatever you decide to do." Then she leapt back into the trees and was gone.

Turning back toward my trail, I planted my feet and said, "I'm right here, Carlisle. I'm not going anywhere."

*Thank God.* A second later, my father was with me.

He looked disheveled, not at all his usual composed self. He was still dressed in his light-blue scrubs and was barefoot. Etched in the lines of his face was a deep worry that looked out of place for his impossibly youthful features. He stood back from me a moment, appraising me as though he were afraid to move forward and touch me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean to worry you." Would he realize that those words were meant to cover the entirety of the last month, and not just this morning?

Carlisle exhaled sharply and audibly. His eyes bore into my own, but he chose to keep the topic light. *Where's Alice?*

"She just left." I gestured to the trees. "Back to Jasper, I suppose."

He nodded, and cocked his head downwind. *We should hunt before you go.*

I tasted the air myself. There was a small herd of deer maybe two miles away. I nodded, and the two of us sprang off at a run.

If there was one thing I could always appreciate about Carlisle, it was that he never pushed a conversation. It was his nature to be quiet, patient and watchful. I had never appreciated my father's introspection more than I did now. We ran together in silence, his strides matching my own. His thoughts were a mess. Concern for Esme, who was back at the house blaming herself for my outburst. Worry that I was going to take off without telling them where I was going. Some strange man and woman in tears at the hospital; Carlisle's voice telling them that he had done all he could...

Oh. No wonder he was so distraught.

"I'm sorry, Carlisle," I whispered. "You didn't need this."

Even as fast as we ran, I caught the thoughtful expression that passed over his face. *Maybe I did*, came his answer. He flashed quickly back to preparing to fight Esme, then to holding me in my bedroom. Holding me had made him feel...happy? How strange. All I had perceived from him was pain and worry. But before I had time to ask him about this, we fell on the deer.

Carlisle's style of hunting always set me a little on edge. *Hunting* was actually the wrong word to describe it—he appeared, and his prey suddenly died. There was no chase; there was no fight, and there were certainly none of the long, playful battles that Emmett preferred. For Carlisle hunting was not at all enjoyable. It made him feel detached from his humanity, and so he liked to have the act over with as quickly as possible. And after three and a half centuries of practice, he killed with terrifying speed.

It was a *very* good thing that my father did not hunt humans.

He had methodically struck down all but a large buck by the time I even realized he had gotten started. I lit out after the buck; bounding away from Carlisle as he began to drink. It had

six points; a human hunter would have had his head on a trophy. Perhaps I would leave the carcass in case someone else wanted to take credit for the kill.

When I'd finished with the buck, I returned to Carlisle. He had drunk from only two of his kills; leaving the remaining three for me. This immediately recalled his earlier worry that I would not have strength enough to hunt.

Amusing. Carlisle was trying to feed me.

To humor him, I drank from a second and third deer, and then beckoned him to help finish the last. Both fully sated, we sat in the grass amid the carnage as the sun rose over the lake in the distance. Carlisle seemed intent on not speaking until I spoke to him; but his thoughts made him impossible to ignore.

*I want what's best for you*, he thought fiercely. *But I also don't want you to leave again.* His mind drifted back to the years I had abandoned him and Esme, filling his thoughts with anguish. I sighed. There was no winning this. No matter what I did, someone I loved was going to end up in terrible pain.

Carlisle caught my expression and knew its meaning immediately. *I'll survive*, he assured me. *But I will never stop missing you.* He lifted a hand, running it through my hair again as he had done a few hours before. His fingers on my scalp felt nice, and I unconsciously leaned into him, eliciting a contented sigh from him as he put his arm over my shoulders. *I love you more than you understand, Edward.*

My own mind shifted back to my first memory of him, when I had still been deep in the clutches of the venom fire. How tortured his thoughts had been then—he had spoken aloud to me of his life, of time in Italy, France, the United States, but behind it all was an excruciating loneliness which he did not voice. When I had awoken, and allowed him to embrace me and console me, our bond had been sealed. His happiness had been unadulterated; I was his rescue from two centuries of melancholy. His love for me, born out of that pain, had a desperate edge to it, and I knew that although I understood him better than anyone, I would never fully comprehend where he was coming from without having experienced that pain.

Although, I realized with a start, I had to be coming incredibly close with Bella. She had altered my world permanently and completely. I felt human and whole around her. I wasn't the same Edward that I'd known before. She was the light and life in my existence. I was not

Carlisle's mate, of course, and I had not changed him in *that* way, but perhaps I now understood better where he was coming from.

"Do you know where you'll go?" My father's voice startled me.

I shook my head. I'd figured I would probably strike out somewhere on my own; establish my own homestead. Perhaps I could return to Chicago.

*What about Denali?* This would, of course, be preferable to Carlisle. Having me with Tanya and her sisters would be the next best thing to my being with him. But I knew that I couldn't handle Tanya's wistful thoughts of being my mate right now. Plus, Laurent had moved to them when he left James' coven. And the last thing I needed was a reminder of James...

The realization was so powerful I shot to my feet. Carlisle was with me in an instant, his posture immediately defensive.

*What is it, Edward?*

"Victoria," I hissed, my voice dark. *If I were in your shoes, then I would do whatever I could to make sure that Jasper was safe and happy*, Alice had said. Wasn't this the key? Bella would remain in danger as long as James' mate ran free. That was what I had to do.

Carlisle looked understandably confused. *Victoria? James' mate? Here?*

"No," I answered, "She's not here. And she won't be. Nor will she be anywhere near Bella."

Comprehension dawned on my father's face and his posture relaxed. *You're going after her.*

I nodded, my mind already beginning to race. I knew next to nothing about tracking; obviously I would follow her scent, but how to continue from there, I didn't know. She and James had followed Bella to Phoenix based on her school records; no records would exist for Victoria. Maybe flight records? She would undoubtedly travel under an assumed name...

But she did have to hunt. That was a start. If she was being at all incautious, I could catch her trail from her victims. That was what I would have to do.

"I'm going to track her," I told Carlisle quietly.

And then I would destroy her.

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The house was silent when Carlisle and I arrived home, but I had heard Esme's panicked thoughts nearly a half mile away. She was berating herself for what she had suggested to Carlisle,

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blaming herself for my running away, worrying that Carlisle was angry with her, and then starting over with the berating.

I was a terrible person. How could I possibly apologize for putting someone as pure and gentle as Esme through this?

Carlisle shot me a questioning look as we entered the house, and I understood him at once.

“She’s a mess,” I whispered. “Go to her.” He disappeared before I finished speaking.

I watched through Esme’s eyes as Carlisle entered their bedroom. She was perched on the spot where I had lain only shortly before, running her fingers absently over the bedclothes. Carlisle took her into his arms, kissing her. She did not return the affection.

*“Is Edward angry?” she asked. I never should have said anything. I am his mother. How could a mother have thoughts like that? Unforgivable.*

Carlisle’s answer was gentle. *“He’s not angry. He just needed to think.” We put so much pressure on him; seeing as he can’t tune out our thoughts...*

There was a long pause. *Do I even ask, Esme thought. I don’t know that I want to know the answer...*

Her voice, when she mustered up the courage to ask, was too quiet for me to hear downstairs, but I heard in her thoughts that she had asked the question. *“Is he leaving?”*

Carlisle’s face twisted. *“Yes.”*

She wrenched away from Carlisle and began berating herself again. *What kind of mother throws out her child? What kind of wife hurts her husband like this? When did I turn into such a monster? “Carlisle, I didn’t mean to—”*

He laid a finger over her lips, and when she was quiet, he kissed her again. *“It’s his decision. He was coming to that conclusion on his own. You didn’t cause him to leave.” And I think—I hope—that being away will be good for him.* He rested his chin on top of Esme’s head. Watching them, seeing the incredible love that passed between them, made me realize how I could soothe my mother.

As I opened the keyboard of the brand-new piano, I was struck by the sameness of its smell. Although it was unquestionably new, the same scents swirled before me: the brass of the strings, resin of the keys, the polished wood of the body. The familiar scents were calming, and I

inhaled them deeply before I began. Placing my hands over the keys, I plunged into Esme's favorite piece, the tribute I had written to her and Carlisle.

The very first bars of the piece drew both of them downstairs in an instant. At first they stood back from me, and I could see myself in their eyes as I played. A moment later, though, I felt hands on my shoulders; one from each of them. Esme stroked my hair fondly.

*Thank you, Edward,* she thought, and I smiled. She understood.

On my other shoulder, however, Carlisle's hand began to tremble forcefully, causing my left hand to falter. He removed his hand, but I stopped playing anyway, twisting on the bench to get a good look at him. It wasn't just his hand that shook—Carlisle's whole body was quaking; the hand that had not been on my shoulder was balled into a fist at his mouth. Esme looked from him to me, her eyes filled with sadness. I rose to my feet, my arms meeting Esme's as we both put them around him.

Together Esme and I embraced Carlisle as he sobbed.

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Three hours later found all five of us at the train station in Syracuse. We had decided that it would be best if I traveled as humanly as possible for as long as possible; that way if Victoria somehow caught on that someone was after her, she might be confused about the identity of her hunter. The train would take me down to New York City, and then I would catch the first plane out to Washington, where I would begin my hunt. My parents and Alice and Jasper stood by, arms around each other, two perfectly matched couples. I gritted my teeth. To stand like that, with my love, was an impossibility for me now. But I could and I would make sure that Bella was safe.

The clock on the wall indicated that I had a little over fifteen minutes to board my train. I figured I had better start with Alice and Jasper—perhaps I could spare Esme and Carlisle a breakdown if I didn't say goodbye to them suddenly.

Jasper was the easiest, so I started with him. "Hey, listen, Jasper. I'm sorry it's been so hard," I began, but he cocked his head nonchalantly.

*You can't help it, Edward.*

"Nevertheless. I appreciate you putting up with me."

He nodded. *Take care. I'll be rooting for you.*

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I turned to my sister next. "Alice," I said quietly, taking her hands. "Thank you for earlier. I wouldn't have known what to do without you."

She squeezed my hands in hers. *Of course, Edward. Take care of yourself. And take care of Bella.*

"That's what I have in mind." I studied her face carefully, dropping my voice to something lower than the humans around us could eavesdrop. "Any changes?" I didn't want to inquire after the vision I hated so much, but I had to know.

Alice bit her lip, and then shook her head.

A cold rage flushed through me, but I managed to suppress it, packing it deep to draw on in the future. "Okay," I answered quietly. It just meant there was more to do. I would make that vision change. Taking a deep breath, I made one more request of my sister. "Can I ask you not to look for me?"

She nodded; she'd been expecting this. *I'll do my best.* Her mind flashed quickly to Bella, but she the image only flickered for a moment. *And if Bella...gets hurt?*

Realizing what she was asking, I felt my jaw clench. *Don't do anything reckless or stupid,* I'd asked Bella. My one condition. She loved me enough for that, right? She loved Charlie enough for that. I could trust her.

"Bella promised," I hissed. "Don't be looking for her future either." The last thing she needed was to be visited upon by our family again. Bella needed her life; her glorious, soul-filled human life. She didn't need to have to rip herself from me and my sister again.

"We've done enough damage," I added, and Alice nodded.

After a moment of awkward silence, she suddenly threw her arms around me, kissing my cheek. If I had been human, I would have blushed.

"Take care, Edward," she said, her voice echoing the worry I heard in her mind. *I'll miss you.*

Behind me a chime sounded and the loudspeaker announced that the train to Grand Central Station was leaving in ten minutes.

Carlisle untwined himself from Esme and beckoned to me. Together we stepped away from the other three for a moment.

*I need to give you some things,* he told me. *Do you have your wallet?*

I gave him the most withering look I could manage, and he actually smiled.

*I'm sorry. Of course you do. May I have your wallet?* I handed it to him, and he removed my driver's license and my credit card.

"Hey—" I protested, but he put a finger to his lips. From his own wallet he withdrew a dark card, and handed it to me. It was an American Express Centurion card. Its jet black face glimmered as I turned it in my hand. The name on it read *Edward C Cullen*. I raised my eyebrows. Since when was my middle initial not "A"?

In answer to my unasked question, my father handed me a second card. This one was a New York State driver's license, listing our address in Ithaca and my name as *Edward Carlisle Cullen*. I stared at it a moment, puzzled. Carlisle had never taken the liberty to change my given names in any of the times he'd created paperwork for me.

"I know you want nothing of ours to take with you," Carlisle murmured as I continued to stare at the driver's license, "but I need you to have a tangible reminder that I'm behind you. I will always be wherever you need me to be as soon as you ask." *When you come back to me safely, I'll change it back to Anthony*, he added.

I turned the card in my hand. Would I return safely? Edward Carlisle didn't sound too bad. "I kind of like it," I admitted. "One name from each of my fathers."

Carlisle swallowed audibly. He pulled one last thing from his back pocket. This was a dark blue US Passport, also listing me as Edward Carlisle. *If you find the need to use this*, he thought forcefully, *please call and tell us where you're going*.

I nodded absently, looking over the inside cover of the passport. I knew about document forgery; it was a task at which we were all reasonably skilled. He couldn't possibly have created all of these in the mere hours since we'd come in from the forest; the credit card alone must have taken weeks to procure. "How long ago did you do all this?" I whispered.

He looked down. *When we moved here*. Meeting my eyes, he added, *I wasn't sure that you would stay*.

"You know me too well."

*Of course*.

I turned the passport over in my hand. What would he have done if I had actually taken off as I had this morning? "What if I had run away?"

At this his face broke into a small smile once again. *They were in your bag*, he answered, nodding to the knapsack on my shoulder. *Alice never saw you leaving without it, so I figured you'd take it and then you'd find them.*

I actually laughed. I didn't give him enough credit; he had been a step ahead of me the entire time.

"Thank you, Carlisle," I said softly. He nodded, and together we returned to the others.

Another chime. Five minutes.

Esme threw her trembling arms around me, kissing my cheek. *Edward, please don't go*, she thought urgently. *I'm so very sorry about what I said. Stay with us. Let us all go back to Bella. We can take care of her together.*

I smiled. She was unbearably sincere, but she didn't understand. This wasn't about me; this was about Bella. I wasn't safe for her. "This is best, Mom," I whispered back. "I'll miss you. I love you."

*We love you too, Edward.* She gazed at me sadly as she reluctantly let me go.

Carlisle laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. His thoughts were effusive: *I love you so much. I can't bear to see you go.* But he merely said, "We should get you on this train."

I nodded. I adjusted the pack on my shoulder, and gave them one last wave as I headed for the door to the car.

*Edward.* It was Carlisle. I turned to face him. His eyes were full of sadness; the lines of his face displayed an unspeakable grief at seeing me go.

I raised my eyebrows.

*When?* It was just one word, but the pain behind it bore witness to centuries of loneliness. For a split second I reconsidered everything. Maybe we could all stay together. We should. What kind of a son was I to do this to Carlisle? Then James' face swam before me and my resolve returned. I *had* to keep Bella safe...from Victoria, and from me.

Shaking my head in dismay, I shrugged in response to Carlisle's question. He knew full well that I had no idea when I would see him again. And he knew that this was something I had to do.

He nodded, his face further creasing with his worry. *I love you, son.*

"I love you, too, Dad," I mouthed, as the train whistled.

My choice of addressing term caused a riot of emotion in his mind, and I could hear that it was taking all he had not to physically prevent me from boarding the train. His jaw flexed as he gritted his teeth. I waved to all of them once more, and swung myself up into the car.

I chose a window near where my family stood on the platform so that Esme could make sure for herself one last time that I was okay. She stood in Carlisle's arms, his body turned so that she could see me easily. They were both waving. I waved back.

The train lurched, and my mother's waving became more frantic. I forced a smile so that she wouldn't break down. As the train began to move, I briefly took my focus off my family for a moment, just enough time to let in all the other thoughts of the people on the platform.

*I should have told her to take her vitamins.*

*Two million dollars. Really? I'll be glad to see the end of the negotiations with these jokers.*

*Bye, bye, Grandma!*

And the last one I recognized clearly: *I just wish I knew for sure that he was coming back.*

Pressing my forehead to the cool glass window, I gave my father one last look as the train picked up speed and cleared the platform.

I wished the same thing.

## Chapter 5: *Primum non nocere*

It was an unusually warm afternoon for mid-November. The breeze that blew in the windows of the house was refreshing, carrying with it the scents of smoldering bonfires, wet leaves, and ripening apples. These mingled with the acrid odor of interior latex paint and turpentine to create a strange mixture that left me feeling a little bewildered as I prepared to assist my wife.

Esme had finished with the living room, which was now beautifully appointed with antique Quaker furniture that she'd had shipped in from all over New England. She had now turned her attentions to the kitchen. The room was presently in complete shambles, as my wife had made quick work of tearing out all the anachronistic fixtures and cabinetry. She and I were priming the walls today so that she could layer on a whitewash-like treatment that would restore the walls to their original appearance from almost four hundred years ago.

Painting was an excruciatingly slow process, owing to the fact that the tools for the job had been invented for humans. As it turned out, paint rollers used at vampire speed just didn't do a very thorough job. So we might just as well have been any other husband and wife in the country as we stood side-by-side, matching in two sets of my old scrubs, slowly applying the primer to the kitchen walls. We worked in silence, our motions in sync with each other's to the point that we could anticipate the other's movements and stay out of each other's way.

Esme and I had had many long, soul-searching conversations in the last several weeks. Despite Edward's musical extension of his forgiveness, she hadn't quite made peace with herself about his hasty departure. I did my very best to console her, but it wasn't enough.

I didn't blame her for her difficulty; I spent a lot of time second-guessing my own actions these days. Edward had been gone for over three weeks now without a word. I tried to remind myself that this was a good thing; that he would likely only call if he was in trouble. His silence meant he was most likely safe. But I still had to prevent myself from unconsciously speed-dialing him on my cell phone. He wouldn't appreciate it; and I didn't want to seem in any way as though I didn't trust him. So I just worried instead. And so did Esme.

It made our silence rather tense.

The sound of the back door opening caught both our attentions. We each lifted our heads toward the breeze to figure out which of our children had returned from the university. Jasper was enjoying his philosophical studies quite a lot and spent a great deal of time reading every ethical treatise he could lay hands on. Alice frequently went with him; she was working on some major project the purpose of which she had not yet disclosed.

The peal of high-pitched laughter and the low-pitched voice that followed it told us that both of them were back. I looked at my wife.

“Should we go say hello? Or should we leave them be?” It was somewhat unlike them both to have not popped into the kitchen to say hello on their way in.

I was nearly interrupted by the sound of the stereo from upstairs. They were in Edward’s room. I recognized a few bars of Verdi’s “La Traviata,” which was a favorite of Edward’s. It cut off somewhat abruptly, however, to be replaced by a more upbeat piece—“Penny Lane.”

Esme shot me a smile. The Beatles were a favorite of both of ours, a fact that did not escape Alice and Jasper.

“I guess people do usually listen to music when they’re doing something like this,” I mused, putting my roller against the wall and rolling in time to the steady beat. I was surprised, however, when Esme’s hand closed over my wrist after only a few strokes. She pried the paint roller from my hand, letting it drop into the pan below us where hers already lay. Taking my left hand in her right, she wrapped one arm around my waist, wrapped one arm around my shoulder, and began to move us both to the music.

Closing my eyes, I put my right hand on the small of her back and took over the lead of a slow foxtrot. Esme sighed contentedly, her breath tickling my neck as our hips met in time to the beat. It had been decades since we had last danced to this song together. I reveled in the feeling of Esme’s light frame against my own, and for a moment, it was as though the world went no further than the boundary of our embrace. I wasn’t worried about Edward, I wasn’t thinking about work, I was just with my wife and the music.

“See? *Dancing*,” a delighted whisper said from the doorway, and I looked over to see Alice and Jasper standing in an embrace a few feet away. Alice was smiling broadly, and a small smirk played on Jasper’s lips.

“Thank you,” I mouthed to them, shooting Jasper a particularly pointed look.



He held up his hands, grinning. "I'm not doing anything. We just turned on the music."

As "Penny Lane" ended, the CD shifted to the more up-tempo "Can't Buy Me Love."

The next thing I knew, Alice had grabbed Esme's hands and the two of them were flying around the room in a fast lindy hop. Jasper and I exchanged glances, equally taken aback by our wives' sudden frivolity.

"Do we cut in?" I asked him in a conspiratorial whisper.

He nodded. "Let's."

Jasper and I took back our partners without missing a step. The four of us whirled around the wrecked kitchen, two pairs in flawless sync. It was a pleasure to watch Alice and Jasper-in fifty years, I couldn't remember ever really seeing Jasper dance like this. He was incredibly light on his feet and looked fully at peace basking in his wife's giddiness. Alice sang loudly as she turned in his arms, first to Jasper and then to me and Esme as we sped past each other, comically affecting a deeper pitch to imitate the original artists.

The sound of my own laughter startled me. Esme looked up at me, a broad smile spreading across her face, and I took advantage of a pause between songs to press my lips gently to hers. A part of me was fully aware that the pain and the worry would return as soon as the music died. But for the brief duration of a few songs, I let myself enjoy having a little piece of my family back.

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"Triple-shot latte, venti. Skim milk if you would, please."

The barista, a girl maybe in her late teens, smiled at me shyly as she rang my order. I smiled back politely, then shifted over to wait for my drink.

"Triple-shot? Is that how you do it, Cullen?"

I turned. Roland McLanahan, a pathologist, was approaching. The route from the operating theaters to the patient rooms went directly through the west lobby, where several years previously the hospital had seen fit to allow Starbucks to open a kiosk. Ostensibly for outpatients and visitors, the kiosk instead tended to cater to the sleep-deprived practitioners, their white coats forming a neat, identical queue. I visited it frequently, for as my colleague had just pointed out, Starbucks definitely held the key to my secret.

It just wasn't the secret that he thought it was.

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Coffee was the best tool ever invented for concealing immortality. All of the physicians I knew drank it by the gallon. When it appeared I was imbibing as well, no one batted so much as an eyelash when I pulled a twenty-hour shift or rushed straight from the hospital to the university to teach. And then there was Starbucks' wonderful invention in the high, white plastic lids that were now the norm for every coffee vendor in the nation. Twenty years ago I'd had to furtively dump coffee out of my cups, or conveniently leave them behind so that I was frequently seen getting another dose. Now I could buy one cup, walk around with it for hours, and no one could ever see that I admitted not a drop past my lips. And the mere presence of the cup would also tinge my scent with Arabica, like so many of my peers. Act like them, look like them, smell like them. It worked like a charm.

The barista set my drink on the counter, giving me another smile. I returned her smile and took the cup, lifting it to my lips as I turned to Roland.

"How are you, Roland?"

"Fine, and yourself?"

I nodded. "Faring well enough." I pretended to take another sip of coffee. "Long day. Going to be a long night."

He laughed. "I remember being your age. Thirty-hour shifts, trying for breakthrough discoveries whenever I wasn't seeing patients...you young doctors push yourselves too hard. But then, I guess we all did it."

"Everybody does," I answered carefully. This was the occupational hazard of practicing medicine as an immortal—since I looked like I should be just out of medical school, I was forever tied to the hectic schedule that accompanied being an early-career physician. The CV that I had submitted to the hospital only went back three positions; there was a limit to how much time I could pretend to have lived and still manage to stay in one place for any length of time. At my current falsified age of thirty-one, I was the "youngest" attending on the CMC staff. But I enjoyed the long hours; for me being at the hospital was the epitome of catharsis.

I had pulled many long shifts since Edward left us. In the weeks since, I'd increased my night shifts from ten to fourteen hours, the maximum I could be at the hospital and not run afoul of AMA work guidelines. In between I had the seminar I was teaching at Cornell to keep me busy, and of course helping Esme with the house. Preparations for the seminar rarely tied me up for long, however, as I had lived through all but one of the epidemics that were on the syllabus.

Teaching about them mostly amounted to my recounting what it was like to be practicing medicine at the time; talking through the ways in which we had all been stumped by the diseases and the courses they were taking until a cure was stumbled upon. The previous week, after my lecture on the European cholera outbreak, one of my students had commented, “God, Dr. Cullen, you teach this stuff like you were *there*.” I had simply chuckled and joked that I had a vivid imagination.

“You’re headed to the wing?” Roland’s voice brought me abruptly back to the present.

I nodded. For reasons unknown, the doctors at CMC referred to the east wing of the building, where the patient rooms were located, simply as “the wing.” This had led to a number of other turns of phrase, such as “going to the wing,” which meant doing patient rounds.

Roland and I walked together towards the patient rooms. I looked forward to visiting my patients every day. Trauma surgery was often a head rush, and I enjoyed the distraction, but there was something wondrous in meeting privately with my patients. It reminded me of what medical practice used to be. Sure, now my patients were surrounded by incredible amounts of expensive machinery and privy to a host of synthetic drugs that no physician could have even dreamed of two centuries ago, but this moment was still the same—the doctor at the patient’s bedside, consoling and healing. Even after centuries of medical practice, I still found myself humbled by the trust my patients had in me.

My sole aim was to be sure that trust was not misplaced.

I had fourteen post-op patients in the hospital currently, recovering from everything from an appendectomy to a kidney transplant. I visited the appendectomy first; she was a young woman, a student at the university. I saw her eyes light up as I entered.

“Dr. Cullen. Hi!”

I smiled. “Hello, Miss Robbins. How are you this evening?” I made my way to her bedside, and made a show of picking up her chart from the end of her bed. Of course, I remembered everything I had written on it yesterday, and the only entries since then had been her temperature and blood pressure measurements from throughout the last twenty-four hours.

“Good! Mostly,” she answered, gazing at me searchingly. When Edward had assisted me informally some decades ago, he would often rib Esme in the evenings about the thoughts my female patients had in my presence. That my wife actually found these unchaste musings funny was a huge testament to the bond we shared. Just to be on the safe side, however, I held my

patient's chart with my left hand as I read, letting my wedding ring catch the light. All of her entries for today looked good; I could probably authorize her to go home.

"May I have a look at the incision?"

She nodded, shifting her hospital gown to one side. The tiny wounds were healing well; the redness and swelling had reduced considerably since I had last seen her during yesterday's shift. I shook my head, marveling at the significance of such a simple surgical procedure. A hundred years ago, appendicitis had been almost universally a death sentence. Even those whose organs we managed to remove were almost always claimed by sepsis. Now I could have a nineteen-year-old present with an advanced case and have the organ out in a matter of hours in a laparoscopic surgery that left incisions hardly bigger than my fingernail. It was nothing short of miraculous.

"This all looks good," I commented, replacing her bandage. "I can discharge you tonight, if you'd like."

Her face lit up. "Really? I can get out of here? That was fast."

I laughed. "They don't call it drive-by surgery for nothing. You'll need to take it easy," I admonished. "Hold off on the partying until at least next weekend." Although Cornell students were, for the most part, very serious about their studies, I knew they weren't immune to the beer-driven culture that seemed to dominate the modern American college scene. Yet another reason that it was nice to live as far out of town as we did.

She flushed red, grinning. "I will, Dr. Cullen." Looking at me hopefully, she asked, "What about school?"

"Classes are sedate enough that it shouldn't cause a problem," I answered with a wink. "Neither should sitting and studying."

She groaned good-naturedly.

"*Learn.* Doctor's orders." I smiled at her, and she grinned sheepishly. "Do I remember that your mother is here?" I always felt obligated to inquire after who would care for my patients once I was no longer with them. Otherwise, I felt ill-at-ease.

Nodding, she answered, "Yeah. She can take me back to school. Or her hotel, probably." She rolled her eyes. "She's been ridiculous about this."

I smiled. "Well, we parents tend to err on the side of overboard, that's true."

My patient's eyebrows raised. "We parents?" Her eyes flickered to my wedding ring again, and back to my face. I could see her trying to reconcile parenthood with my youthful appearance. I chuckled.

"I have five adopted children. Two of them are your age," I told her, putting her chart back in its slot at the end of her at least, they were her age physically—my "youngest" son was actually over seventy. "And if one of them had to be rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery, I would probably be a little ridiculous about it, too."

Talk about an understatement. I was driving myself halfway crazy as it was; knowing that my virtually invincible son was merely out of range for me to immediately assist him. If I were put in a situation where I knew Edward or any of the others to be in real danger, I would be beside myself. For a brief moment I entertained the thought of calling Edward before I went on to my next patient, but I immediately put myself in check. He would call if he needed me. My son might be stubborn, but he wasn't stupid.

Sighing, I smiled gently at my patient. "At any rate. I'll get your discharge papers written up, and I'll have a nurse in here to help you get ready to go with your mom. You seem to be healing very well, but if there's any pain, a dose of ibuprofen—Advil—should help. And if you notice serious pain, especially if it gets anything like what it was when you came in, I want to see you back right away, okay?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Then is there anything else I can do for you, Miss Robbins?"

She shook her head, grinning back at me. "Thanks, Dr. Cullen."

"It's been a pleasure treating you, Miss Robbins." This I said when I discharged all of my patients; and I meant every word. Nothing brought me more joy and peace than to be here, attending to my calling. I exited her room and headed for the charting station at the end of the hallway to formally approve her discharge.

No sooner had I completed the papers, however, when my pager sounded. Peering at it, I frowned. It was Roland. What on earth did he need me for? Although I understood pathology, the endless hours in the laboratory without patients were not my preference, and I did not list it as a specialty of mine. No one at this hospital had any inkling that I had any particular acumen in the area. This was very curious.

Dropping the discharge forms at the nurses' station, I went to answer the page.

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A half hour later found me in the lab, looking at slides of blood. I whipped through them frantically, hoping against hope that there would be some way to disprove my initial diagnosis. Things weren't looking good.

Roland had met me in the hall and quickly ushered me into his office. "Carlisle. I'm glad you could come so quickly. I need a consult."

I raised my eyebrows. As far as Roland knew, I was a perfectly average young doctor, perhaps a little advanced by virtue of having entered medical school a little early. He knew nothing of the years I had practiced; he had no reason to believe I would know anything particular about his specialty. So why on earth was he looking to me for help?

"You need a general surgeon for a consult?"

"No," he replied quickly, "I need a hematologist. Dr. Andrews isn't in today, and his lab rats are stumped by this one."

So naturally I was the next line of defense? "Since when am I backup to Andrews? Hematology is not my specialty." For very good reason.

He shot me a withering look. "That case of von Willebrand's you caught last week put you on the map, Dr. Cullen," he said slowly.

I cursed myself silently. The previous week a middle-aged man had been brought into the ER from a car accident which had caused multiple internal injuries. He had been sent for a CT which had confirmed massive internal bleeding and he had been on his way into the operating room when the PA had finally brought his gurney to me.

Usually, I was very careful with my diagnoses; if I knew something that a human doctor would not be able to sense, I took the time to back it up with a recognizable diagnostic test. But I was only assisting on this surgery, and I couldn't stall it to give me time to confirm the diagnosis that my nose had made instantaneously. So I had decided to make my evaluation known to my colleague; von Willebrand's, a fairly rare bleeding disorder. Its scent was incredibly distinctive; it set off all sorts of alarms in my mind telling me that he would be easy prey. If we sliced into this patient without regard for this problem, he would undoubtedly die on the operating table from blood loss. When I had immediately been pressed, I made up an unlikely explanation involving the patterning of the bruising on the patient's abdomen, and my colleagues were rightfully suspicious. But my certainty had bought me enough time to run a few tests, which of

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course confirmed my diagnosis. Because of that, the patient was upstairs recovering from his surgery instead of at the undertaker's.

However, that didn't mean it might not have been a mistake. I looked at Roland very carefully. Did he suspect anything was amiss, or did he just think I was some sort of wunderkind?

His jaw was set. "Word gets around," he said. "Everybody knows you're the blood guy, Carlisle."

I almost laughed at his choice of wording.

"Okay," I said carefully, still appraising Roland for any sign that he might think my skill was anything other than medical in nature. "What's the problem?"

"Fifteen-year-old male, presented with flu-like symptoms," he began. "White cell count is elevated, but consistent with the flu. Patient claims no possibility of exposure to HIV; tests came back negative. Mononucleosis also came back negative."

I shrugged. "Then he has the flu. What do you need a consult for?"

Roland shook his head. "We sent him home with the flu already. He came back two days later feeling worse. His fever's higher; his white cell count is lower. He was referred to me because they thought it might be some new strain of something, but I'm stalling out. Do you think you could have a look at his slides?"

I frowned. I doubted I would have insight that my colleagues did not. Not every blood disorder smelled as distinctive as von Willebrand's. But I could humor Roland by at least giving this the once-over.

"May I see the chart?" I asked, reaching to take it from Roland's desk.

If I'd taken a moment to prepare myself, perhaps I might have been able to think rationally about this case; to insulate myself from the feelings that a mere name could evoke. But I did not know to give myself that time, and thus was caught unawares by the emotions that entered my body as I read the name on the file. I looked quickly to the smear of red on the slide that Roland held out. Even in the dim light of the office, I could still see the sign that Roland and the lab techs had missed: the single aberrant cell that would multiply and ravage this boy's blood, stealing his life unless we managed to stop its progress.

Acute Myelogenous Leukemia.

All of the worry, all of the pain, all of the fear that had weighed on me for the past two months came crashing down on me again at once. Had it really only been earlier today that I had

danced so freely in my kitchen? It might as well have been decades. I forced myself to look back at the name on the file, all the while willing it to read differently than what I had seen at first glance. But it remained unaltered—the disturbing homonym to a surname I knew only too well. It drew my mind back almost ninety years, to a different hospital, to a different disease, to a different boy whose life my medicine had proven inadequate to save.

MASON, ANTHONY, screamed the barcode label at the top of the file.

And he was dying.



## Chapter 6: C. C.

I had always disliked San Francisco. Alice loved coming down here to shop, and she made the trip as often as was feasible. For me, San Francisco brought back too many memories of the noisy filth that had been downtown Chicago at the turn of the century. I loved my hometown, but there was no questioning that its aesthetic had improved greatly over the last century.

Perhaps the problem was the topography. San Francisco, with its hills, cradled the rolling fog as though it were dear; in Illinois, weather moved in and out across the flatness that was the city and Lake Michigan. In Chicago, were it not for the buildings, one could see to the horizons.

Here, I could be snuck up on.

And of course, there was the night thing. Northern California was having an unusually warm and sunny winter so far, which meant that I was barred from moving around outdoors in the daytime. It was infuriating, skulking around in the dark like some kind of beast.

The thought brought forth a hard laugh. A beast. Wasn't that exactly why I was here? A beast was what I was, why I was unsafe for my love. And still I hadn't managed to embrace that destiny. A month in Ithaca, a month on the run, and there was still some stupid part of me hoping that I could figure out some way to be with her. I cursed myself. I was not going back. I would reject both of my sister's visions. "*The only thing he's not strong enough to do is stay away from her,*" Alice had said. "*That's a lost cause.*"

I would show them all.

*How in the—no, that can't be his car. Bet the owner will beat the shit out of that kid when he realizes that some high schooler has been touching his ride.*

My head snapped up. A man was walking past me, regarding me suspiciously. I thought briefly about making an obscene gesture at him, but decided I didn't need to draw further attention to myself. The car was noticeable enough. And no one would be beating anything out of me over it.

I'd rented an unassuming Toyota to make the trip across the Olympic Peninsula, but I'd stopped at the Porsche dealership in Tacoma on my return trip south. Camrys were great cars for humans, but at a top speed of about 110, it wasn't going to cut it for my needs. Not to mention the rental had an automatic transmission—the worst invention in automobile history. It was right up there with seat belts on the list of things that annoyed me about modern cars.

On the other hand, the six-cylinder engine had been a rather nice development.

Running my hand appreciatively across the hood of the black 987 Boxster, I thought back to its procurement and the days that preceded it. As much as I knew it would pain me, and as much as I didn't want to, I knew it would be next to impossible to pick up Victoria's trail anywhere other than where I knew it to have last been. So I had begun in Forks.

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Leaving the airport, it had taken me two hours to get clear of Seattle and onto the 101, where I could actually floor the little sedan and speed back across the Olympic Peninsula. I blazed past Port Angeles, my memory of that terrifying and glorious night resurfacing at once. To be known as I really was, to have the woman who now unwittingly held my heart look me in the eye and say, "It doesn't matter." Liberating. Exhilarating. Her openness that night as she had sat beside me here as we sped down this same road had been incredible. To think that she could feel for me even a fraction of what I felt for her was nothing short of miraculous.

And then it had all shattered, just like the plates that had tumbled off the table in our living room.

The memory of Bella's party brought a snarl to my lips, spurring me onward. I would make this *right*. Bella would be safe. She would not love a monster. And no other monsters would come after her as long as she lived.

I was happy that the house was north of town. I didn't need to see the preparations for Christmas that would undoubtedly be taking place in the town center: the smattering of restaurants each adorned with twinkle lights, the huge "Happy Holidays" banner that always went up on November 1 across the main drag. The goal of destroying Victoria gave me focus, now, drive that I did not have a month ago, but anything approaching cheer certainly still eluded me. Christmas was not something I could bear.

The drive was already beginning to become obscured by the growing underbrush which was happily reclaiming the land for itself now that cars no longer zipped in and out on a daily

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basis. Pulling up to the house, I shot a glance at the garage, giving brief consideration to ditching the Toyota for my Vanquish. The cars had not yet been shipped out to Ithaca, as we were waiting to find a place to house the collection. That would no doubt become priority number one when Rosalie returned, but with me out of commission and her out of the country, no one else was particular enough about the cars to request them moved from Washington.

It would be nice, to jump behind its wheel, spin through town, perhaps over to the high school...

"No, Edward," I growled at myself, sounding every bit like someone chastising a rambunctious puppy. If I saw her, if she saw me, this would be for nothing. If I laid eyes on her I would never leave. And if she laid eyes on me, she would never heal. I had promised her. *It will be as if I never existed.* For her sake, I couldn't check up on her.

At least not in person.

The thought hit me quickly, and I bounded into the house. It was exactly as we had left it, save the few spots on the wall uncovered by the paintings that Carlisle had taken with him. The rugs, the furniture, my piano were all still in place. I took only a second to appraise the entryway, however, before I raced up the stairs into Carlisle's study.

"Come on," I urged his computer as I sat waiting for it to boot. An agonizing half-minute later, I was finally greeted with the login prompt.

*ccullen*, I typed. I would need administrator privileges for what I was about to do. Carlisle's password was *happyguard*, which I'd never really understood. Once he had started to tell me that the Old English for those words had some sort of double meaning, but then had digressed into a dry lecture on English historical linguistics that I'd tuned out.

Once logged in, I opened up a connection to the Forks High School main system. I wasn't terrifically skilled in hacking, but we all knew how to get in to the attendance module. Every now and again it became necessary to add a day or two of attendance for each of us if there had been too many sunny days in any given quarter.

The prompt blinked at me. *Check attendance record for student:*

*SWAN ISABELLA*, I typed, and waited for the page to load. When it did, I breathed a sigh of relief. Her attendance was perfect for the month of November, as well as for October. She was marked present for school today. Then I scrolled up and caught a series of red marks on the

calendar. For September, there was an eight-day absence, starting on the sixteenth. The day after our conversation in the woods.

I felt sick.

I ran my fingers across the red strike marks, as though some essence of Bella's pain would be communicated to me through the screen. "I'm sorry," I whispered, and the pain inside reared up, delighted that I might allow it to claim me once more.

Clenching my fists, I chanted slowly, "Victoria. Victoria." I had to regain control of myself. Victoria was why I was here, not Bella. But I had to get out of here before I forgot that. Closing the window in which I ran the connection to the high school, I opened a web browser. I needed some way of keeping tabs on Victoria.

The question was answered for me by Carlisle's homepage, on which he aggregated news feeds from several major dailies. Google News Alerts. Give them a search phrase, and they would e-mail relevant news. I just had to activate my phone for e-mail, and then I'd be set. I could get updates anywhere.

There were times when I loved the twenty-first century.

I typed in *murder*. No, that would be too broad. I didn't need my phone ringing for every murder in the United States. *Maul*, yes, that was better. *Maul OR mauling OR mauled*, I typed.

*Send to?*

Oh, right. That was a problem. I had given Carlisle my internet passwords, exchange for the fact that he could never keep any of his from me. If he and Esme thought to look at my e-mail and saw all the news reports, they would worry. That was unnecessary. I quickly opened another window and signed up for a new e-mail account.

*ProtectBella*. An address that would keep me focused. Switching back, I signed up to receive alerts at the new address, and set up my phone to receive the e-mail alerts through its web browser.

Then I shut down the computer and headed for our baseball field.

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I spent several weeks in Seattle.

Victoria's trail leading away from Forks had been surprisingly strong for being so old. I followed it across Olympic National Park to the sound, where it had disappeared. I'd swum across the sound first to Whidbey Island and then on to the northern suburbs of Seattle, both to

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no avail. But when I'd finally returned several days later to where I'd left the rental car in Forks, my phone had registered with an update. There had been a mauling in Seattle, of all places. It had happened in the middle of low-income housing, and they were blaming it on pit bulls.

Even with its suboptimal speed, the Toyota got me back to Seattle in a little more than two hours. I found the scene easily enough. I parked the Toyota at the end of the block and walked back.

The alley was dark; only the dimmest orange glow of streetlights penetrated it on either side, and then only a few feet. Two dumpsters loomed in the dark, and the body had lain between them. I crouched down in the trash that was strewn between the dumpsters, and my shoes stuck in the sludge formed by the detritus. Rotting pizza, stale beer, cigarette butts, empty soda bottles.

And not a hint of Victoria.

Frustrated, I unthinkingly threw a punch at the dumpster, which clanged loudly as it gave way to my fist. The noise caught the attention of someone walking by on the other side of the street, and I shook my wrist as though I were in pain. The stranger quickly looked away, leaving me to my private anger.

I leaned up against the dumpster, letting the smell of the fetid trash bathe me as I thought.

If Victoria was not here, then who had been? We hadn't seen any nomads in our area in months. And certainly if someone were coming our way, they would come all the way to us—a coven the size of ours did not generally escape notice. And how had we missed this vampire who was loose in Seattle, when Carlisle kept such careful watch on the local news? And if it was a vampire, then why had the body been left for the police to find?

Roaming the streets around the site, I listened for anything which might help me locate the beast, but I heard and saw little as I walked among the dilapidated apartment buildings. Many were boarded up; those that weren't had doors covered in graffiti.

*Imma whoop him when he gets home...*

*Seahawks had best not lose...*

*This car is a piece of junk...*

Then finally I caught it. Someone was remembering the strange young man they had seen last evening. *Black eyes. No, must have been brown, it was just too dark to see. But usually a blond don't have eyes that dark...*

And then I got a picture. A young man, turned when he was not much older than I had been. Blond, with blackened eyes that would by now assuredly be crimson. His skin was a pale, hard white; I could recognize him for what he was even in the dim memory of the woman who'd seen him roaming these streets. She had thought he'd looked menacing, and as there weren't very many whites in this neighborhood, she had taken notice of him just in case she needed to report him to the police.

Now that I thought on it, I probably looked pretty out-of-place here, too. Returning to the dumpsters, I tried very hard to differentiate the scents. Moldy soda, urine, flat beer, stale cigarettes—a bit of the cloy of human blood, which reminded me that it wouldn't hurt me to hunt sometime soon. And then I finally caught it—faint, washed away by the rain and fog that were ubiquitous in Seattle, but still nonetheless present: the stinging sweetness of venom; the scent of another of my kind. There was a second vampire loose in Seattle.

It was this creature that I chased now in the streets of San Francisco. He had come south after killing two more in Seattle, both which I had been unable to sense in time. My rational mind kept screaming that this was not Victoria, that finding this vampire was useless. And yet some part of me urged me onward, to find this creature who was wreaking havoc on these cities in hopes that he might have something to tell me about the whereabouts of my intended victim. But so far he had eluded me. His patterns confused me: on the one hand, he seemed like a bloodthirsty newborn, more often than not leaving his victims unattended for the police to find. On the other hand, he was ducking my trail at every turn like a decades-old vampire. I was perplexed.

Alone and with no good leads, I found myself simply leaning against my new Porsche in the darkness, trying to formulate a new strategy.

*He looks distressed.* I lifted my eyes to see a woman, maybe in her mid-twenties, moving towards me. She looked concerned. As I caught her gaze though, her thoughts took a very different turn. *Wow, he's gorgeous. I wonder if I could convince him to go for a drink? If he's even that old...*

Right. It was time to leave. I leapt into the Porsche, gunning its engine and speeding off in no direction in particular. I drove for a good twenty minutes until I was well clear of the city. Then I pulled into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant and pressed my forehead to the

steering wheel. Under the florescent lights my arms shone pure white, the sight filling me with disgust and shame.

I was nowhere. Over a month of tracking and my only lead was a vampire who likely had nothing to do with Victoria, and I was chasing him over eight hundred miles away from the place either of them might do harm to Bella. It was like a game of chess, where my men were getting seized so quickly I could formulate no continuous strategy, and the board became so empty that any moves I made to advance on the other player were completely ineffectual.

*Go back*, a part of my mind answered. *Go back. If Victoria attacks Bella, you'll be there to protect her. Go back! Eight hundred miles, you fool! Mere hours! Drive! Go!*

The warmth that flushed through my body at that thought was delicious. I could go back. I would beg Bella's forgiveness, tell her how poorly I was managing without her, and be at her side to protect her. I could absolutely do that.

But my own voice came to me, surprisingly sharp and clear for being only a memory: *I'll make you a promise in return. I promise that this will be the last time you see me. I won't come back...I won't come back...I won't come back...*

The frustrated growl that escaped me quickly became a whimper. I had promised her. No more interference, for her sake. It was the best possible thing I could do for her. She would learn to live without me, and I would eke by until the day that she lived no longer.

And then we would truly be separated, for she would go to a place barred to me forever.

Dizzying pain shot through my body at the thought. I knew what I would do when that awful day came. But, soulless demon as I was, would even that provide the relief I sought? Was it possible that this pain might continue to emanate from my ashes?

I clenched my fists, feeling the steering wheel give a little beneath them. Whoops. Pulling my hands back, I stared into the night. What did I do now? My strength was fading. I could feel myself begin to slip back into that sorry creature that had balled himself up next to the radiator in Ithaca. Then another voice came to me; not my own this time, this one bell-like and beautiful. *I'm here for you whatever you do.*

Alice. I could call Alice for help. She could tell me about where Victoria was headed. If I told her I couldn't bear to speak to Esme and Carlisle, she would understand.

With one hand, I grabbed my knapsack from its resting place on the floorboard of the passenger seat. I unzipped it and began to rifle through the few changes of clothing to the bottom.

My fingers finally closed around something firm—but not plastic. What was this? I removed my hand slowly. My hand was clenched around a small black book with a leather cover and a tie that wrapped around it to keep it closed. Tooled carefully into the leather of the front cover were the initials C. C.

Mystified, I turned the little book over and over in my hands. It couldn't be. Carlisle kept a *journal*? He had never told me, and I had never heard him think about it. But then, I did tune him out when he was in his study, so as to not be inundated with the stultifying content of the medical research he tended to read for leisure. It seemed he used that alone time for other pursuits as well. Curious, I untied the book and flipped quickly through its pages. Sure enough, every leaf was covered in my father's miniscule and flawless script. His scent saturated the pages, and I inhaled it, feeling calmed.

Why had he given this to me, I wondered. He had offered to pack my bag, seeing as I was wearing his clothing anyway, and he must have slipped this in among the shirts and pants he'd put in for me. Was this for sentimental reasons? Did he intend for me to read it? I looked more closely at the pages. Every date I could see ended in the year 1921.

The year Esme joined us.

The year Carlisle found his mate.

I knew immediately that Carlisle had *fully* intended me to read this. Nervous, I turned to the little book's first page. I knew Carlisle's every thought; I knew him better than Esme did. Sometimes I felt I knew him better than he knew himself, objective observer as I was able to be. Yet he rarely spoke about himself, preferring to couch his observations about our family in the plural as though he were like the rest of us, forever darkened by heinous misdeeds, instead of the blameless, pure man he actually was. Now I knew the truth—he talked to *himself* about himself. How very like Carlisle.

I opened the book to its first page.

*9 January 1921*

*Thus I begin a new volume, though the old will remain unfinished. My life seems to have started over for a third time, and again I find myself questioning what to expect from this next chapter. I am lying to myself if I say I am certain there is good reason that Esme Platt lies here in my bed under the fire of my venom. There was no Elizabeth Masen at my side in the morgue two days ago to request my terrible action; and even if there had been, I told myself three years ago that I only needed a companion. In the singular person. And that companion is downstairs right now, playing—what, I don't recognize. His own composition; it is new. And so sad!*



*I am complete in Edward. He is all I could have hoped for in a companion, friend, and if I might dare say it, son. (He described himself as such last week—I find I cannot get over the thrill of hearing that word on his lips, though I myself still struggle to use it aloud.) The joy he brings me is pure and though I know my base actions of the past days have caused him to doubt this, the happiness I share with him is enough for me.*

*And still, the pull of this woman was unbearable. I have only an inkling of what brought her to that cliff, but whether she will accept me as replacement for the family she has lost is yet to be seen. Even more troubling is what she might be to me: a friend? A sister? A daughter? (A mate? That word I can barely force out of this pen.)*

*I have whispered my apologies to her for two days now, but I cannot help but feel that this will never be enough. I know that she will grieve as did Edward, for her life, for the child I know she lost, for the husband I can only assume never returned from Europe. Will she come to know us as her family in their stead?*

*Then there was Edward's face when I brought her home! Fury. Disgust. Disappointment. I cannot blame him for these feelings. In changing Miss Platt (Should I call her Mrs. Evenson? Dare I call her Esme?), I acted not on my human instincts, but on that which forms the darker part of me. Once she was so uninhibited that she eschewed the propriety befitting a lady her age in favor of climbing trees. Yet somehow that lively young woman I knew became the broken body brought to me in the morgue two days ago. To allow that joyous girl a chance to resurface might have been a noble reason to do what I have done.*

*But I can give no such reason. For in the end it was not Dr. Cullen who brought this woman into our dark otherworld. It was Carlisle, the vampire, the beast who lurks beneath all that I do, whose desires I am so skilled at silencing I can fool even myself into complacency. It is for allowing that creature to surface that I am most ashamed, for it is not this monster in which Edward has laid his trust.*

*I have betrayed my beloved son.*

*I have damned an innocent woman.*

*May God have mercy on me.*

—C. C.

My hands shook as I read and reread the last triplet. *Betrayed...damned...*my lips moved as my eyes traced these lines again and again. Carlisle was unshakeable in his belief that the God in which he believed was looking out for us just as well as for the humans. He believed we still had souls. Had all that talk been for show? Was he merely trying to placate me, or absolve himself of turning me?

Searching back up a paragraph, my eyes next fell on the words my father had used to describe himself. *Beast. Creature. Monster.* Never had I heard such words cross his lips, except in assuring me that I was none of these things. He was the one who steadfastly held that we still retained our humanity, that it was our duty to ourselves to cling to the things that we held in common with those who were supposed to be our food source. But everything in this entry seemed to indicate that he did not believe this true of himself. Was that even possible? Carlisle,

who had never taken a human life, and at whose hands hundreds and probably thousands who otherwise would have lost their lives had been saved—*Carlisle* believed himself a beast in need of redemption?

I took a deep breath trying to steady the flow of emotion that had flooded my core, and I tried to calm myself by isolating my emotions as *Carlisle* had taught me long ago. Anger was there—anger that *Carlisle* had never told me how he felt about turning Esme, not even in the face of my disappointment in him. Hurt—that he hadn't shared this with me earlier. Sadness—that he felt that way about himself when I knew his compassion to be pure.

And above all, I felt myself quickly becoming consumed by a mind-numbing fear. Because if *Carlisle* was a monster, then what exactly did that make me?

## Chapter 7: What We Have Left Undone

The shrill beeping of my pager shattered the stillness of my office. I always enjoyed the silence of a hospital at night, as I frequently found myself taking advantage of the lack of sun to work during these hours. Everything seemed to slow while our patients slept, and the reduction in noise level resulted in a calm atmosphere. It was often that the wee hours of the morning would find me simply wandering the halls of the hospital, taking in the quiet and feeling at peace. In recent weeks, however, I had scarcely left my desk at night, spending most of my shifts here amid stacks of medical journals reading up on myeloid leukemia.

As had become my nightly habit, I'd gone to check on Anthony Mason, Tony as he preferred, an hour earlier at the beginning of my shift. He was residing again at CMC as he began the second round of his chemotherapy. His handsome young face always brightened to see me and this made me happier than I should have allowed it to. We had developed a rapport in the past several weeks—I had been the first doctor to unwaveringly call him by his nickname, and he in turn had begun to address me by my initial.

Tonight he had been propped up in bed playing a new video game called *Guitar Hero* when I'd entered—which as far as I could tell was his preferred means of spending time when his mother wasn't around to remind him to do his schoolwork. I had mentioned that I ought to get the game as a Christmas gift for Emmett to add to his immense collection, and Tony had eyed me with the typical confusion.

"You've got kids?" he'd asked suspiciously.

"Five." I answered, receiving the usual puzzled look in response.

"No offense, Dr. C.," Tony responded, "but you look like you're like twenty-three or something. I mean, I know you're not because you've been to college and medical school and what not, but you can't be *that* old. How do you have five kids?"

Like twenty-three or something. He was more than a little perceptive. "Well, to begin, I'm thirty-one," I answered carefully, gauging his reaction. He seemed unfazed, so I went on. "And my children are all adopted. Well, our twins are foster children. But you get the idea."

He looked intrigued. “How old are they?”

Well, the range was from seventy to a hundred forty, I thought wryly, but answered, “My youngest is seventeen and the oldest is twenty. Three boys, two girls.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, they’d like this then.” He gestured to the plastic guitar that he was using to play the game.

“Yes, I think they probably would. Thank you for the suggestion.” I would order it as soon as I got back to a computer. “If I may act like your doctor for a moment, how are you feeling today?”

“Shitty,” he answered quickly, and I winced at both the word and the state it described. Tony caught my expression. “Sorry. I know, my mom says I shouldn’t say sh-stuff like that.”

His feeling poorly bothered me far more than did his vocabulary. He had no idea how much I wished I could just expel the cancer without causing him pain.

“‘Shitty’ can be a useful diagnostic description,” I told him. “Don’t worry about it. I know the chemo feels awful.”

“I feel sicker than I did when we weren’t treating it,” he muttered, looking away from me. “Kinda wish we didn’t have to fight it.”

I nodded. What he was reporting was not at all unusual. Tony was faring the chemo quite well, considering. He’d lost six pounds since his initial admission, but that was well within the range that was normal. He was also still alert and cheerful every time I came by to see him; usually involved in some video game if he wasn’t doing his schoolwork. We were all trying to keep his spirits and his grades up: two nights ago he had been struggling with some quadratics when I’d come by to check his charts, so I had helped him calculate and draw parabolas for a good hour before I’d done the rest of my rounds. All in all, he was doing remarkably well. But it was his eyes which always betrayed him; they were tired and he had developed circles beneath them, like my own children’s did when they were thirsty. His eyes told me that the treatment was hurting—as I knew it would.

“I understand,” I told him quietly. “Chemotherapy is a nasty treatment. I wish we had a better one, but we don’t. And it’s way too early for other options.” Moreover, “other options” were something I couldn’t even bring myself to think about right now. We were supposed to have in place a plan for palliative care in case we needed to switch into a mode in which we were no longer actively fighting the disease. But not a single physician on his team was willing to put

such ideas to paper just yet. Tony was strong. We would battle the disease alongside him as long as we needed to. I gave him a gentle smile and patted his shoulder. “Keep fighting, Tony. We will, too.”

Tony was quiet a moment, studying his guitar. “Dr. C.?” he finally asked without looking up.

“Yes?”

He took a deep breath, and his next words came out in a rush. “If it starts to look bad, will I get to decide if I don’t want to do this anymore?”

I froze. It was as though he were reading my thoughts—a sensation I hadn’t had in several months. Leave it to Tony to ask a difficult and forthright question like that. It caught me off-guard. It seemed to be one of my new patient’s defining characteristics that he preferred to confront things head-on. In this respect he reminded me of Edward, who also had no patience for sugar-coating, although Tony’s responses to the inevitable bad news invariably displayed optimism of which I surmised Edward was probably incapable.

My hesitation did not escape Tony’s notice. Usually, I was very good at answering my patients. I knew better than to lie even if I was feeling optimistic. The only time I ever gave a patient a rosier outlook than the one that really existed was if my patient was very young, and even in those instances I was very upfront with the parents.

“Is that a no?” he asked quietly after a moment.

“You’re a minor; it will be up to your parents,” I answered, looking down at the rails of his bed. American medical law was both wonderful and burdensome—sometimes it protected exactly what I wanted it to protect, other times it incapacitated patients who otherwise should have been calling their own shots. “Nevertheless,” I continued, fixing his blue eyes in my gaze, “we will *only* cross that bridge when and if we come to it. The statistics are on your side, here, Tony.”

“Forty percent,” he mumbled back, quoting me the percentage of young patients with AML who died within five years of their diagnoses.

“*Sixty* percent is the one you should be thinking about,” I corrected. “That’s more than fifty-fifty.” Not to mention that his medical team included a number of physicians from the oncology staff at Cornell’s high-ranking medical school in Manhattan. “You’ve got the best doctors in the state at bat for you.”

At this a faint smile broke on his face. “Are you bragging?” he teased.

“I never claimed to be one of them,” I answered, but he had struck a nerve. I *would* be one of the best doctors in the state when it came to this case. I would make myself so. I could not let this boy down. I would not let him die.

“You should probably get some sleep,” I told Tony quietly, but in truth, it was I who needed to leave before I spoke aloud any of the promises I was desperately making myself. “It’s past one AM.”

He nodded. “I’ll finish this and then I will.” He gestured to the game.

“All right. Let me know if you feel worse during the night. Just call your nurse and they will come find me.”

“Okay. See you, Dr. C.” His eyes had quickly become fixated again on the TV mounted to the wall.

“Goodnight, Tony.”

I had exited my patient’s room lost in thought. Growing attached to a patient was dangerous, something which after the incident with the Masens in 1918 I went to great lengths to avoid. Tony’s resemblance to Edward was in truth almost non-existent: his features were dark where Edward’s were light; his nature was to be optimistic and playful where Edward tended towards seriousness and worry; he was two years younger and still behaved very much as a young teenager where Edward had arrived into my care naïve but well into manhood. Had Tony’s name not been so close to my son’s, it might never have occurred to me to draw any comparison between them at all. But it was, and so in Tony I saw my chance to redeem myself for what I had done to the Masens’ son when my own hands failed him nine decades before. I had two hundred fifty years of medical experience at my disposal. Attached or no, I would heal my new patient.

Thus an hour later found me again at my desk, surrounded by the usual stacks of medical literature. At my left hand were Tony’s latest lab results, showing his white cell count still normal. Since his chemotherapy was supposed to be destroying his white cells, the number was more than a little troubling. There was a direct correlation between high white cell counts and likelihood of not beating the cancer. Each day that his labs came back with the count still high, Tony’s chances slowly worsened, and thus I grew more anxious, frantically poring over issues of journal after journal, searching for anything that might help us.

So when my pager went off, I was more than slightly startled to be jerked out of my reading. I instinctively pulled the device to my face, expecting a page to trauma surgery. That was my usual interruption in the dead of night like this. I was very surprised to see instead six very familiar numbers: **030121**. St. David's Day, 1921.

It was Esme.

Why was Esme calling me in the middle of a shift? It wasn't an emergency; if it had been, she would have preceded her code with "911." Laying down the journal I was presently reading, I picked up the phone in my office and dialed. It made it through a full two rings before Esme picked it up. Unusual.

"Hello?" She sounded...hurried.

"Hello, love, it's me."

"Oh, hi, Carlisle." It wasn't an unhappy greeting, by any means, but she seemed as though she was trying to temper something. Very strange. I was immediately uneasy with this phone call.

"Is there something the matter?" I asked carefully.

"No, no, no," she answered in a rush. "I just wasn't expecting you to call back so quickly. How's your shift going?"

"Just fine. Uneventful. It's quiet here." I was getting my head in order. "And the night at home?"

"Are you coming home in the morning?"

I sucked in my breath. In all truthfulness, I hadn't planned on it. My new routine involved leaving straight from the hospital and driving back into town and to the university, where I had access to the full library and its backlog of medical journals. This morning was no different; I would go to the university and bury myself in the stacks until darkness fell again.

Yet my plans for the day aside, there was still some part of me that knew that the correct answer to Esme's question was, "Of course." Even though I wasn't human, even though I could never be asked to sleep on the proverbial couch, even though Esme and I had enjoyed a loving marriage that had now lasted longer than any human's, somewhere deep I understood that the right response here was to tell her I would be home immediately if that was what she wanted. But instead of doing that, I let a foolish question slip:

"Why do you ask?"

Esme's breath hissed as she drew it sharply.

"Because I haven't seen you in *three days*," she answered a second later.

Had it been that long? Tonight was Wednesday—yesterday I had gone from the hospital to the university and back, and I had done the same on Monday, as well as earlier today, which meant...that my wife was right. I hadn't seen her since Monday morning. The guilt washed over me at once.

"Oh, God, Esme, I'm so sorry," I answered. "I didn't—days are so short, and I've been studying..."

She cut me off. "Rosalie and Emmett are home, too. They got here yesterday."

I covered the mouthpiece and hissed a word Esme wouldn't approve of. Rosalie had called from Paris a week before to tell us that she and Emmett would be coming home for at least a month to spend the Christmas holidays with us. I had somehow managed to distract myself so thoroughly that I had pushed their arrival from my mind. No wonder Esme was upset.

"I'm sorry," I muttered when I finally uncovered the phone.

My wife sighed. "Look, I understand. I do. I know you. I know you're working hard for your patient. But...could you come home this morning? Please? Just come say hello to Rosalie and Emmett. We'll be gone the rest of the day. We're meeting with a realtor to look at houses for them."

"And Alice and Jasper?" Jasper was the one contact I'd had in the last several days; he and I had run into each other at the Cornell library for all of five minutes the previous afternoon.

"They're here, too. Jasper said he said he saw you yesterday. I was glad to hear you were still out walking around."

I could tell it wasn't quite a joke.

"And Alice is possibly leaving for Mississippi."

"Mississippi?" Now I was truly confused. "Does this have something to do with her project?"

Esme drew her breath and it took her a moment to respond. "Just come home in the morning. We just want to see you."

I nodded stupidly, as though she could see me. "I'm off at six."

"We'll see you then."

"I love you," I added.



“I’m not angry, Carlisle.” She hung up.

Laying the phone back in its cradle, I wandered over to the window and stared out into the blackness. I was failing. Edward was gone, Esme was upset, I’d all but forgotten about two of my children, and a floor above me, my young patient still lay dying. Closing my eyes, I covered my face with my palm and drew a deep breath, raking my hand down my face as I exhaled. When I opened my eyes again, it was to my own reflection in the darkened window.

The man staring back at me was not the man I usually saw, whose youthful vigor I had to fight in order to convince anyone that I was anything close to the ages I claimed. No, this man looked exhausted and sad and old. In my reflection I saw three hundred sixty years of loneliness and concern, brought to bear on me again by a mere three months of agonizing worry. How much longer would this last? At what point was I supposed to give in, call Edward home, force him to pick himself up, and march him back to Forks? Edward hadn’t called in the month and a half he’d been gone, and despite weeks of practice, it took great concentration to refrain from calling him myself. I wanted Edward to understand fully my confidence in him, but I still missed him bitterly. My whole being ached for the days from the summer just passed, when I would come home to his laughter as he and Bella shared some inane joke in his bedroom, or as he cheerfully mocked her protestations over his concern for her safety in the wake of James’s attack. For the summer, Edward had been happy. And so, in turn, had I.

In hindsight, the intensification in Edward’s protective nature should have caught my attention sooner. My son’s actions had been so clearly foreshadowed in his behavior between March and September. The way he traced her every move when I saw them together; the rare moments he’d let her out of his sight—he feared for her safety, and he saw himself the biggest threat to her. It should have been my foregone conclusion that Edward would eventually come to the decision that he needed to remove himself without regard to the torture doing so might cause him. Again I pressed my hands to my face, forcefully drawing my fingertips down my temples. Why hadn’t I seen this coming?

As if in answer, Edward’s beautiful face swam before me, his golden eyes giving me a look of pure regret as the wind on the train platform whipped his hair across his face. Five words that made my still heart leap: *“I love you too, Dad.”* Even in mere memory, the joy those words brought me was acute to the point of pain. And I had let my pursuit of that joy keep me from what I needed to do in protecting my son.

I had so badly wanted happiness for Edward that I had forgotten that my responsibility to him as a father entailed occasionally telling him “no.” Had I not thought that we should stay in Forks? Hadn’t I already realized what pain Edward would be in if we left? Yet I had allowed myself to get foolishly caught up in promises I’d made and in my fear of “forcing him” to do something against his will and in doing so, I had forgotten my first and most important promise to him: to protect and care for him. Instead, I had let both our stubborn streaks rule and all but given him permission to drive himself mad with pain.

And now in the wake of his departure, I had let the agony of losing him drive me away from his siblings and from my wife. I couldn’t think of a time when I had accidentally gone this long without laying eyes on Esme. Certainly we had both gone on hunting trips that had taken us away from each other for periods of time, but those had been planned. To have *forgotten* her—for that was in truth what I had done—it was a monstrous thing to do.

Well, if there was nothing I could do about Edward right now, this other mistake was one for which I could make reparations. Sliding back into my desk chair, I opened the hospital’s scheduling program on my computer. It was just after two AM; there was a second attending in trauma due in at four. My shift technically ended at six, but I could probably take off the extra two hours and go home to surprise Esme. It wouldn’t make up for the last three days—I wasn’t so stupid as to think so—but it would bring a smile to her face. And those were increasingly rare these days.

Sending a text message to Alice asking her not to blow my cover, I left my office to go request the two hours’ leave.

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I heard laughter as I approached the house, and as I peered through the windows I saw through that the rest of my family members were sitting in the recently completed kitchen, looking at photos of the trip on Emmett’s new Leica S2. Emmett was animatedly telling a story to go along with one of the photos, and it was this which had elicited the laughter. The window itself also bore witness to my absence: Esme had restored the paint to the windowsills and shutters. A pile of loose bricks at the base of the chimney told me that she had also been working there. I sighed. I’d missed all these latest projects. Although I had my keys, I rapped gently on the kitchen door, hoping that Esme would come be surprised. But it was Rosalie who was closest to the door.

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“Well, well, well,” she said darkly when she saw me. “If it isn’t the absentee father.”

“Rose—” Emmett and Esme spoke in unison, rising as a pair. Emmett immediately moved to Rosalie’s side. As though to make clear to Rosalie where she stood on the matter, Esme embraced me at once, kissing my neck.

“You’re home early,” she whispered, delighted. “Thank you.”

I nodded, putting my arms around her as she pressed her back to my chest.

Rosalie simply shook her head, giving Esme a hard look. “Fine, Esme. But if you won’t give him a piece of your mind, I will.”

Emmett shot me an apologetic look before saying gently, “Hey, Rose, why don’t you give Carlisle a moment or two before you take his head off? He hasn’t been home in awhile.”

I knew before the words were quite out of Emmett’s mouth that they would be the wrong thing to say. Rosalie immediately shrugged off her husband’s hand and whirled on me, her eyes aflame. “That’s exactly the point! How could you not be here for *three* days, Carlisle?! How *could* you do that to Esme?”

“Trust me, Rosalie, that question has not escaped me.” I gazed down at my wife, who was shaking her head at our daughter as though to affirm that I had been forgiven. This did nothing to calm the fire in Rosalie’s eyes, however. Rosalie saw Esme as akin to herself because of what they had both suffered at the hands of their human partners. My hurting Esme gave Rosalie one more reason to unleash her anger, and perhaps that was why she had chosen to attack. She was trying to protect Esme from me. That she felt the need to do so made my stomach turn.

“You, Carlisle Cullen, are a selfish, prideful, egotistical *idiot*,” Rosalie hissed slowly, giving progressively more emphasis to each adjective. I found myself momentarily transfixed as she advanced on me, tossing her long hair behind her as she did so. None of us could contest that Rosalie was the most beautiful of our family, and when she was fully enraged she was almost more so, her golden eyes aflame with a mad fury that made her magnificently striking.

Alice and Jasper both drew their breath, and my twinge of apprehension faded immediately. Rosalie smiled at me briefly and added, “It’s really good to see you Carlisle. We missed you in Europe.” Then she whirled on Jasper.

“Okay, I played nice, now please stop what you’re doing,” she said sweetly.

I nodded to Jasper, whose concerned eyes met my own. “It’s okay. There won’t be a battle,” I assured him. “Rosalie should get a chance to say whatever it is she needs to.”

Cocking one eyebrow, Jasper put up his hands. "Okay...but I'm leaving."

He stood slowly and Alice rose with him. They disappeared from the kitchen, Alice muttering to Jasper, "She's only going to yell at him. Don't worry."

I watched them disappear up the stairwell, and then turned back to my fieriest family member. Every now and then, it became necessary to just relax and allow Rosalie to get off her chest whatever she needed to. She never escalated anything to the level of actual violence, but yelling was a cathartic process for her. And of course, as the source of her change, I was more often than not the recipient of her vitriol. She rightfully blamed me for her not having the peace of death, and as a result she also blamed me for anything and everything that went wrong with her current existence. I knew better than to ask her to calm down.

Closing my eyes briefly, I beckoned to my daughter with my right hand. "I hear that you are upset with me, Rosalie," I answered carefully. "May I ask why you think that of me?"

"Oh, you can just *stop* it with that counselor talk," she snapped. "You know exactly why I'm angry. You and your blind eye for your *precious* Edward."

I nodded solemnly and she went on, taking another step closer.

"My home," she said slowly, enunciating both words with care. "You and Edward have taken *my* home from me. First, you let him leave Forks. That was fine. Getting him away from *her* is probably the only useful thing you've managed to do since September."

"Her." Not "Bella." Even after nearly a year, Rosalie was unwilling to admit to any sympathy or feelings for the girl Edward had chosen.

"But you couldn't just let him go," she continued. "No. You had to take us all with him and make everyone else suffer while he just skulked around here being sad about something that was entirely in his control!" Her eyes were narrowed as she fixed them on me, gold upon gold, contempt and guilt meeting at once.

"It's why we *left*," she hissed. "Who wanted to sit around here and deal with the misery of 'poor, poor Edward' day in and day out?"

Wincing, I nodded again, the painful image of Edward huddled in the darkness of his bedroom filling my mind. "I'm quite sorry, Rosalie," I answered.

She glared at me and continued. "And then we come home, and he's not even here. You just let him *leave*, without any regard to how that's going to affect everybody else. And if this was what was going to happen anyway, why did the rest of us have to leave with him? You

disrupted our lives and our home for nothing. *Nothing*. And then” —she paused for a split second to draw more breath— “*then* you let everything just go to pieces around you. Esme keeps cleaning Edward’s room because she keeps hoping he’ll show up and need it. Alice and Jasper can’t stand to stay here in the house anymore. Emmett already wants him back and we’ve barely been here a day—none of which you have managed to be here for, mind you.”

“And for that I am truly sorry.” She had no idea. My memory was flawless—there was no forgetting in my world, only distraction. And wasn’t I distracting myself on purpose? Because if I focused my attention instead on my family, then the only thing available for me to contemplate was the gnawing pain of not knowing where Edward was. To avoid that pain, I had avoided them. Rosalie was perfectly right—it was beyond selfish of me.

“Save it,” she hissed, her eyes still fixed on mine.

I nodded contritely. “Is there anything else?”

Rosalie closed the distance between us in a millisecond. “Yes,” she said, dropping her voice to a low growl. “I want my home back. I want this—*coven*—back the way it was. Fix it.” She turned on her heel and stalked out of the room so quickly she created a tiny breeze. Shooting me a repentant glance, Emmett mouthed *I’m sorry* before he disappeared after her. I nodded and waved him on. He was the only one Rosalie listened to when she got in these states. The back door opened and closed with a slam, which was followed a moment later by a second crash as it fell from its hinges to the floor.

Still in my arms, Esme drew a shaking breath. “I’m sorry that happened,” she said quietly, turning in our embrace so that she faced me once more. “She’s been seething ever since she got home. I asked her not to confront you the moment you walked in the door, but you know Rosalie.”

I sighed, shaking my head again. “She has every right to be angry with me. I’m angry with myself.” And her accusations—every single one—had been perfectly sound. But it had been her final words that had truly thrown me. *This coven*. Rosalie more than any of our children clung to her past with all her superhuman tenacity. And although she would never admit it aloud, I knew the bonds our family shared with one another were desperately important to her sense of humanity. She would never look to me as a father the way Edward and Alice did, and while she was slightly more open to being Esme’s child, she reminded us both with some regularity that it was not us but the Hales who were her parents. But she had never before denied our being a

family. The word *coven* stung. Was that what we had been reduced to? Just another group of mated vampires, together for convenience and only for as long as that convenience was mutual? A low rumble escaped my lips at the thought and Esme's head jerked up.

"I'm sorry," I said immediately, rubbing her back. "I'm just—upset."

It took my wife a second to respond. "Coven?" she asked quietly.

I flinched. "Yes."

Esme sighed, moving her arms up my body until they were around my neck, her hands entwined in my hair. "She only said that to hurt you," she answered quietly. "Please don't take that seriously."

I didn't respond right away, instead staring out the window to the lawn and the woods beyond. A thick snow had fallen while I'd been at the hospital, the first since we'd moved into the house. The white blanket over everything gave the view a very serene feeling, quite the opposite of the tempest that had just blown through our kitchen.

Sighing, I looked down again at my wife. "Have I really turned us into a mere coven?"

Esme closed her eyes. I braced myself for an emotional consolation that mirrored my own worry, and as I suspected, she soon began to tremble in my arms. I was completely unprepared, therefore, when my wife threw her head back and laughed so hard she nearly choked.

"What?" I asked, and she smiled at me, simply shaking her head until her laughter subsided to the point that she could speak.

"Oh, Carlisle," she sighed in exasperation, but she was smiling. "You *are* a prize idiot. And here I was arguing to Rose that you didn't suffer from a God complex." She giggled.

A God complex? If there was one thing I felt certain about, it was that I was not God. I was feeling more helpless now than I'd felt my entire life. And I had put this family together; I was its backbone. If the back broke—how did the rest of the body function?

Esme pressed her cheek to my chest, the gentle vibrations of her laughter penetrating my body as she answered my unspoken question. "Do you *really* think your actions alone could possibly break this family apart? And that even if they could, that you would do it merely by burying yourself in the library for a few days?"

"But I made this family," I protested feebly.

Esme laughed even harder. "No, darling, we *make* this family," she corrected, bringing her lips to mine again. "The seven of us. And you don't get to decide when we're not one any

longer. Neither does Rosalie, for that matter.” She removed one hand from my hair and stroked my cheek with her thumb. I closed my eyes and let myself enjoy her touch.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said after a moment, laying her other hand flat against my chest. “Yesterday I finally tore out the bricking that was stopping the flue. Why don’t I go re-hang the back door” —I winced, remembering Rosalie’s tempestuous exit— “and you go get some wood. We’ll sit in front of the fire and catch up.”

“I should go apologize to Rosalie,” I mumbled.

“She’s not going to listen to you right now and you know it,” Esme answered. “And you have to teach this afternoon, so I only have you for a few hours, Dr. Cullen. I plan to make good use of them.” Smirking at me, she tugged on my tie to bring my head to hers.

“Are you sure it’s really the living room you’re after?” I teased as we kissed, and she playfully smacked my cheek.

“I said ‘catch up,’” she repeated, grinning, but the delight in her eyes told me she knew I hadn’t been serious. “That entails only *talking*.” Shaking her head and still laughing, Esme broke our embrace and headed in the direction of her tools.

I followed my wife with my gaze as she left. Even if for only briefly, it was good to hear the sound of her laugh, and I promised myself to relish the time she wanted to spend together this morning. I appraised the woods from the window and, locating a fallen tree which looked suitably small to be ripped into pieces for firewood, started for the door. I threw one last glance at the emptied kitchen, the abandoned camera on the table standing as reminder of how quickly laughter had once again fallen to anger and despair in our home.

One hand on the doorknob, I paused. I thought of my young patient, his dark eyes ever cheerful, teasing, even as he quietly suffered his disease. I thought of Esme and the worry and fear on her face when I had nearly attacked her two months ago. I thought of Edward, terrifyingly motionless as he lay in my arms. And finally I again recalled Rosalie’s parting shot, and a deep pain rocked me once more as I went out into the frozen dawn.

## Chapter 8: Intent to Kill

12 February 1921

*Wrath! As Homer found fit to begin his epic, so I find fit to begin yet another small one of mine. I feel I have become Achilleus, burning with an anger that could easily fuel war. Never before have I felt this emotion to this degree. Certainly Edward and I have had our heated disagreements, and I have been angry with others at points in these long years. (That battle with Aro about my food source comes readily to mind.) But nothing compares—nothing, I imagine, could ever compare—with this burning hatred I feel for Charles Evenson.*

*Esme, my beloved Esme, is so carefully nonchalant about this monster who was her husband. She has told me so little of him: that they were married at her parents' request; that he fought in the Great War. I assumed he died fighting those wretched Germans, and she let me believe this was the case, which makes me furious.*

*Of course, if I listen to my own reason (a part of me that seems to have disappeared of late), I must consider that perhaps Esme kept this information from me in order to protect him. Surely she must sense how badly I desire to take his life just as he, however unwittingly, took hers. It is all-consuming, this incoherent rage. I am nearly afraid to go to work, so powerful is my thirst for the blood of this man who harmed Esme.*

*Why she should want to protect him, however, I do not know. I am immeasurably grateful that my venom has healed her, for it would be impossible for me to bear seeing the marks that madman surely left upon her body. It is pain enough to see his evil reflected every time Esme flinches from my touch—in this act I see the deep scars he has left on her which no power of mine, mortal or immortal, can possibly heal.*

*It was for this that she explained the vile behavior of her first husband to me in the first place. Last evening we lay together after a hunt (Edward having already returned to the house—he has recently traded his anger toward Esme for aloofness and I am frankly unsure which reaction I like less), and she pulled away from my hand when I went to touch her beautiful face. I was hurt by this and so by way of explanation she offered the description of what that cretin did to her. Burned as her words are into my memory, I will not dwell on them here except to say that it is my wish that she never have to utter them again.*

*I realize now that I have begun to think of Esme as mine. Mine to keep, my duty to protect. My mate, if I dare. And while I acknowledge that she once shared her life with another, I am as yet unwilling to accept placidly the horror that befell her during that time. Thus for the first time since I myself was newborn, I again find myself battling a craving to kill.*

*Columbus is not so very far from Ashland.*  
—C. C.

I ran my fingers across my father's initials at the bottom of the page as I finished rereading this chilling entry yet again. It made me every bit as uneasy now as it had the first time



I'd read these words. Three weeks ago, I might have said that I knew Carlisle better than Esme did. Three weeks ago, I might have thought I knew Carlisle better than he himself did. Now I simply knew better—I had hardly known Carlisle at all.

I had read the journal in a single sitting, hunched over my steering wheel in the In-N-Out parking lot that night. Even after almost ninety years of sharing Carlisle's home, his life, and his thoughts, there was so much I still did not know about the man I called my father. His introspection was a hallmark of his personality, and no one in our family would contest that he was the most intellectual of us all, but I had never before grasped the complexity of the way these two things came together in his everyday thinking. He analyzed everything down to the most minute detail. If I smiled at Esme, he would go on about it for a page or more, wondering if it meant that I was starting to accept her or if I was simply imagining the joy of tearing her apart. If Esme cleaned the kitchen, he worried that she felt she had to take care of us, but also wondered hopefully if she was trying to take the role of his wife. And he wrote about me far more than I would have ever expected; even consumed as he was with figuring out his own feelings for Esme, I still appeared in nearly every entry. It was a little unnerving to realize how much time Carlisle spent thinking about me.

And then there was the Evenson rant, as I had come to think of it. He spent over a fortnight's worth of entries spewing vitriol about Esme's first husband. To read him going on and on contemplating a very grisly murder was disturbing and fascinating at once. I was still finding it difficult to imagine my resolute pacifist of a father in a fury so deep that actually made him fantasize about taking a human life. On the other hand, these entries felt like tacit approval of my current course of action. In hunting Victoria, wasn't I doing exactly what Carlisle wished he had been able to do? With Esme's first husband, there had at least been the solace that if we waited him out, he would eventually die. The same could not be said of Victoria.

It had been those entries that had given me the fuel I needed to stay hunting. I spent another week skulking around in the shadows and darkness of San Francisco, trying to pick up any trace of the blond vampire or Victoria. Two more mauling deaths—both attributed to an overpopulation of cougar—had drawn me to the outskirts of the city. I prowled around the generic suburban neighborhoods for several days, all the while battling a growing desire to move my protective circle back north to Forks. During the days I lay low, staying indoors and out of

the sun, and at night I stretched my own running capabilities to their maximum, covering huge swaths of the state before returning to the Porsche in the mornings.

Ten days had passed without incident and I had grown uneasy, knowing that my enemy would have to feed sometime soon. I took to staying as close to the human population as I could manage, hunting frequently so that I could keep my own strength at its peak. And so a moonless night had found me again standing by my car in the darkness, paging through the journal and waiting for any sign of the blond. His unsuspecting potential victims drifted idly by me, cheerful from their holiday celebrations and shopping trips and oblivious to the danger that surrounded them.

*My goodness he is so pale*, I heard, and dismissed it. Nearly everyone who looked at me, especially at night, had some sort of similar thought. But then I looked up from the page and realized that the street on which I stood was temporarily deserted. I chucked Carlisle's journal back into the Porsche and took off at a flat run in the direction from which I had heard the thought.

What I saw when I rounded the corner stopped me cold.

It was neither the blond nor Victoria. Bathed in the hazy orange glow of an aging streetlamp stood a tall, dark-haired, muscular vampire. His eyes were wild with bloodlust, and his irises, as I finally saw them, were a vivid red.

*A newborn?*

He had targeted the woman who had noticed him and unwittingly alerted me—she was maybe a quarter of a mile down the street. But just before he moved after her, he caught my scent and whirled on me, snarling.

The look in his eyes was pure confusion—I watched in his mind as he registered the color of my eyes. *Gold?* It seemed to connect with something for him. And then I caught a glimpse of *her*, red hair flying wildly behind her as she spoke: *"They have golden eyes. That is how you know them."*

This vampire *knew of my family*. And he knew Victoria!

I didn't think about newborn strength or speed in that instant. My rational mind left me completely as I let out a horrific snarl and launched myself down the street. In an instant I had pinned the unsuspecting newborn on his back, the cement breaking beneath us with a boom that

shook both our bodies. I knew I had mere seconds until he recovered from his surprise—I had to get what I could as fast as possible.

“Where is she? Where is Victoria? The redhead?” I snarled.

He shook his head, but in his mind I saw her running away, laughing, hand-in-hand with the blond vampire I’d been searching for. The image stunned me. I had assumed I was merely protecting Bella from yet another nomad—I had long ago dismissed the notion that the blond was somehow connected to this other, more important quarry of mine.

My god, I had been *right*.

I grabbed the newborn’s jaw and he did nothing. If she had created him, Victoria had told him nothing of his strength. For this I was momentarily thankful. “Where is she?!” I demanded again.

*I don’t know, I don’t know.* The vampire was shaking his head forcefully. *Texas? She said something about going to the South. But I’m not telling this gold-eyed one anything...*

And he spat in my face. My split-second of surprise was enough time for him to throw me backwards, and I slammed into the streetlamp behind us with a resounding crash. The top of the lamp fell to my shoulders, exploding around me in a shower of glass and sparks. Two car alarms went off, the honking and screaming sirens adding their chorus to the cacophony.

Having momentarily stunned me, the newborn raced away into the distance, my attack thankfully having diverted him from his prey. She continued ambling down the street, somehow oblivious to the devastation behind her.

Humans.

I used my shirt to wipe the venom from my face as I slowly returned to my car. Again behind the wheel, I paused. Did I go after the newborn? If he got too close to Forks, he might seek out our home. And moreover, knowing Bella, she would figure out some way to walk right into him if he got within a hundred miles of her. On the other hand, I couldn’t take on a newborn of that size by myself. It would take someone like Jasper, with more experience, to take that vampire down alone.

I growled, feeling suddenly caged. Nine months ago almost to the day I had found myself in a similar situation: trying to run after two dangerous vampires at once. But then I’d had help. There had been five of us; my mother and sister closing the perimeter around Charlie Swan, my father and brother with me chasing the other monster north.

And Bella had nearly lost her life anyway.

Pressing my forehead to the steering wheel, I considered my options. I could leave California and travel to Texas, in hopes of coming across Victoria there. Or I could stay here, fight not to return to Bella, and still try to destroy this newborn who might pose a threat to her. If I went after the newborn, I could at least assure myself that he was not moving toward Bella. But I would be diverted from Victoria for however long it took me to be certain.

I hurled my fist into the center of my steering wheel.

A loud bang erupted and the airbag exploded back at me, filling the car with a noisome burning odor as it slowly deflated into my lap.

I growled. Now I would need to stop and pick up shop tools somewhere.

I carefully folded the airbag back into the wheel. I was eight hundred miles from Bella, and so was the newborn; whoever he was. Had Victoria been warning him to stay away from our family? Had she even been the one to turn him, if she was no longer here? And Texas...it seemed like Victoria was on the run, but from whom? She couldn't possibly know I was after her, could she? I had barely been gone a month. On the other hand, it did make sense that she would warn others about us; perhaps try to turn the tide of other nomads against us. We had, after all, killed a member of her coven. But I hadn't even perceived their bond to be at all that strong.

I needed another dose of fury. Picking up Carlisle's journal from where it had landed on the floorboard, I thumbed through it quickly, my fingers at once finding the familiar section where my father had unleashed his rancor for Esme's first husband. But instead of falling open to the usual cathartic vitriol, it fell instead to an entry I'd read only once. My eyes skimmed across it, at first hardly taking in the words, but then they slowed as I began to read it once more.

*1 March 1921*

*How many times can a life change in such a short period of time, I wonder. St. David's Day will mean something different for me forever onward. Today Esme and I hunted, and instead of forest animals, together we killed Charles Evenson.*

*I had thought I was being careful not to seem too standoffish, but I was wrong. Esme has noticed every inch that I stand further from her, every chaste embrace that I've failed to exchange of late. As soon as we were clear of Edward this morning, she confronted me.*

*It frightened me then, and that it did is humorous now. It has been nearly two months that we've been together in this new life, and still Esme takes me by surprise daily. She is forward with me, which is refreshing. I am constantly reminded that this woman is the same one who fell fifteen feet out of a tree which, at sixteen, she should never have been climbing. Sometimes I worry that she is not enough a lady, but then, what lady would have had the audacity to tell a man she has known only scant weeks that she missed his touch? (And moreover, to recognize*

*that to be so confronted was exactly what that man needed?) At first, I was reluctant to tell her of the demonic thoughts in my head, but she sensed them surely as though she were Edward and would not rest until I had told her their contents.*

*Instead of hating me for them, she only laughed.*

*For that laughter, I am eternally grateful. Her laughter forgave me for that which I thought and healed me from the pain of bloodlust. And as though these were not gifts enough, she leaned against my body and told me words I will never forget, but which I write here merely to see them again: "It is you that I love forever, Carlisle."*

*Seeing those words I am flushed again with the desire to do nothing more than be with her until the world comes to an end. It was this that I told her today, my Esme: that I, too, would love her for all of forever.*

*And then she kissed me. It was both exquisite to feel and healing to experience. In that instant, I was whole. One with myself, at long last, and now one with Esme Anne, my mate, my love—my new life.*

*What happened in Columbus today, I do not know. But in Ashland, we laid Charles Evenson to rest.*  
—C. C.

I ran my finger across the penultimate paragraph. *I was whole*. The words stung. I had also been whole. From the moment that Bella had mumbled my name in her sleep I had known love. A love which I had understood from the beginning would always be my burden to bear alone. But for a brief moment of time Bella had shared the load; returning that love to me in fits and starts in tiny moments we shared. It was never fully the love that I had for her—how could it be? But even small as those moments were—kissing in the meadow, cuddling in her bed, her face as she told me that she wanted me forever—they had made this crushing pain of loving her more bearable.

Carlisle and Esme had killed Charles Evenson in the abstract. They had celebrated that day ever since—every St. David's Day morning a bouquet of daffodils appeared in the kitchen accompanied by some impossibly simple note, often merely *Love, Carlisle*. Whenever either of them remembered it or spoke about that day, it was only their kiss to which they referred. They had never mentioned to me the declarations to each other that had preceded it, or the tumult that Esme had healed in Carlisle through her words. I had always thought it a rather silly gesture, marking the anniversary of their first kiss. I felt chagrined for having not taken it more seriously.

Nevertheless, Carlisle had a luxury I did not; he had his love alongside him. I could not be with Bella in that way, not without hurting her in a way that none of us could heal. I would not bring Bella into this non-existence. She would know love like my parents', but at the hands

of someone who could grow old with her, who did not need to fear ending her life, who could nurture her soul with his own.

Bella was not a granite replica of her former self like Esme. The newborn was a danger to her. Victoria was a danger to her. We all were a danger to her. I had begun by removing the biggest threat in September, and now it was time to work my way down the line. It was time to protect my Bella, as I would continue to do, silently and unseen, for as long as that heart which had once beat for me continued to throb. I had no option for grand gestures of romance like my father's—Victoria had to be destroyed in a very literal sense.

Praying that eight hundred miles was enough buffer from the newborn, I shoved the key in the ignition and peeled out toward the southbound freeway.

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Houston was one of those places where it was easy to understand why cold-bloodedness was a necessary trait to truly be a predator. Nothing short of that could enable a being to sit still in this humidity. The air hung thick and wet around me; it was nearly seventy degrees despite being the dead of night in late December. If the weather had been unseasonably warm in California, it had nothing on Texas.

This was the last major populous area I had still yet to search. Dallas had yielded nothing, nor had Austin, although being around the university had been interesting and nice. I liked universities. Although most of the students thought of little more than their next beer and the next time they could jump in bed with someone, every now and then you wandered across someone who was fascinated with Kant or who had just discovered William Wordsworth. They were delightful to eavesdrop upon. But there had been no vampire sightings, even in the memories of the most observant students. So I had moved on to Houston.

Cities were the preferred hunting ground for nomadic vampires, or so I had discovered over the years of listening to the minds of those whose hunting habits were not like my own. It had seemed paradoxical to me at first; in cities humans lived so much more closely that it seemed the missing would be noticed sooner. But the opposite was true. In small towns and hamlets, people looked out for one another, and even kept a watchful eye on the recluse living in the cabin on the outskirts of town. They all knew what happened to everyone around them. It was in cities where people didn't care—a bleeding body could lay in the street and the strangers

who saw it would only look sadly in the other direction. So it was in the cities I had concentrated my hunt for Victoria and the blond vampire.

But I had turned up nothing.

The street I was on now was nearly deserted, although windows lit in the homes that flanked it shone warmly, many twinkling with the light of Christmas trees. I walked slowly below them towards my car, carefully taking in my surroundings in a last-ditch effort to find any sign of Victoria. But every breath was labored, every step became heavier. She wasn't here. And I was so far from Bella I would never be able to help her if the need arose.

A growl of sad frustration escaped my lips, and I discovered that I was having difficulty drawing breath. I stopped a moment and leaned against a solid wooden sign, hiding in the shadow cast by a streetlamp nearby as I began to reconsider my options. I could expand the search for Victoria and look further throughout Texas and the south. I could return to San Francisco and attempt to keep an eye on the newborn, if he was even still there. I could return to Washington and set up a perimeter around Forks.

Closing my eyes against the uncomfortably warm breeze, I unwittingly conjured Bella's face before me. Not happy Bella—no matter how hard I tried to bring them to mind, those images were now long-since lost to me. And nor was it her pained face from that fateful day in September. Instead I received again Alice's vision, watching once more as Bella's fitful slumber was shattered by her screams, and the familiar, fiery pain began licking at my insides once more.

*But she made it to school*, I told myself, gritting my teeth. Every day she had made it to school. Eight days had been all it had taken to rid herself of me. And of course she would let me go. Who wouldn't, after the fantastical lies I had told her? After the blasphemy I had forced her to believe?

*"You're no good for me, Bella."* If only she knew. The only thing that had *ever* been good for me, and she was gone. Gone because her danger was my fault. My selfishness need to be around her had put her squarely in harm's way, twice. I had to stay away. And I would do it precisely because it was next to impossible for me to do.

The pain seared and I staggered, reaching out to the sign for support.

"Momma, is that a ghost?"

I opened my eyes. A woman and a young girl, maybe seven or so, were hurrying hand-in-hand towards the brightly lit building behind me—a church, I realized. The sign against which I

leaned identified the building as “Grace Episcopal.” The little girl had seen me when I’d all but fallen and had thrust a questioning finger in my direction as she addressed her mother.

Her mother shushed her. “Don’t point, Lily. It’s rude to point.” She threw me a long glance. *Albino, looks like. Poor thing. And my goodness, he’s only a boy. He looks so scared. I wonder what he’s doing out alone on Christmas Eve?*

I stared at them in surprise. No wonder they were hurrying into the church. Now that I took a closer look, I could see that the church was packed with families dressed in their holiday best. The clock on the tower that rose above it read ten minutes past eleven. Midnight services.

How had it become Christmas Eve without my noticing?

It would be just after midnight in Ithaca. Esme, who was insistent about things like the establishment and maintenance of family Christmas traditions, would be leading the annual tree-trimming right about now. She and Carlisle would have gone out earlier in the day for her to select a tree that she liked—frequently the top of some other, much taller tree, which then necessitated Carlisle climbing to bring down the part she wanted. He would have done this cheerfully as always. They would put it up and wait until darkness fell, then enlist the rest of us to decorate it while Esme gave orders, or “suggestions,” as she euphemistically called them. Alice would undoubtedly ignore Esme’s direction and hang ornaments as she saw fit, inevitably protecting them from being smashed when Jasper and Emmett got into a wrestling match that toppled the tree a half-hour later.

I usually avoided the whole mess by banishing myself to the piano and providing music. We weren’t a family that sang Christmas carols, and no one was particularly religious apart from Carlisle, so my Christmas Eve repertoire was mostly classical and baroque, with some of my own compositions thrown in. I had improvised a complicated version of Silent Night some years ago that had become one of Esme’s favorites, and it was a frequent request.

Would Rosalie be playing in my absence? Would they have put on a CD?

My hand closed around the small cell phone in my pocket. I knew I needed to call, but could I? How would I convince them that I was fine? I had caused them all such grief before I’d left, the last thing I needed to do was make them worry about me more.

The congregation in the church began to sing “It Came upon the Midnight Clear,” the strains of music tempered with hundreds of voices drifting to my ears. It was a hymn I had learned myself as a child. Music was one of the few human memories that had stuck with me,



much to my surprise. When I'd once mentioned it to Carlisle, he'd told me that it was common for people who otherwise seemed to have few memories—head trauma patients, or elderly dementia—to remember songs that they had known from before. It didn't surprise him at all that it was something I had carried forward into my new life. I leaned against the sign, closing my eyes and beginning to unconsciously whisper words I'd memorized a century before:

*O ye, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low  
Who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow  
Look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing  
Oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing*

I was suddenly acutely aware of the content of these lyrics I sang without thought. *Ye beneath life's crushing load...* What load could be more crushing than the burden of loving someone who could not safely love me back?

Was I the one being ordered to rest and listen?

Out of habit I sat, pressing my back against the cool wood of the church's sign. And I listened. The congregation inside had changed hymns and were now singing "Silent Night." Closing my eyes, I let the music wash over me in waves. The arrangement the pianist was playing was strikingly similar to my own, with soaring arpeggios in the base line that carried the song such that even a human down the block would have heard its beauty. I thought of Esme, and how she would love this rendition, made even more beautiful by the rich timbre of the combined voices of the congregation. She would love this. Moreover, she would love being here with me...

I thrust my hand into my pocket and drew out the silver phone. I took a deep breath. I could do this.

Focusing on the sounds of the hundreds of voices, I dialed "1" and hit SEND.

*Speed Dial #01: Carlisle*

*Calling...*

I would have preferred a more human reaction time to collect myself further, but there was no such thing in our family. Phones were answered with undue speed, so it was before the phone really even registered the first ring that I heard my father's astonished voice:

"Edward?"

"Hi, Carlisle. Merry Christmas."

He made a quiet choking noise. “Merry Christmas, son. It’s so good to hear your voice. Where are you?”

“Houston.”

“Victoria is in *Houston*?” Carlisle’s voice rose an octave or so.

“I’m not sure,” I answered, and the story of the past two months began to pour out. Carlisle switched his phone to its speakerphone setting so that Esme and the rest of the family could hear. I told them about returning to Forks—“He managed not to go see her?” Alice had gasped—and about finding the trail of the blond vampire in Seattle. Esme gave a little squeal of disapproval when I relayed the details of my battle with the newborn in San Francisco, but Emmett cheered and congratulated me for still being in one piece. Then I told them about my last several weeks in Texas and my utter strikeout.

“I’m not sure where I’m headed next,” I admitted.

I heard Carlisle swallow. It was a tic he had when he was trying not to say something, and it usually preceded some thought he didn’t want others to hear. It was a little unnerving to not be privy to whatever he was stopping himself from saying aloud. But instead of speaking to me, he handed the phone to Esme.

“What about Forks?” she asked immediately.

I closed my eyes, dropping my head against the sign with a loud thunk. If only she knew how badly I wanted that. “I can’t,” I choked.

“Edward, we should all be there. We should be protecting Bella together. Come home. Let us go back.”

The image of Jasper lunging at Bella flashed in my mind, and I nearly felt the impact of his body at my shoulder as I deflected him and sent Bella flying.

“I don’t want a repeat of her birthday party,” I mumbled.

My mother sighed. “We’d make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“It’s who we are. She shouldn’t be with us. It’s time to let her go.” The lie came almost too easily.

“You’ll never let her go,” my mother reminded me gently. “You should be with us. And we should be with her.”

“I can’t, Esme. I’m sorry.” The idea of being home with them was delicious. I closed my eyes and prayed she would stop asking.

“Will you at least come to visit?” Her voice was strained and I was reminded vividly of the pain on her face when I’d raced past her to my room the morning I’d finally left Ithaca. If I returned, her happiness would make it next to impossible to leave them again. And I had to find Victoria.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” I whispered.

There was a pause and she said something quietly to someone, probably Carlisle, then returned to me. “Edward, we love you. Please be careful.”

“I will.” There was a brief scuffling noise as she handed the phone back to Carlisle.

“Edward,” he breathed, and I could hear his footsteps as he walked—away from the family, I presumed. “How are you, really?”

The mind of the mother who’d spotted me earlier came back to me at once. She had pegged me with an emotion I hadn’t even admitted to myself that I was feeling. But as she had ushered her daughter into the crowded church, she had read me as surely as though she were Jasper.

“I’m sc—” I started to say, but thought better of it. “I’m worried.”

My correction didn’t escape Carlisle. “You’re allowed to be scared, Edward,” he said gently. “Tell me more.”

“I haven’t found her,” I said, and the frustration in my voice surprised me. “And I just—” Just what? I was worried about any number of things. That Victoria would return to Forks before I stopped her. That the newborn would shift his range northward instead of eastward. That Bella would never move on. That she already had. How was I supposed to protect a danger magnet without causing her the pain of seeing me again?

“If Charles Evenson had really posed a threat to Esme, would you have still let him live?” I blurted.

The silence told me I’d caught Carlisle by surprise. But after a moment, he chuckled.

“I see you’ve been doing some reading.”

“Yes.”

“That part must have been distressing to you,” he said carefully. “I’m sorry for that.”

I shrugged. It had been helpful to see that even Carlisle was prone to at least thoughts of violence when it came to protecting his mate.

“You’re not perfect,” I told him, and he laughed.

"I've been trying to convince you of that for a long time. And I do think about Charles a lot. Especially since you've been gone."

"And?"

"If the situation had been the same, then yes. I suppose would probably have done exactly what you're doing. But it wasn't. Charles was human, and he thought Esme was dead. Not to mention that she was a newborn. I'm quite confident he would've ended up on the short end of *that* stick." He chuckled again.

"But even now, Edward," he said, regaining all seriousness, "are you sure that Victoria actually poses a threat to Bella?"

He had a point. Texas was nowhere near Bella or any of her family. I had no idea why Victoria might have come here—or anywhere in the south at all, save maybe Jacksonville. It certainly didn't map on to a plan to cause harm to the woman I loved.

"No," I admitted.

"Then perhaps it would be best to come home? If you wanted, we could even move someplace nearby, but where Bella wouldn't know about us. Outside Vancouver?"

My heart lifted at once. The idea was delicious. To go home, to be with Carlisle and Esme, hang out with Emmett and Jasper, banter with Alice—even Rosalie didn't sound like such a bad idea right now. If I pushed the Porsche to its limits, I could be in Ithaca by the afternoon. Carlisle would make a fire, and we'd all sit around it. I'd look at everyone else's Christmas gifts...

But then Victoria would still be out there. I had vowed to destroy her—not because she was trying to hurt Bella, but because she knew too much. If she was far from Forks, so much the better, but it didn't change the fact that she needed to be removed.

"I promised," I mumbled.

"Promised who?"

"Me. I have to find her. I have to keep looking. It's all I have to hold onto right now."

There was a long pause on my father's end. "You have us, Edward," he said finally. "You will always have us. Please don't forget that."

I closed my eyes. "Thank you, Carlisle."

"Always." He paused again. "Are you sure you don't need help? I could be there later today, easily."

Carlisle had done the same math I had. Pressing my head against the cool wood of the sign, I was again filled with hope. I imagined Carlisle in the passenger seat as we zipped throughout the south in my Porsche. Maybe the two of us could even go back and take care of the newborn and then resume the hunt. It had been decades since he and I had been alone together like that.

But then I remembered the traditions that I was missing tonight, and Esme's gentle insistence on the phone that we stay together. I couldn't possibly ask Carlisle to leave the rest of the family. I had caused them more than enough pain already.

"I'm okay, Carlisle," I answered. "If I need your help, I'll ask for it. I promise."

He sighed. "Then Merry Christmas, Edward. We love you. Please call again soon."

"Merry Christmas. I love you, too."

I snapped the phone closed and slid it back into my pocket. People were beginning to trickle out of the church, laughing and wishing one another a Merry Christmas. I watched for a moment as families walked by: cherubic toddlers asleep in their parents' arms, normally sullen teenagers walking arm in arm with their mothers and fathers. I watched two excited siblings begin running around after each other, giggling and shrieking until their mother stopped them and called them back toward the car. It reminded me of playing with Emmett during our winter hunts, which inevitably devolved into chases and drawn-out snowball fights. A sharp pang ripped through me that for the first time in weeks had nothing to do with Bella.

It was time to leave. I turned and walked slowly away from the church, slipping through the dark alleyway between two buildings back to my car.

Sinking into the driver's seat, I reviewed the conversation with Carlisle and Esme. Carlisle was right; there was no reason to believe that Victoria was indeed after Bella—all the signs pointed to exactly the opposite. But what would I do if I was not hunting Victoria? Slide into dark corners of our home again, and let the pain consume me for the rest of time?

I clenched my fist but before there was a chance for me to break some other part of the dashboard, there came a sharp rap at my window. Too lost in thought, I had failed to pick up the thoughts of the person who had approached. I tuned into them as I swiveled in the drivers' seat to see who it was.

*Well if it isn't Edward Cullen*, came the amused thought, and I looked up into a pair of glimmering burgundy eyes. A tall male vampire stood next to the car, hand-in-hand with his

much smaller mate, who was smiling beautifully beside him. Their blond hair shimmered in the light of the streetlamps. Both were peering into my car excitedly, looking thoroughly entertained at having snuck up on me. I rolled down the window so that I could address them more easily.

“Peter? Charlotte? What are you doing here?”

## Chapter 9: In Giving

The cold wind battered my torso as I rushed into the blackness of the forest. The temperature was somewhere well below freezing, and I had been careful to wear a heavy coat to work the previous evening. Now free from human eyes, I ran shirtless and barefoot across the frozen ground, the wind whipping snow into my face and hair. The rush of light breeze from behind me told me that Esme was close on my heels—she didn't know where we were headed. I had chosen the spot three nights earlier, in anticipation of the impending dark night. It was over two centuries now that I had immersed myself in this ritual, but only a mere eighty-four years that I had shared it. I still wasn't quite used to having Esme along with me.

It had been in 1799 that I had stood outside a church in the young state of Massachusetts as the Lutherans within it celebrated the fourth Sunday of Advent. I had lived only ten short years in the New World at that point, and I had begun to find that, despite how at odds I had been with Aro, Marcus, and Caius, I nevertheless missed their companionship. And so I had been caught up short by the sound of the hopeful congregation as they worshipped and celebrated and had done something that had been foreign to me for a nearly a hundred forty years—I had begun to pray.

I passed the whole night there, kneeling in the mud outside the church. The congregation left, and still I stayed in prayer until dawn began to break and I was forced to race through the forest back to my modest home. I prayed for myself, for the people I had known and lost, for the friendship I was already beginning to crave. I prayed for the strength to continue in my chosen profession. I prayed that my prayer would be heard; that the God I'd once worshipped might still love a damned creature as myself.

It had been a long night, almost imperceptibly longer and darker than the one before or the one that followed, and as I had run home I had laughed when I recognized the irony. I had found fit to worship the God in whose name my father had persecuted so many on a holiday that belonged to those he hated: the Pagan Yule. But what more fitting time for a creature of the night to worship than on the longest night of the year?

So it became that I had celebrated Solstice all over the northern United States, in each of the places I had lived, for two hundred six years. The winter of 1918 had found me in worship just feet from the house as I kept a watchful eye over a newborn Edward; in 1921 it had been he who'd kept watch over Esme while I'd gone further away. I called it collecting myself; Edward called it being ridiculous; Esme called it nothing, she simply came along. She did not believe that the God who loved the humans could have mercy on us, too, but she did believe in me.

I slowed my run as I reached the tiny trail I had discovered three days before. It was at the edge of the gorge twenty miles from our home, half a mile from the main trail, leading to a ledge too dangerous for humans to wander onto. Bright yellow signs at the trail's edge warned of the danger of falling to death over the falls. I sprang from the trail to the ledge obscured by the half-frozen waterfall, then turned to catch Esme as she did the same.

She smiled as she landed in my arms. "That was unnecessary," she whispered, pressing her head to my chest. She released me a moment later and went to dangle her feet over the ledge, her legs shining white in the pale moonlight.

Folding my legs beneath me, I pressed my bare back against the freezing rock behind me and laid my forearms on my knees. It brought a smile to my face that I, who had once been berated into taking the appropriate posture for prayer, now assumed positions more commonly used by the moors of the East. Beside me I could hear Esme breathing as she sat, and below us the steady trickle of water, the small bit of the thunderous falls that had resisted freezing. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, the scent of ice, of Esme, the cotton of my slacks, the bracken along the rock wall behind me reaching my senses at once as I began to speak.

I could feel Esme's gaze on me as I recited several psalms of penitence and, between them, offered petitions of my own. Sometimes I prayed aloud, sometimes I prayed silently. I wasn't conscious of when I was speaking and I didn't care anyway. I prayed that Edward would return home safely, his soul healed from its hurting; that Rosalie would find some comfort in the Christmas season; that I could provide healing for Tony. I asked for forgiveness for the ways in which I had not supported my family as I ought to have, for the times I had been distant, for the ways in which we all had hurt one another over the past months. I thanked God for the good moments of the year, for Bella, for Edward's happiness, even for the ways the sadness had brought our family together. I thanked God, as I always did, for providing me with companionship after so long.



It was nearly two hours later that I allowed my voice finally to fall silent. I shifted posture, pulling my knees to my chest and resting my chin atop them. A moment later Esme's hands slid over my shoulders, clasping together over my chest as she wedged herself behind me. She laid her chin on my bare shoulder, saying nothing as we both stared out over the gorge. The waning moon played over the ice and water below us, its light dancing in erratic patterns as we looked on.

Esme's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Are you going to pray your prayer?" she whispered.

"It isn't mine," I muttered. "I learned it so recently." It was a Catholic prayer of all things, which had made me feel uneasy at first. Old prejudices still not quite erased, I supposed. I had first heard it from a soldier come home from the Great War, who had prayed it on his deathbed in Chicago. It said so many of the things I wished for my own life that I couldn't help but adopt it, and I had made it part of my Solstice prayers shortly thereafter.

Esme moved to my side, laying her head on my shoulder. "I know it isn't really yours," she said quietly. "But I still think of it that way. I'd like to hear it."

Smiling, I put an arm over her slender shoulders. "*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace,*" I began quietly. "*Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.*"

"*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*"

"Amen," I muttered.

Esme sighed contentedly, her breath tickling my neck. "That one is so beautiful. And it will always mean you, every time that I hear it." She pressed her lips to my cheek.

I shrugged, staring down at the water below us. The shallower parts of the falls had already frozen, but the deeper parts thundered on, churning the river into a black froth at the bottom of the gorge. To meditate on that prayer was always challenging, but tonight the words seemed to call me to an impossible task. *Where there is despair*, I repeated to myself silently as I stared into the swirling water. How was I supposed to sow hope when it was I who was in pain? We were four days from Christmas, and still without word from Edward. It had taken me years

to recover from Edward's last disappearance and those years had been filled with anxiety—I had even foolishly tried to mate him off to keep him around.

The thought of Rosalie made my stomach turn with guilt. She and I had developed an uneasy truce after her angry homecoming and we were now speaking, albeit tersely, but she had yet to smile at me in the ten days she'd been home. We gave each other wide berths like a pair of unfriendly housecats. Yet I suspected that we each had our guards up for the same reason: neither of us wanted to admit how much Edward's absence hurt. So we avoided each other instead.

A rustling noise from beside me signaled that Esme was shifting position. She sat in front of me between my legs, pulling my arms around her like a shawl as the wind whipped through our hair and splattered water from the falls across our bodies. We were quiet for a long time, she every bit as lost in thought as we sat together in the moonlit dark. There were so many things I wanted to say and to worry about, prayers I had yet to offer. But it was Esme who finally broke the silence.

“Are we ever going to see him again?”

I gulped. Had that not been the very center of my prayers this evening? That Edward would successfully hunt Victoria, and once he found her, he would rejoin us and we could begin anew? But as I looked down at Esme, the moonlight glinting off her hair, I knew that it was a hope to which I was clinging irrationally. The son I had once known was never going to be the same after loving Bella, just as I had been permanently changed by the woman who sat now in my arms. For Edward to return to us would mean reconnecting with the pain of leaving Bella—of that much I was certain. As much as I wanted him back at my side, I wasn't sure I could bear seeing him curled up again next to the radiator. If he wasn't actively protecting Bella, was he even he capable of an existence beyond the feral being that had huddled at the foot of our staircase? A knot formed in my throat as I let myself acknowledge the truth: unless something else changed, Edward would likely never find the strength to return.

Running my hands through Esme's hair, I kissed her neck and pulled her closer to me. “I think we will,” I whispered anyway. “When he's taken care of Victoria.”

Esme sighed softly and closed her eyes. I rested my chin on her head and enjoyed the feeling of her weight against me. And so in the darkness we sat, listening to the rushing water, both fervently trying to believe my lie.

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“So everything seems to be healing just fine, and your function is almost normal. I’d like to see you back in three weeks so that we can check on things again. In the meantime, please keep an eye out for rejection symptoms. Fever, pain, fatigue—”

“—basically if it feels like I have the flu I should get my ass in here,” my patient finished for me, smiling.

“Daniel,” his wife chastised him. She shot me a sympathetic look. “Only my husband would be this crass to the man who saved his life.”

I smiled. “Kidney transplant these days is almost routine,” I answered. Something about which I never ceased to be amazed. “It’s not much in the way of a heroic act anymore.”

“Well, doc, you made it so I can piss, so that makes you my hero.”

Daniel’s wife smacked his arm and I laughed.

“It’s been a pleasure treating you, Mr. Spence,” I said. “Take care, please. The scheduler will make your follow-up appointment.”

We shook hands and I exited the exam room, sighing as I looked down the hallway. There were still two other rooms with yellow plastic flags sticking out from the doorjamb—my patients, waiting. This was one thing I truly didn’t enjoy about modern medicine, and one reason I preferred working in surgery rather than as a general practitioner. The speed with which we were expected to dispense patient care was mind-numbing. When I was seeing outpatients, I was often lucky if my appointments were spread a half-hour apart. We sent PAs in to get histories, and then we swooped in with a diagnosis and a pen to sign prescriptions. It was all I could do sometimes to get a full once-over of my patient and make sure I wasn’t missing some other ailment that the patient hadn’t mentioned or noticed. I didn’t know how human doctors did it. Well, actually, that wasn’t true. Human doctors simply made errors. Medicine itself had come a long way from the days I’d made house calls in the middle of the night and conducted examinations by lantern light, but I couldn’t help but feel something had been lost in the process.

I used the computer in the hallway to alert the checkout receptionist that Mr. Spence needed to schedule a follow-up appointment, and then looked at my patient list. My heart lifted when I did so.

*13:40–Mason, Anthony* the screen read.

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Tony had been released from the hospital slightly before Christmas. The count of his cancer cells had been just over the ten percent we would have liked to see, and well above the five percent at which we could declare a remission. But we had sent him home anyway, and he had spent two weeks with his family and friends. We had all pretended it was because his condition was good enough, but everyone knew the unspoken subtext—none of us wanted to deprive him of what might be his last Christmas.

My jaw clenched involuntarily, but then I shook my head, disgusted with myself. I was Tony's *doctor*, for Heaven's sake. Nothing more. If we had to fall back to a protocol that was only pain management, that was what I had to do.

But the idea made me ill.

Taking a deep breath, I headed for the first yellow-flagged exam room and rapped on the door.

"Yo," came the familiar voice from the other side. I opened the door.

The boy dangling his legs off the exam table actually looked for the first time like a cancer patient. Even without looking at his vitals, I could tell he'd lost another five, maybe seven pounds. He had been on the wiry side to begin with, but now he looked downright thin. His ever-bright eyes were more sunken into his increasingly pallid face. The biggest change, though, was his hair. The dark locks that had made him so boyishly handsome when he'd started treatment were now shorn into a close military cut, undoubtedly to hide the places where his hair was thinning from the chemotherapy.

I forced a smile onto my face. "Hello, Tony." Acknowledging the dark-haired man who sat in the chair next to the examining table, I added, "Kurt, it's good to see you again."

I'd met Tony's parents on several occasions. Kurt was an architect who usually split his weeks between his firm and apartment in Manhattan and his family in Ithaca, but he'd spent more time at home since Tony's diagnosis. He and his wife, Anne, had been at the hospital almost constantly. Both were loving, pleasant people who were bravely trying to hide their worry. It was strange how that was something I'd never considered that I might someday have in common with my patients' families.

"Hey, Dr. C.," Tony answered, a smile breaking out on his face. "I see the Cancun thing didn't work out for you."

I laughed. “That’s right, I’d forgotten about that order.” Before we’d released Tony for Christmas, he’d jokingly told me that I needed a tan and ordered me to go someplace warm for the holidays on his behalf.

Taking a second to glance at the notes made by the PA who had seen Tony first, I saw that his appetite had decreased but that he otherwise was reporting feeling normal for someone undergoing a treatment protocol such as his. All of his vitals looked good, although I had been right about the weight—he was down another six pounds.

“So, how was Christmas?” I asked, putting my fingers at his neck so that I could palpate his lymph nodes. “Look up, please.”

He tilted his chin upward as he answered. “It was pretty good. I got a bunch of cool stuff. You know, to keep me busy when I’m here. A sixty gig iPod, and a DVD player and a Nintendo DS and stuff. My aunt bought me books, though. Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings.” He rolled his eyes.

“I’ve heard both of those are good,” I offered, gaining instant respect for his aunt. Although if she were really trying to get Tony educated beyond the realm of video games, it would have been better to hand him an anthology of Shakespeare. I thought for a moment. Did I have a modern one at home I could part with?

“Your hands are still cold, Dr. C. Cancun would probably fix that, too.”

I laughed. If only it would. “Sorry. I do my best.” I removed my hands from his neck. Nothing felt swollen, which was good. The leukemia wouldn’t in itself cause that, but often chemo patients got some other opportunistic infection and I was glad to see that was not yet the case. I placed the chest piece of my stethoscope on Tony’s back so that I could listen to his lungs. “Please just breathe normally,” I told him, and continued our conversation. “So aside from gifts, how have the last few weeks been?”

Kurt shot his son a sharp look, which I didn’t miss. Tony rolled his eyes.

“You should tell him about Christmas dinner,” Kurt urged, laying a hand on Tony’s pale arm. His arm sported several small bruises, I noticed. Another not so good indicator. I made a mental note to add that observation to Tony’s chart.

Tony looked away. “I just hurled, Dad. That happens all the time.”

“And fainted,” his father added, looking at me. “We were pretty happy because it seemed like Tony was starting to get his appetite back—at least for turkey and mashed potatoes at any

rate.” He shot his son a gentle smile. “But then he looked a little green and threw up before he had a chance to get to the bathroom, which is unusual.”

This generated another eye roll from Tony.

“Well, it is, son. I know Dr. Cullen is your friend, but he still needs to know about this kind of stuff.”

I nodded, removing the stethoscope from Tony’s back and sitting down. “Can you tell me more about it, Tony?” I pulled the wheeled stool closer to the exam table and rested my forearms on my knees.

He looked away and appeared to be intent on studying the sphygmomanometer on the wall. “I just got sick is all.”

“Was it preceded by anything unusual? Do you feel like you overate? Anything at Christmas dinner that isn’t your usual diet?”

For this I got a withering look. “I’m fifteen. There’s not a lot that’s not in my usual diet, Dr. C.”

I grinned. “Fair enough. And the fainting?”

“It was only for a second.”

“He was out only until he hit the floor,” Kurt supplied. “Thankfully his uncle was at the table next to him and caught him. It took him maybe oh, three minutes to get back to making sarcastic remarks at us?”

I chuckled. “Well, sarcasm recovery time is generally a reliable health indicator.” The fainting and the vomiting were both common side effects of the chemotherapy, although Tony would have been what, two weeks out of his last round by the time he’d eaten Christmas dinner? I visualized his record in my mind. Yes, we’d taken out his PICC line on December thirteenth, so it was almost exactly two weeks.

Swiveling back to the computer mounted on the wall, I pulled up the window to requisition a lab appointment for Tony. “I think it’s probable that the fainting and the vomiting were both just side effects from the chemo,” I told them as I entered the request, “but I’m going to put in an order for a blood draw anyway. You’ll need to go over to the lab when you leave here and they’ll get a few vials.” I checked the boxes for a full cell count, as well as analyses to get a count of cancer cells.

“You ahlvays seem to vant my blood, Doctor Cahllen,” Tony joked, affecting a Russian accent.

I laughed. Leave it to Tony to offhandedly accuse me of being a vampire. If only he knew how few of them actually lived in that region—Stefan and Vladimir liked to keep their hunting grounds as free from competition as possible.

“Yes, well—it’s unfortunately an important diagnostic tool,” I answered. “But you can keep most of it, how about that? We won’t drain it all. At least not today.”

He shrugged. “Sounds good.”

Kurt was studying me carefully. “So, what’s next?” he asked cautiously.

I hit “submit” on the lab request and turned back to them, resting my forearms on my knees as I spoke. “Well, Tony, we’ll take a look at the blood,” I told him. “Then based on that we’ll make some decisions. It’s probably going to mean another round of induction therapy. Your leukemic myeloblast count wasn’t quite low enough in December to let us start the next phase, but we’ll take a look at it now.”

Tony stiffened. “Which means I move back in here.” He rolled his eyes again, but behind the sarcastic expression I caught the hint of pain.

“Believe me, Tony, I wish there was another way.”

“Is there another way?” Kurt shifted his posture so that he was leaning toward me. “What about bone marrow?”

I nodded. That would be an option, and it was one that Tony’s other doctors and I had already discussed. The problem was that we needed to get the cancer cell count low enough for the new marrow to be effective.

“We’re not quite there yet,” I answered. “But if this next round of chemo goes well—and assuming we even need a next round—then Tony might be in the position to go ahead and prepare for that.”

“Can we be tested?” Kurt’s expression was understandably anxious.

That was a relatively simple thing that we could do for them, I supposed. It would make Kurt and Anne feel more empowered, which was a good thing. “I think we can arrange for that.”

“And Ashley?”

“Ashley?” I frowned.

Tony blanched. “She’s too little, Dad. I don’t want her to deal with this crap.”

Aha. That was right. Tony had mentioned that he had a younger sister.

“Siblings are usually closer matches, aren’t they?” Kurt continued, ignoring Tony’s dissent.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “They are. But—” There were a number of issues. Getting a tissue donation from a minor was tricky, especially when it was for a sibling. A judge would have to determine based on the opinions of a child psychiatrist that Tony’s sister was able to understand the risks involved in the donation process and was willingly entering into it with no coercion from her parents or her brother. Also, if Tony was against the idea, it would make the process that much more difficult.

“Why don’t we get you and Anne tested first,” I offered. “We can cross the bridge about Ashley when we come to it. Besides, I need to see the results of this latest blood work before we do anything. We might not even need to think about that step.” I gave Tony my most reassuring smile, but he was still scowling.

“When will the test results be in?” Kurt tried to pat Tony’s arm, but his son pulled away. A pain shot through me as I saw this—jerking away was a typical move of Edward’s when I tried to demonstrate my affection physically. It was always a sign that he was hurting more than he was willing to let on.

“We should have them by the end of the day,” I told him quietly. “Is it okay if I call you in the evening?” I would run the labs myself, if I needed to. I had a better eye than the lab techs anyway.

Kurt nodded and offered his hand. “Thank you, Dr. Cullen.”

“Carlisle,” I answered, shaking it.

“Thanks, Carlisle.”

“Always. It was a pleasure seeing you today, Tony. I hope I won’t have to see you again right away, though.”

Tony glared at me. “Yeah, no offense, Dr. C. But I hope I don’t see you again soon either.”

I smiled. “None taken.” Standing, I put a hand on the doorknob. “Let me get your lab order off the printer, and then you can check out and head over there. Take the elevator down to floor 2 and then turn right. There are signs. It was good to see you both.”



Exiting the room, I went to the printer in the hallway and pulled off the blood work requisition to check it. The print jumped erratically on the page, and I stared at it a moment before I realized that it was my hand that was trembling.

Laying the paper down, I put my hands on the counter and hung my head. I couldn't let Tony and his father see me get broken up over this. *Get a grip, Carlisle. He's just a patient. You've been practicing medicine for two centuries. You've lost thousands of patients.*

My breath caught in my throat as I realized what I'd just thought. Was I already chalking Tony up to a loss? This bright, funny boy, who eerily seemed to see right through me; one of the few sources of my laughter in the last several months?

I couldn't lose that. I couldn't lose him. I *wouldn't* lose him.

Taking a deep breath and steadying my hands, I turned to take the lab request back into the exam room.

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"How do six people who don't sweat manage to generate this much laundry?" I grumbled to no one in particular as I pulled a heap of socks, towels, t-shirts and boxer shorts out of the dryer. Laying the warm clothes atop the machines, I dumped a sodden load from the washer into the dryer. I hummed quietly as I began folding the dryer load, sorting the garments into six stacks. As I turned back toward the dryer, a voice spoke up from behind me.

"There is no need for you to do anyone's laundry except maybe your own. We're all adults here. If you didn't like it, we wouldn't go letting you do it."

I smiled, turning to find a smirking Jasper. When Esme had first come to live with me and Edward, she had almost immediately taken over most of the tasks involved in keeping house. It had bothered me a great deal, for I didn't want her to feel as though I had turned her so that she could become our maid. True to her usual forwardness, however, it hadn't taken Esme long to point out that, as a newborn, she was stronger than I, and thus I obviously was not forcing her to do something she didn't want to do. So I had learned to relax and let myself be taken care of. The one chore for which Esme had never had much enthusiasm, however, was the laundry, and so I had gladly shouldered that task. Jasper was right; I did enjoy it. These mundane details of life made me feel more human, and folding my family's underwear was a very small price to pay for that.

“How is Alice?” I asked as I started in on the pile of towels. I had heard the two of them making their daily check-in on the phone just before I’d come into change loads.

“She’s fine. It sounds like she’s finding out a lot. She said she sat all night last night in the asylum hoping she’d remember something, but she didn’t. Tomorrow she’s going to go spy on her niece, I guess.”

“She has a niece?”

“Yes, her sister’s daughter. She’s in her seventies. Lives in a retirement community in Biloxi.” He sighed, and then added, “She’s strong.”

“Alice?”

He nodded, picking up one of the folded towels and turning it over in his hands as he spoke. “I know it’s always bothered her not to remember. I’m proud of her for going to find out.”

I was proud of her, too. I had been so absorbed in my work that it had taken me until after Rosalie and Emmett had come home to learn that Alice had been steadily researching the information that Bella had uncovered about her history back in March. The day after Christmas Alice had announced that she had done as much as she could do from New York and so she’d be making a trip down to Mississippi to continue her research into her family there. She’d left just after New Year’s and had been gone for a little over a week now. She called Jasper at least once, sometimes several times a day as she found out new information. I found that I was becoming anxious to hear her updates as well.

“And Esme?” Jasper asked, leaning against the washing machine. “Where is she this afternoon?”

“At the workshop.” My Christmas gift to Esme and Rosalie had been to lease a warehouse space not far from the house and fill it with all the necessary tools for carpentry and mechanic work. There was only so much room in a seventeenth century home for power tools, and there was no place to work on cars. Esme had been delighted, and although Rosalie had rolled her eyes and only commented that we still needed to ship the cars out from Washington, I had an inkling that she was pleased with the gift as well.

“So that means it’s just us men folk here,” he said, a rare hint of teasing behind his voice. “Doin’ the washin’, as it’s meant to be. You get the bluing, I’ll get the tub...”

I laughed. “The bluing? What do you think this is, eighteen eighty?” I plucked a white bottle off the shelf above the machines and handed it to him. “We got fancy things for doin’ the washin’ now.”

“Clorox Plus for High Efficiency machines,” he read aloud. “Yes. More effective, I’m sure.”

Placing the bottle back on the shelf, Jasper picked up a pair of boxer shorts which read “Bite Me” across the fly and wrinkled his nose. “I sure do hope these are Emmett’s.”

I laughed. “Well, they certainly aren’t Edward’s, that’s for sure.”

Jasper shot me a look of pity, and it took me a moment to realize why. When I did, however, a chill shot through me. I hadn’t meant it that way; just that obviously if they weren’t Jasper’s, and they weren’t mine, then Emmett and Edward were the only two left. It had not been my intention to bring up Edward, but my gut twisted nevertheless.

Edward had called just two nights after I had prayed for his safety. He was in Texas, of all places. I had replayed the conversation in my head almost hourly for the ensuing week, wondering if there was anything I could have said differently to cause him to change course. His pain had been wholly transparent—he had even begun to tell me that he was scared. Admitting vulnerability was something I knew was next to impossible for Edward to do, and that he had done so made me ache. The very hint of that word had been enough to make me nearly jump in my car that second and track him down. But he was determined to stay out hunting alone, so I had once again let him slip away.

Jasper frowned as he perceived my increasing tension. “How are you doing, Carlisle?” he asked gently.

I cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t you already know?”

He nodded. “But I’d be interested to know what you think.” He dragged a jumbled pile of t-shirts toward himself, and began to fold them slowly.

“I—” I stopped. Could I even isolate my emotions any longer? The undercurrent to everything was that almost four months later, I was still reeling from Edward’s departure. I had no idea where he was now, and I worried he would mistake my concern for mistrust if I called him. I was worried about Tony, who we’d readmitted for a third round of induction therapy three days earlier. For him not to have progressed in his treatment was frightening, to say the least. I was trying to be courageous for Esme, who had gone through another two weeks of berating

herself about Edward after he'd called on Christmas. And I was still in the same strained holding pattern with my older daughter. Rosalie and Emmett were still at home, using Edward's room, although at the moment they were using the house as a stopover between trips throughout the Northeast. They'd been skiing in Vermont, clubbing in Manhattan, and had taken an extended hunting trip to Nova Scotia, where Emmett had talked Rosalie into letting him go dog sledding. Most of the time they were gone, but the tension still hung in the house as though it were part of the décor.

Jasper nodded. "Good."

"Good?"

"I'm feeling individual things from you," he said. "Means you're taking stock instead of just standing there being all a mess."

I raised my eyebrows as I began to sort through the pile of socks. They were also mostly Emmett's, plain white athletic socks which Alice ordered him by the gross since he managed to destroy at least a pair or two a week. It made quick work of the sorting, and soon there was a pile of white cotton/poly balls before me on the dryer. Jasper watched me quietly but intently.

"It's good you find this soothing," he offered after a moment. "I don't know if I realized before how much you like housework."

Moving at full speed, he collected the folded clothes atop the dryer into the plastic basket I'd left on the floor, and I found myself with an armload of laundry in an instant.

"Thank you," I said, and he nodded, exiting the living room at my side. As part of her restoration, Esme had cleverly hidden most of the modern conveniences in the house, and the laundry room appeared to be a straightforward closet door in the living room which actually led into a space that Esme had carved out by moving the west wall of my study. Jasper accompanied me as I dropped the laundry off in each of its owners' rooms. My uneasy worry did not dissipate however. Jasper was only using his gift to read.

When he'd helped me stack the towels in the antique wardrobe that Esme was using as a linen closet, Jasper turned to me. "When do you leave for work?"

"An hour and a half." I was looking forward to getting in and checking on Tony. A night of work would be relaxing. "Why do you ask?"

"Would you like a game of chess before then?"

The offer startled me. Chess was a popular pastime in our household and was the source of many a bet. I enjoyed playing, but I'd been so absorbed in research of late that I hadn't played since Edward had left. This of course immediately filled me with sadness, causing Jasper to close his eyes.

I ran a hand through my hair and tried to brighten my mood. "That sounds great."

"I knew that it would." Jasper studied me carefully as we made our way back toward the living room, no doubt trying to make sense of the mood that I was trying valiantly to mask. Reaching the cabinet where we kept our multiple chess sets, I bent down to retrieve one. When I stood again, Jasper's hand was on my shoulder.

"Let it go," he said quietly. "I know it feels strange after two hundred and seventy years, but you're not alone anymore and you haven't been for a long time. There's no sense in you feeling lonely—it's not gonna help."

Loneliness. I hadn't even put my finger on it, had I? But Jasper was right. I had thought it was worry, and sadness and grief, but I felt alone. I swallowed. Surrounded by family, and here I was still desperately seeking companionship. I was behaving like Edward, withdrawing from the support our family offered in my own misguided attempt at self-sufficiency. I hung my head, both ashamed and appreciative that Jasper had called my behavior into question.

"Edward is as stubborn as they get," Jasper offered, no doubt reading the shift in my mindset. "He'll come through this okay. He's hurting, but he'll live. You gotta have faith."

I cracked a small smile. "I'm the only one in this family who has faith."

"Faith in God, yeah. I'm talking about faith in people, Carlisle. Stop praying for miracles and trust the folk you've got around you."

Was that what I was doing? I wanted Edward to come home. I wanted him to realize that being apart from Bella wasn't working out for him. I wanted him not to have to worry about Victoria. I wanted Tony to live a long, full life. Were those things too much to ask for?

"Miracles would be nice, though," I answered distractedly, and Jasper laughed as he took the chess set from me.

"Some think that it is a miracle to walk on water," he said loftily as the board and pieces materialized on the dining table before him in an instant of vampire speed. "But I tell you, the true miracle is to walk every day on earth."

I raised an eyebrow. "A Whitlock original? That's certainly not Aristotle."

“Thich Nat Hanh.” He gestured to my chair. “Eastern philosophy this term.”

Well that was new. Jasper was quoting a Vietnamese monk. “A former confederate soldier is quoting Buddhist philosophy?”

“The color of one man’s skin’s got no bearing on his capacity for philosophical thought,” Jasper answered, taking the seat across from me and smirking.

I laughed. “Are you calling me a racist?”

“No, I’m calling you a coward—stop stalling.” He tapped a finger in the middle of the board. “Sit back and let me school you at chess, old man. A thousand dollars?”

I nodded, giving Jasper a smile. He was so reclusive at times, but then he would step forward, as he had this morning, and be very quietly profound. I was grateful. *Some think it is a miracle to walk on water*, indeed.

Picking up my king’s pawn, I decided to walk on earth awhile.

## Chapter 10: Spitfire

*Yeah, baby, show it—take it off!*

*Bourbon Street? More like Miller Lite Street...but I'll take it!*

*She's a pretty little thing. Hooker? College student? Either way...*

Disgusted, I picked up the pace of my walking. The sooner I could escape the city center, the sooner I could shrug the depraved thoughts that pounded my head. I had lived almost a hundred five years without seeing anything on this order, and nothing, including Peter's incessant descriptions, could have prepared me for the city of New Orleans at Mardi Gras. It was truly how I would have imagined hell—equal parts revelry and gross debauchery. Peter had told me to be prepared but there was honestly no way to steel oneself for the constant assault on one's senses. Nudity, cat-calling, drunkenness, rock music amidst jazz, screaming, singing, and everywhere rivers of purple and gold and green that sometimes were floats and beads and clothing and other times were the half-naked bodies themselves. And on top of that the thoughts: sick, base, inebriated thoughts that were ubiquitous and impossible to shut out.

Charlotte and Peter told me that this was actually a low year, that the hurricane that had ripped through the city a few months before meant that only just over half the usual attendees were present. There was an air of desperation and relief about the celebrations; it was as though the whole city was simultaneously deeply grateful to be back in this mode, and yet the dark cloud of fear and memories of too-recent destruction still hung in the minds of its people. The center of town had been restored in the last five months, and the celebrating humans probably didn't notice the stench of fetid lake water still emanating from the asphalt. I was sure they didn't, in fact. Because if they did, how could they go on dancing? The whole city reeked of death and despair.

Peter, Charlotte and I made it a point to check in every now and again at the hotel where I'd reserved a suite and parked the Porsche. When they were well-fed, the three of us would go out together looking for Victoria. This meant being in the very center of the celebration, however, and the pounding music and screaming people were quickly driving me to madness.

And so while my fellows hunted, I wandered.

I was grateful to have my companions; they were jovial and lighthearted, and through their connections to Jasper, felt like some twisted extension of my own kin. But their very presence caused me pain—every time Charlotte stroked a hand down Peter’s face, I remembered Bella’s touch; every time they laughed, I was reminded of the long time it had been since I myself had done so.

Peter and Charlotte had been Jasper’s coven mates for several years before Jasper wandered off in search of a lifestyle that quell the pain of hearing his victims’ terror. I had met Peter and his mate several times before. They’d visited us just a few months ealier, shortly after I’d first met Bella. I had spent those days keeping a tight perimeter around the Swan residence—despite Jasper’s insistence that neither Peter nor Charlotte would harm “the object of my obsession,” Peter was not known for his self-control. So I had barely crossed paths with the two of them save a brief moment when they had said goodbye to Jasper in the house. I had been in a particularly tempestuous mood that day, having spent the whole weekend away from Bella, and had been taking my feelings out on the piano via an excessively loud rendition of one of my more melancholy compositions. Charlotte had thought I was behaving very oddly at the time.

As far as I could tell, that impression hadn’t changed.

The two of them had been on their way to an all-night roller-skating party on Christmas Eve when they had detected my scent around the Porsche. They had approached cautiously, not sure who they would find.

“We should have known it was a Cullen,” Peter had said when I’d acknowledged them.

“Who besides a Cullen would own a Porsche?” Charlotte added, giving the car a loving glance. *All that money...but what a price.* She shuddered as she imagined Jasper drinking from the jugular of a deer.

I opened the door and stepped out into the thick night air. I could still hear the strains of laughter and well-wishes of the people streaming out of the Episcopal church a few blocks away. Leaning against the car, I crossed my arms over my chest and looked the pair of them up and down again. They were strikingly similar, dressed in dark jeans and black leather jackets, both with platinum blond hair that hung to their shoulders. Charlotte had on a pair of black gloves with the fingertips cut off, which I later discovered were standard attire at the roller rink.

“What are you doing here?” I repeated my question.



“Aww, Eddie, buddy, you don’t think that we could resist finding out who was in our territory, did you?” Peter asked teasingly. “You’d do the same.” *Protecting our turf.*

The growl was through my lips before I thought better of it. “It’s *Edward*,” I hissed.

Peter let out a barking laugh. “Sorry, Edd-Edward. But really, you’d come after some vampire who walked into Forks, right? Well, you have Alice, so I guess that doesn’t count. She always sees us coming.” *Although perhaps you wouldn’t know what I mean—I suppose you don’t have to worry about someone cutting into your supply of...fauna.* He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“She’s not perfect,” I said, as a memory surfaced with agonizing speed. The eight of us, enjoying a perfect game of baseball—we had been having fun. Then Alice’s voice “*I didn’t see—I couldn’t tell.*” And James’ coven, emerging from the woods...

A second image flew at me as fast as the first—Bella, her body broken, on the floor of the dance studio. My voice, calling for Carlisle. The two of us frantically working side-by-side to save Bella’s mortal life. The beyond-excellent taste of Bella’s blood on my tongue, every fiber of my being crying out for me to feed as I was meant to feed, and then—stopping. Stopping because I could no more hurt her than I could end my own immortal life—the two were irrevocably linked in my mind.

“Alice isn’t infallible,” I repeated, my teeth clenched.

Charlotte put her hands in front of her. *Goodness, he’s feisty. No wonder Jasper always steers us clear of him.* “Whoa, down boy. Whatever we said to upset you—nothing meant by it.”

I swallowed and tried to regain my composure. James was not their fault.

*He was your fault,* the voice in my mind said. *Bella would never have been in danger if you had just left her alone. If you hadn’t been so weak, if you had just run away from Forks that very first time.*

But I was weak. And now, too little, too late, here I was hunting down one of a host of ever-growing threats to a woman around whom my whole existence revolved.

“I’m sorry,” I managed after a moment. “Alice is...a touchy subject.”

“Seems like it.” Peter exchanged glances with his mate. “So, how’s it going? And as I said, the real question is what are *you* doing here?”

“On Christmas and everything,” Charlotte added. “Shouldn’t you be at home with your daddy?” *Such a bizarre relationship they have...if Carlisle didn’t have a mate, one might be led to think...* She giggled, pressing herself to Peter’s side.

I growled again.

“I’m sorry. With your *family*,” she corrected.

“The biggest coven in the known universe—hell, you guys are bigger than the Volturi at this point, aren’t you?” Peter stared at me as he calculated our numbers in his head. *Let’s see... Jasper and Alice, Carlisle and his mate, the big one and the blonde, and little Eddie here. Seven. How do they manage that without killing one another?*

“I am not ‘Little Eddie,’” I shot back. “And the Volturi have their guard.”

The barking laugh returned. *I always forget about his little talent.* “Sorry. Yes. And Heaven help us all if the Cullens ever amass a guard!”

“We’re not getting any help from Heaven, sugar.” Charlotte ran her hand lovingly down Peter’s face. “A few too many transgressions, I think.”

“Yes. A few.” Peter grinned, turning back to me. “But seriously, *Edward*”—as though my name was some kind of disease—“what brings you to Texas?”

Victoria’s face swam in my mind, her wild hair behind her—the way I had seen her through the eyes of the startled newborn in San Francisco.

“I’m tracking someone.” Realizing that might give them the wrong idea, I hastily added, “Another vampire.”

Peter’s eyebrows shot up. “*You’re* tracking another vampire? As in, to kill him?”

“Her. And yes.”

Both of them burst out laughing. I stood there for several minutes while they doubled over, making no attempt to in any way hide their amusement. I realized that our family didn’t exactly have a reputation for violence, but even Peter and Charlotte knew that I had lived away from Carlisle and his lifestyle before. It couldn’t be *that* funny.

“Oh, Edward,” Charlotte said, when she finally regained the powers of speech. “I’m sorry. It’s rude of us to laugh.”

“Indeed it is,” I answered, frowning.

“It’s just that—” she was still making funny chortling noises as she tried to speak, “the idea of you trying to hunt a nomadic vampire—it’s like—it’s like—”

“Like a housecat trying to hunt a wild bird,” Peter supplied, eliciting a fresh giggle from Charlotte.

“Yes! With a bell around its neck.” Charlotte put a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle. *Poor dear. He’s absolutely lost. But how funny to see a Cullen trying to be a real vampire.*

I rolled my eyes. “Well, it’s nice to have run into you.” My hand found its way to the door handle behind me. There was a soft click as the door opened.

*Oh, not so fast.* “Hold on a blessed minute,” Peter said. “You’re just going to tell us you’re on the hunt for somebody, then take off? I don’t think so. Who is this woman who’s got you all hot and bothered?”

Charlotte snorted. *As if Edward Cullen gets hot and bothered...*

For the first time in months, my mind pulled up a happy moment with Bella—on her couch, watching Zeferelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*, her lips on mine, her arms twined behind my neck. I had unlocked her from her hold and gently nudged her backwards. She had no idea that my restraint from her blood was now near-perfect—I had drunk from her and still she lived—but that I had been fighting a far different monster when I unlaced her fingers from my neck. Hot and bothered, indeed.

The happiness rushed away as quickly as it had come, leaving a searing, vacuous hole where it had resided so briefly. I put a hand on the roof of the car to steady myself as nauseating pain flooded me once more.

“Careful, there, Eddie,” Peter said quietly, gripping my upper arm. I didn’t correct him this time. *He looks like he’s going to be sick. Well, that’s what that weird diet’ll do to ya...*

“It’s not my diet,” I answered through clenched teeth. “And her name is Victoria.”

He looked confused. “Whose name?”

For someone with an eidetic memory, he certainly had poor short-term recall.

“Hot and bothered,” I answered. “The one I’m hunting. Her name is Victoria. She’s a crazy redhead. Have you seen her?”

Peter and Charlotte glanced at each other and shook their heads.

“Does she have a mate?” Charlotte asked. *Because he’s not going to kill someone with a mate on his own—or, maybe he’s trying to get himself killed. That would be an Edward thing to do. Jasper is always saying how melancholy the boy is...*

“We already killed her mate.”

If I thought Peter and Charlotte had looked surprised before, it had nothing on what they looked like now.

*The Cullens killed someone? I'll be damned. Well, I am damned.* Peter smiled at his private joke. *But still...* Carlisle swam in his memory, his arm lovingly around Esme and a gentle smile on his face as he bid Peter and Charlotte welcome to our home in Forks. *I can't believe Carlisle would let that happen...*

"We were protecting" —My mate? My girlfriend? My sole reason for existing?—"my friend."

Charlotte's eyes widened. "The girl," she whispered. "He went after the girl?" Jasper's face appeared. *"He's gotten obsessed with this human girl. He can't hear her mind and so she's sort of a novelty to him, I think. He's been crawling in her bedroom window at night and watching her sleep."* Charlotte still found this disturbing. *"And he's trying to protect her from Peter."* She remembered how upset I had been by the unreasonable—in her opinion—notion that her mate might pose a threat to Bella. She tried hard to imagine what would happen if I perceived a real threat, then assessed my current defeated posture and gave up.

"Oh, tough break," Peter whistled softly. *You ask for heartbreak when you fall for a human, Eddie. They don't stay alive that long.*

"Edward. And Bella isn't—" I couldn't even say the word. "Bella's fine." *Fine* apart from the fact that I had left her in the woods alone and crying as I ran like a coward back to the house. I shuddered. "And we found the tracker—my brothers took care of him."

"So you're after his mate because..." Peter still looked a little confused.

"Because she's..." *after Bella*, I added to myself, remembering Carlisle's words from just a short while earlier. This was not necessarily true. I changed tack. "She was involved in what happened." That much was true. "I'm worried she'll want to finish what James started."

"Let me get this straight," Peter said, his brow furrowing as he began to tick assertions off on his fingers one by one. "You fell for a human. This human was hunted by a vampire. You had to kill said vampire. She is now *possibly* being hunted by a second vampire. You are now trying to kill said second vampire."

"That's the general idea, yes."

Peter rolled his eyes and clapped a hand down on my shoulder. “Eddie. Did it not occur to you to just turn the *girl*?” He looked down at Charlotte, mentally inventorying her extraordinary beauty and contemplating how impossible it would be for him if she were human.

I growled again. “I *love* Bella. She deserves more than that.” Hadn’t he been the one who had just admitted that he was damned?

Peter gazed at me with curiosity. *Jasper thinks so highly of Edward...*

I was surprised to hear this. I didn’t get many compliments, aloud or otherwise, from my taciturn older brother.

*...I wonder if he realizes that the boy is a lunatic.*

And so much for compliments.

“Well, at any rate. I’ve got to keep going.” I replaced my hand on the car door handle.

*Is he out of his godforsaken mind?* Peter’s hand shot out and grabbed my upper arm again, in a grip so hard it hurt. “You’re not going anywhere, little brother. You’re going to stay here, and we’re going to help you.”

Now it was my eyebrows that were raised. “Little brother?”

“By marriage, or coven switch or whatever the hell you want to call it. I couldn’t look Jasper in the eye ever again if I let you walk out of here.”

“Yes,” Charlotte had chimed in. “We’ll help you, Edward.” She’d given me her sweet smile and then turned to Peter and added, “Right after we go roller skating.”

This was how I ended up spending the wee hours of Christmas morning mashed into a rickety wooden booth under disco balls and black light, while Aerosmith pulsed from the loudspeakers and giggling young adults rolled unsteadily by me on their skates. Peter and Charlotte unsurprisingly turned out to be excellent skaters—apparently the roller-derby scene was one they frequented. They were among some of the more showy skaters, taking up the center of the rink to do tricks.

To keep myself occupied and tune out the hundreds of minds of the skaters while I waited for my new and unlikely companions, I had brought along my only piece of diversion. Carlisle’s journal was beginning to smell more like me than him, and pages which had only been turned a few times in the past were growing more dog-eared as the weeks passed. Recently I had been bothered by the same entry, and I wondered if I might feel differently about it now, having talked to Carlisle.

15 June 1921

*The piano is so loud at the moment I can scarcely think, but the din is such small penance for losing my temper with Edward today I cannot but let it go on. It is not his fault that the California Perfume Company has learned there is a woman living here. That he was upstairs reading when the man knocked at the door is not his fault either. Esme is yet faster and stronger than us both—if Edward had interrupted her, he would likely have met the same fate as the salesman. I am relieved that there was not time for him to try.*

*Good man that he is, Edward spent the afternoon soothing Esme while I worked on at the hospital, oblivious to the tragedy taking place at my home. I am deeply grateful to him for this. And yet my instinct upon returning home to find my mate sobbing with guilt amid the cloy of recently-mopped human blood was not to thank him for offering his comfort but to berate him for not protecting Esme from a temptation that proved too great. The row that ensued was terrible and only stopped when Esme burst into louder cries.*

*I am neither God nor man, but today Edward saw fit to accuse me of playing at both.*

*I was hurt then and am still now, but I cannot help but think that he is right. For even filled with joy as I am each day now, I cannot forget that both he and Esme should be at peace—Edward with his parents, and Esme with her son. That they both live this cursed half-existence with me is due to my own selfish needs, not their desires. My beautiful mate would not have murdered in her human life, and now I have forced her to live with a man's death on her conscience.*

*In five days, Edward will be twenty. I find myself wondering what he would be like if he had been granted three additional years in his human form. Would I recognize the man my son was growing to be? The venom has bestowed upon him inhuman beauty as it has to us all, but he alone of us three retains the evanescent perfection of a boy still on his way to becoming a man, his features arrested in the middle of a process that will be forever incomplete.*

*I worry about that which I have stolen from these two whom I love so much. After the horrors of this afternoon, I had expected my mate to loathe me just as Edward seems to at the moment. Yet Esme assures me that despite her thirst, and that which it has driven her to do, she is happier than she ever remembers being as a human. Even after today's tragedy she is still speaking of formalizing our union, and I find this idea pleases me deeply. But even if her new life makes her happy, was it my place to prevent her old one from ending?*  
—C. C.

I laid the journal down on the table and stared as the page flashed purple and green under the pulsing lights. The fight Carlisle described had been one of our worst, second only to the battle we'd fought in 1927 when I had announced I wished to try a different way of life. That one had actually turned physical; this one had been only a prolonged shouting match. I had returned to merely seething at him within the space of a few hours. He had accused me of being inattentive; I had accused him of playing God.

I hadn't realized until I read this journal entry and the several that followed it how seriously Carlisle had taken my accusations. But now I understood fully why he had. I recalled Peter's earlier question, "*Did it not occur to you to just turn the girl?*" After reading this entry

again, I felt even surer of my answer. Of all his actions in his long life, there was nothing Carlisle questioned more than his decision to turn each of us. And if he could worry about the life he had stolen from us even when each of us had been at the very brink of death, how could I let Bella allow me to take hers? One of us should know better than that. One of us had to take responsibility for this mess.

A pale hand snapped the journal closed as Peter and Charlotte slid into the booth across from me.

“So,” Peter said with finality. He spoke with a voice slightly quieter than normal, as though it was possible that any human could ever hope to eavesdrop on a conversation that wasn’t shouted over the pounding rock music.

“So?”

“So Charlotte and I have come up with a plan.” He dropped his hands to the table excitedly. I hadn’t noticed until now that the fingernails on both hands were painted black. I had to hand it to them—they knew how to fit into this scene. Under the lights even their eye color looked appropriately bizarre rather than frightening.

“Hot and bothered is on her own without a mate right now, am I right?” *So three of us could take her down if we needed to.*

I nodded. “We killed her mate.”

Peter chuckled. “I never get tired of hearing you say that, Eddie.”

“Edward.”

“Whatever.” He leaned forward, a conspiratorial smile on his face. “So. What we’re thinking is, we’ll travel the south for a little while. Spend some time in that hot rod of yours. See if three of us can pick up her trail. But” —he paused dramatically— “if she knows what’s good for her, she’ll be in New Orleans in about three weeks.” He pronounced it “N’awlins.”

“I’m sorry. New Orleans?” Why did they think Victoria was headed for Louisiana?

They both laughed.

“You Cullens. You’re so buttoned-up. Not that Carlisle is not amazing. I have the utmost respect for the man. But he’s got you all so sheltered.” Peter leaned in a little closer. “Mardi Gras, Eddie.” *Easiest hunting all year. Not to mention a damn good party. And just like here, we fit in.* He shot me a sadistic grin. “It’s why we came south to begin with, and it fits with helping you. So we’ll go.”

“I’m not so sure I’ll enjoy the hunting. Besides, aren’t you people usually more—“ how did I put this politely “—territorial?”

“Listen to him,” Charlotte said, laughing. “‘You people.’ As though the Cullens are the ones behaving normally.” She beamed at me. “It’s sort of like old home week. Those of us that go put the fighting aside for a little while. No one bothers anyone else unless they’re after the same human—and there’s hundreds of thousands of humans. The humans go missing there all the time even without our help. They don’t even know what hit ‘em.” A young man came to her mind, his torso painted purple and multiple strands of colored beads strung around his neck. He was calling to her, and he smiled when she advanced—and then he screamed only briefly before his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Don’t dwell too much on that, sugar,” Peter said, still smiling. “You’ll scare poor Eddie and his diet away.” *Maybe he can snack on some alligator.*

I wrinkled my nose. Not exactly the kind of large game I had in mind. Still, the idea of being able to find Victoria gave me a fresh rush of energy. And, as Peter had so astutely pointed out, three of us could take her down with ease. I nodded to them both.

“New Orleans it is.”

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Even several miles from the center of the city, the uproar of hundreds of thousands still echoed in my ears. I was finally far enough, however, that the din had taken on a surreal muted quality, as though I’d dived underwater. More importantly, I was no longer under assault from the perverse thoughts of the revelers, most of whom were hoping that their next drink would lead them into a fleeting sexual encounter by means which betrayed a gross misunderstanding of cause and effect.

But here the streets were silent and deserted. The houses which loomed on either side of me were empty and dark, their windows either smashed or boarded up, with shutters that hung freakishly askew. Waterlines and moss bore witness to a flood that had reached to second-story windows. Porch roofs sagged, their supports having rotted or washed away. Uprturned furniture and waterlogged cars joined the mountains of debris in the streets along with a host of even stranger deposits—drainage pipe, refrigerators, cinder block, crumpled street signs. The stink of mold and rust hung in the thick air. A few of the homes that had sustained less damage were beginning to be attended to, but as Esme’s son I knew enough about construction to see that

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nearly all would eventually need to be razed. Compared with the drunken mayhem on Bourbon Street, this place was a desecrated wasteland.

I found it soothing.

In the five weeks after Christmas, Peter, Charlotte and I had almost no more luck than I'd had alone. The storm season this year was strong, and the constant rains continued to wash away scents as soon as any of us stumbled across them. The closest we'd come had been in Galveston, when someone had noticed us together and remembered a white-skinned redhead, but he'd focused in on us again so quickly I couldn't even be sure it was Victoria he was thinking of. He seemed to remember her with her hair in a ponytail, which struck me as unlikely. Still, we had remained there searching for two weeks, until a young man that Charlotte had thought was homeless and thus fair game turned up on the local news as a missing college student. We had to beat a hasty retreat to Corpus Christi. And although Peter and Charlotte did their best to keep my spirits high—usually by dragging me to yet another oppressive nightclub—I was spiraling back into my personal hell with each passing week.

So far in New Orleans we had been unsuccessful as well. If there were other vampires in the city they certainly weren't out enjoying the scene the way Peter and Charlotte did. But then, I couldn't imagine vampires that would—when Jasper had always described his former coven as choosing a more “peaceful” lifestyle, I hadn't realized it involved the party circuit. Perhaps Jasper didn't either. But for a pair who had been turned right at the beginning of the era of rock and roll, I supposed it made sense in a way. And Peter was right; it was one of the few places where they fit in perfectly with their pale skin and strange eye color. As a predatory strategy, it really was one of the best.

Tonight they were out hunting and partying in the thick of things. I took the opportunity to wander, and found myself in the ruins of what six months before had probably been a perfectly adequate neighborhood. Now it had been reduced to rubble, a soggy and stinking testament to the flood that had raged here six months before.

A house not far from where I stood still had its front porch largely intact, one of the few that didn't seem to have been nearly washed away in the floodwaters. I tested the stairs carefully to be sure the rotting wood would hold my weight and then sat down to think, pulling my knees to my chest and resting my chin atop them. My arrival startled a garter snake that had made its home in the dank shadows, and it slithered away quickly over my shoes.

Huddling in the darkness, I let my thoughts drift, as they always did, to Bella. What was she doing now? I clung desperately to those weeks of perfect attendance I'd seen on Carlisle's computer back in Forks. She was living; she was unhurt. She might even be happy by now—more than four months had passed since that terrible day in the woods. Surely she had returned to her friends. Angela was so gentle and kind, and even Jessica's perkiness would have to be of comfort. Hadn't I seen high school girls ready to tear their hair out over the boy that had dumped them one day, and then swooning over a new boy the next? Bella wasn't a typical high school girl, no, but she was still human. If I could stay away long enough, she would move past me.

I just had to keep her alive that long.

As I gazed out at the desecrated street, Carlisle's words from a month before came to me unbidden: *"Even now, Edward, are you sure that Victoria actually poses a threat to Bella?"*

An involuntary growl tore forth and the searing, burning pain ripped through my midsection once more. In agony, I threw my head against the column that held up the porch roof. The wood exploded, the rotted parts going to mush and the dry parts crashing down on me in a shower of splinters. A chunk of the porch roof fell also, and I sat still as moldy shingles slapped down on my head.

Was I only imagining danger to keep myself from insanity? It seemed more and more likely. Even if Victoria had truly been in Galveston—even if she had been in San Francisco—she had a right to move around the country, didn't she? Carlisle had always told us that our family was to lead by example. If others wished to join us, they would. I saw again through Carlisle's eyes the trio of formidable men, cloaked and red-eyed, standing in their opulent chambers and watching approvingly as one of their guard wrenched off the head of a quaking newborn vampire. In the memory, I felt my gut twist along with my father's. *"We are only peaceful protestors. Not police,"* his voice echoed in my mind.

*Go back.*

It startled me. I hadn't heard that voice in awhile. In fact, in these weeks I'd spent with Charlotte and Peter, I hadn't heard that voice once. As crazy as it drove me at times—Peter still hadn't stopped calling me "Eddie"—companionship was nice.

*You had a companion. You had a friend. You had your mate. Go back!*

A strangled howl echoed off the abandoned houses and I was on my feet before I realized that the pitiful noise had come from me. I was just starting to sit down when my eye caught the fleeting motion across the street. I frowned. Perhaps it was an animal.

Then, unmistakably, I heard: *Edward*.

Whatever had just run by knew my name?

I launched myself forward with such force that most of the remainder of the porch collapsed behind me with a shuddering boom as I shot across the street. But I almost hadn't needed to get any closer—added to the stink of rot and mold was the unmistakable sweet scent of another of my kind.

*Victoria*. It had to be. Who else would have run?

My feet were moving again before I willed them to, and I was running at full speed. The trail was easy to follow, weaving between the dilapidated houses—until it stopped.

The trail had hit a dead end just at the edge of where the houses stopped being in such terrible state—here the water had clearly been lower, and I could even see a few windows with lights, the homes whose inhabitants had not left the city. Surely Victoria would have slowed her pace here—the scent should be *more* obvious, not less. I stood there, puzzled, when at once I heard, *There he is*, and something dropped from the rooftop above me.

I attacked.

The being who'd surprised me flew backward and we crashed into the wet earth so hard our bodies left deep indentations. For a moment all I knew was snarling, growling, and flailing limbs as my assailant and I locked ourselves in combat. And then just as suddenly as the attack had come, it was over, and I was flat on my back under the hand of a tiny, dark-haired woman I'd met only once before. She had a triumphant but crazed smile on her face as she shook her head.

"*Maria?*" I spluttered. Looking up into the dark eyes of my brother's fiery former companion, I promptly recalled Charlotte's words from more than a month earlier: "*It's like old home week.*"

She hadn't been kidding.

Maria had changed—then subsequently tried to kill—Peter, Charlotte, and Jasper. I knew Peter and Charlotte, being nomads, occasionally ran into her. Jasper, however, had gone out of

his way to steer clear of her after her visit to our home in Calgary several decades before, which had resulted in the deaths of several of Carlisle's patients and our immediate relocation.

It would be best to keep mum about my traveling companions.

"You are *loco*, Eduardo," Maria said disapprovingly. "Why are you attacking me? I let you up, you gonna act right?"

I nodded, and she laughed, lifting her hand from my chest and pulling me to my feet.

She shook her head at me, clucking her tongue disapprovingly. "*Te ves horrible*. What are you doing here?"

Brushing off my slacks, I muttered, "I could ask you the same thing."

She laughed again, throwing her black hair behind her. "I'm here hunting *los humanos*, *pobrecito*. Something tells me you aren't here for that." She made note of my golden eyes—I had very luckily discovered a pack of coyotes running in the woods around Lake Pontchartrain and had eaten like it was my last meal.

"I'm looking for someone," I mumbled. "Another vampire. Her name is Victoria."

As soon as I said the name, her face appeared in Maria's mind, red hair spilling over her shoulders as always. I felt a surge of excitement. "You know her!"

She cocked an eyebrow. "Victoria? *La pelirroja loca*? Yeah, I know her, *hermanito*." There was a pause, then, "Why are you looking for her?" *He looks like he wants to kill her*, she thought in Spanish.

"Killing her is what I have in mind, yes. Do you know where she is?" I spat.

*I forget about his mind-reading thing*. Maria tossed her hair behind her with a flick of her wrist. "*Posiblemente*. Why you trying to kill her?"

"She tried to kill my—well, her mate tried to kill my girlfriend."

"*Su compañero*? Then why aren't you looking for him?" *Or is that why you want her?*

I winced, bracing myself for her inevitable response to my next statement.

"My family already killed him."

Her eyes widened, as I knew they would. "*Carlisle Cullen* killed somebody? *Madre de Dios!*" Carlisle's face appeared in her mind, accompanied by feelings of respect.

It was funny how the things my father loathed garnered him the most honor in the vampire world.

“Carlisle didn’t do it himself,” I spat back. He had been too busy tending to the massive injuries the love of my life had sustained while foolishly trying to protect *me* from her attacker. I shook my head in disgust. If I had never been in her life; if I had just left her alone, none of this would ever have happened.

She only laughed. “Well, you’re in the wrong state, *mijo*. Last time I saw her she was in Texas. By the gulf.”

Galveston. I *knew* it. I let a word I didn’t usually say in front of women slide through my clenched teeth.

Maria laughed. “Listen to that mouth. I should tell Carlisle.”

“Where is she headed? Do you know?”

Maria studied me a moment, her black eyes following mine. *I can’t tell him that*. In her mind a conversation with Victoria appeared—they were arguing in rapid Spanish. Her memory seemed not to be in complete pieces, as though she was trying to hide something. But still I caught the word *Rio*.

“Rio? Rio de Janiero?”

She looked startled for a second, but then a smile flashed briefly across her face. “*Tu familia tiene una casa allá, no?*”

We did have a house in Rio, but how would Victoria know about it?

“She’s going to Isle Esme?” Did this mean she was actually after our family? Was she planning retaliation?

Shaking her head, Maria only laughed. “No, no, *querido*. She went down there for the same reason I am here.” Dancers appeared in her mind—huge feather boas, drunken people, the same sea of purple, green, and gold. “*El carnaval*. ”

“Because the hunting is easy.” I had never been in Rio for Carnival, but I had heard it was many times more chaotic than New Orleans. Now having seen New Orleans, I had a much better sense of what that meant.

“*Sí*.” She gave me a condescending pat on the shoulder. “Now you are starting to get it, *hermanito*.”

If she referred to me in the diminutive one more time, I was going to have to hit her. But Carnival. It made a little bit of sense, after what I had seen here. If you were a hunter, you went

where the prey was bountiful. And if she was in Brazil—well, then Carlisle was right. “She’s not going back to Forks,” I sighed with relief.

Maria rolled her eyes. “You truly are in love, aren’t you, *Eduardo*? You think *el mundo entero gira alrededor de tu novia*. I’ll tell you a secret--everything is not about you.” She threw her head back and laughed again.

But my entire world *did* revolve around Bella; that was the thing. I had to get to Rio.

“Thank you, Maria,” I said hurriedly. “You’ve been a huge help.” Suddenly flooded with energy, I took off at a run, hoping to blow off enough steam before I was back in the populated area that I could avoid barreling full-speed down Canal Street.

“Tell Jasper hello!” she called after me as I sped away. And before I got too far, I caught: *Who in the hell brought Edward Cullen here? No matter. He’ll never find her in Rio.*

I laughed to myself as I ran. I had been away from Bella for almost five months.

Compared with surviving that, anything was possible.

## Chapter 11: To Dust

The ceiling light refracted through the bottle of spring water before me on the desk, sending a spray of multicolored light across my colleagues' legal pads. Their eyes were not privy to this chromatic display, however, and I caught more than one of them shooting me an odd look as I moved the bottle and its trailing rainbow around.

I was fidgeting. For a human, it would have been acceptable, if slightly inappropriate. For me, it was ludicrous. If my colleagues had any idea how utterly unnecessary it was for me to keep in motion, they would have understood immediately how deeply agitated I was. I only kept in motion to avoid focusing on the conversation at hand.

Four of us were convened in the cramped office. Cliff Andrews, the head of hematology, Andrea O'Keegan, head of oncology, and Mandeep Bhattacharya, the head of pediatric oncology from Cornell's Weil Medical School, who had driven up from Manhattan the day before to be with us.

I didn't need Edward's ability to know that the other three were wondering what a young general surgeon was doing in this meeting.

Three days before, Kurt and Anne Mason had asked to speak with Andrea. Not me, because, as Andrea had put it, they were "attached" to me. The conversation had been couched as a request to develop an advance directive, in the case that things got worse. But the reality, as we all knew, was that "worse" was already on us. The question, as Cliff had put it when he'd convened today's meeting, was only how much longer we would wait for miracles.

To me, all of eternity sounded like a perfect amount of time to do that.

Spread before us on Cliff's desk was Tony's entire medical chart—pages upon pages of lab results and declining vital statistics. I had made a show of looking over it, although I knew every entry in it by heart. I knew he was losing weight at the rate of a third a pound a day. I knew what his lab results had been two days ago; I knew what they'd been this morning. I knew that he was battling another opportunistic infection, and that two hours ago his temperature had been an elevated 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit.

And I knew more than that. I knew that the boy whose life hung in the balance of these numbers went by Tony, not Anthony. I knew that he had picked this name for himself at the age of three because he was enamored of the mascot for Frosted Flakes, and that his father still called him “Tiger” on occasion. I knew that he loved video games, the X-Men, baseball, and his little sister, although he would never admit to the last. I knew that he hated algebra with every fiber of his being. I knew that he possessed a wit beyond his years and, moreover, that he was the only person who had truly made me laugh in almost five months.

But I didn’t know if Tony was ready to let his disease claim his life. And for that single piece of knowledge I lacked, I might as well have known nothing at all.

The conversation the other three were having washed over me in waves. I was taking it all in—my superior brain capacity couldn’t avoid letting that happen—but I wasn’t truly listening. I knew the direction of this conversation—the same direction in which I would have been leading were it about any other patient.

It was Dr. Bhattacharya’s voice that brought me fully into the conversation, “The palliative care plan calls for him to be moved to one of the hospice facilities,” he was saying.

“He won’t want that,” I said, a little more loudly than I’d intended. To the humans, it was merely a mumble, but it was enough to capture their attention. I found three pairs of eyes suddenly trained on me.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Cullen? Could you repeat that please?” Dr. Bhattacharya gave me a hard look, and added an under-the-breath mutter that came to my ears as clearly as though he’d shouted: “Nice to have you back in this meeting.”

I took a deep breath. “Ton—the patient likely won’t want to be moved out of CMC. I know that’s what we wrote, but other things have happened since then.”

“I appreciate that sentiment, Dr. Cullen, but—”

His speech was cut off by the rumble that came unbidden from my chest.

I clapped a hand over my mouth, quickly balling it into a fist and pretending to cough. Had I really just *growled* at one of the most well-published oncologists in the United States?

“I’m sorry,” I answered. “Allergies, I think. Does one of you have a cat?” Dr. O’Keegan did; I had already caught its scent on her pants. She smiled apologetically and scooted her chair away from mine. “At any rate,” I continued. “I think that when we talk to—to the patient, we’ll find that he would prefer to stay here.”



“Well, we wouldn’t think of forcing that decision,” said Dr. O’Keegan gently. “Of course. And you know the patient better than the rest of us.” She frowned disapprovingly.

“For all we know, he won’t want to stop treatment,” I added.

Dr. Bhattacharya rolled his eyes. “As you well know, Dr. Cullen, that decision rests in the hands of his parents.”

In the hands of his parents. The image of Elizabeth Masen came to me, her face pallid and clammy with fever, her arms turning dark with cyanosis. I recalled her beautiful green eyes—Edward’s eyes—locking me in her gaze as she begged of me, “*You must do everything that is in your power. What others cannot do, that is what you must do...*”

And like that, my mind took me two floors down, to Tony’s room, and I saw myself bent over his bed. I watched as my teeth sunk into the soft skin of his neck with ease. I tasted as his blood—the blood I had agonized over, the blood that was killing him—pooled into my mouth like honey. Seven would become eight. I would laugh easily again.

The venom that filled my mouth snapped me back to my senses as quickly as I had lost them. Tony had parents. A sister. A family that would be just as lost without him as I was without my own son.

*But they will lose him either way...* The venom surged again.

I shot to my feet, trying desperately to choke back the deadly liquid.

“I’m sorry,” I said through clenched teeth. “I’ve lost track of the time. I’m not usually here during the day, and I’m to pick my daughter up in Syracuse.” This was a lie only by omission—Alice’s train was to arrive in several hours.

The other three eyed me suspiciously.

“Are you sure you’re all right, Carlisle?” Cliff asked gently. It was the first time in the entire meeting he’d addressed me directly.

I nodded. “Quite. Just being a forgetful father, is all.” I managed to gulp down enough of the venom to give them a sheepish smile and made a fast exit.

“I was going to suggest that he be the one to discuss this with the parents,” I heard Cliff say as I fled. “But I guess I can do it...”

By striding quickly and purposefully as though I had just received an urgent page, I managed to stalk my way through the entire hospital and out to the parking garage without

interruption. Running a shaking hand through my hair, I slid into the driver's seat and dropped my forehead to the steering wheel, my chest heaving with unnecessary breaths.

What was I *doing*? I forced myself to bring Anne and Kurt Mason to mind. Tony's real parents; just as Edward and Elizabeth Masen had been to my young patient eighty-seven years ago. But Elizabeth and Edward had died before their son had suffered by my hand.

This time I growled only at myself. Why was I even *thinking* about this? I was no longer the desperately lonely beast I had been in 1918. I was a man with a family. A wife. Five children. I had sworn that Emmett would be the last.

Jamming my key into the ignition, I lit out of the parking garage so fast that my tires squealed, my mind desperate for the release a lengthy drive would provide.

I would just get to Syracuse a few hours early, that was all.

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Alice stood beside a car parked at the curb outside the Amtrak station, her expression thoughtful and far away as always. My daughter lived her life in a world that was a few steps ahead of the rest of ours, patiently waiting for the moment her visions would fall into place just as she'd seen them. I wondered what she was seeing now. Obviously something to do with me; she had specifically asked Jasper to stay at home. I wondered briefly if she had seen the meeting this morning and realized that of course she had.

There was no driver in the car she stood behind, so I punched on my hazard lights as I approached in preparation for a quick double-park job. Just as I pulled up however, a man rushed out of the train station, jumped into the car, and pulled away quickly, opening the spot right in front of me. I smiled as I parked neatly and exited the car. One month without Alice, and I'd already forgotten to trust her judgment.

Beaming, Alice bounded to me, her messenger bag flopping behind her. I braced myself just in time for her to crash into my torso as she flung her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek.

"Welcome home," I said, and she grinned.

"It's good to be home," she answered quietly, as she disentangled us. There was a solemnity to her voice for a brief moment, but she returned in only a moment and cocked her head towards the car. "Shall we? I'm anxious to see Jasper."

I nodded, taking her bag. We all had perfected small mannerisms that masked our true natures in the presence of humans: holding doors, allowing glasses to spill and break, carrying belongings for one another. But the fact that we didn't need to do these things also made them a greater kindness than they were otherwise, and Alice smiled shyly as she passed the heavy bag to me and climbed into the car.

Alice was uncharacteristically silent as I pulled away from the station. We were well underway on the freeway before she spoke.

"How are things at home?" she asked.

I thought about this a moment. I had of course been more absorbed at the hospital than usual, but I was careful not to make the same error I had in December. Although I had been offered a second visiting lecturer position in the College of Human Ecology, I had declined, opting instead to give only a few guest lectures in the same Epidemiology seminar I had taught the previous term. This left me more time to be with my family, and I was trying to make good use of it. Even Rosalie had begrudgingly joined Emmett, Jasper and me in a game of Five-Card Stud two days before. Jasper, ever the unreadable stoic, had beaten us roundly no matter what he was dealt. In hindsight, I wondered if he had influenced our decision-making processes.

"What did Jasper buy you with his poker winnings?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't return to her question if I deflected it properly.

"Oh, he hasn't bought it yet," Alice replied, smiling. "But he's decided on a new bag from the latest Fendi line. In case I want to make another trip to Biloxi. It's pretty. I like it."

There was a pause for a moment while she considered the bag and I considered her words.

"Do you think you will?" I asked quietly.

"Will what?"

"Make another trip to Biloxi."

The faraway look returned to my daughter's eyes.

"I'm not sure," she said finally. "There's not much for me there."

I nodded solemnly, not taking my eyes off the road even though I had no need to see it fully. What she spoke of had been one of the reasons I had never returned to London. My time there had faded in my mind, and even the few places of which I had fleeting memory were long gone. The last time I had returned to my roots had been in the seventeen-eighties, before I'd joined a voyage to the New World. Even then the graveyard behind my father's old church had

already been reduced to little more than a tangle of weeds, and it was only by accident that I found his grave next to my mother's and my own in the underbrush. The soapstone markers had already begun serious decay—"SLE" had been all of my given name that I'd been able to make out. The church burned some time later and was never rebuilt, its land eventually taken over by the bustling metropolis that would become modern London.

But unlike me, Alice still had ties. "What of your niece?" I asked.

Alice smiled. "She seems neat. Feisty. One of those women you know has always been an upstart. I saw her flirting with a man who must have been ten years younger than her at the retirement home. Her husband passed away of a heart attack about five years ago."

"She's like her aunt," I supplied, and Alice grinned.

"I didn't go see about her family," she added thoughtfully a moment later. "I didn't want to. That was just—too much." She turned away and looked out her window.

"I understand." Although the truth was, I didn't. The only person I had left behind me in my human life was my father, and he and I had been at such odds through most of my adolescence and young adulthood that I had hardly mourned for him. He had passed away only a few years after I was turned, and I had chosen then to leave England for good.

In all honesty, I barely remembered the man.

"Carlisle?"

"Yes?"

"What happened, do you think?"

It took me a second to realize what she meant. "To you?"

She nodded. "Do you know what it was? I know you've thought about it."

And like that, Alice plunged us into previously unknown territory. She was right; knowing what I did about the ways Edward's and Jasper's gifts had manifested themselves when they were human, I had of course given thought to hers. Discovering that she had been turned while in an asylum corroborated my original theory. Perhaps this was why she asked me to pick her up alone. I almost laughed—it was rather self-centered of me to think the first thing Alice would want to discuss on her way home would be Tony.

"Temporal lobe epilepsy is my best guess," I answered carefully. "Admittedly, I'm no neurologist. But it often presents with hallucinatory seizures. In the 1910s, we didn't know how to treat that. We were just barely beginning to understand there was such a thing as neurological

disease.” I prayed that she wouldn’t read between the lines of my statement, but it took her only a split second to do exactly that.

“Would you have advised my parents to send me to the asylum?”

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second. “Yes.”

She did not answer.

The pavement on the freeway had been poured in regularly-spaced chunks, and I counted four hundred sixty-three rhythmic thumps as we sped over the cracks in silence. Finally, I took my right hand off the steering wheel and placed it on my daughter’s slim shoulder. “Alice, we simply didn’t know any better then.” Remembering what Jasper had relayed about the date on her tombstone matching her admission date to the asylum, I added, “I would *not* have advised your parents to pretend you no longer existed.”

“I understand,” she said quietly, looking down. A moment later, she chuckled.

“What?”

“It’s just that as a human, my family locked me up and pretended I was dead. And now I live in a family of monsters, and you rearrange your schedule so that you can drive an hour to pick me up at the train station. The irony.”

I smiled. “Sometimes it is in losing that we gain.”

Alice nodded. “Yes. We both ended up with families.” She reached over and rubbed my hand. “Thank you for that.”

A strange lump lodged in my throat, and Alice rubbed my hand more firmly.

“So, how are you?” she asked a moment later.

I swallowed. “I’m fine.”

“Edward hasn’t called again?”

The lump got a little bigger. “You know he hasn’t.”

“One can hope.” She sighed. “I’m not really watching him, you know. He asked me not to, and I’m respecting that as best I can. I only see it when he makes really drastic decisions.”

“And he hasn’t made any of those lately?”

“No. You’ve been the only one doing that.” She gave me a pointed look.

She *did* know about the meeting this morning. I recalled the exact vision that had assaulted my senses and gulped, knowing that Alice had seen every sordid bit of it.

“So...you saw that.”

“Carlisle.” She laughed a hard laugh. “What else am I going to do on a five-hour train ride?” She paused. “I know that you already understand that it’s a bad idea.”

I looked away. “Yes.” As I recalled my vision, the venom actually pooled in my mouth once more.

Alice saw this but said nothing.

Swallowing down copious amounts of venom for the second time that day, I took a steadying breath. Of course I knew it was a bad idea. I had known it was a bad idea to get attached to Tony from the second I’d connected his name with Edward’s. Yet out of my own grief, I had allowed it to happen. Now I was paying the price. How many thousands of patients had slipped through my fingers over the centuries? I hadn’t even known most of their names. But now, once again, I had let one young man get under my skin, and I was in agony.

“I just wish I knew this was his choice,” I said finally, my fingers digging into the steering wheel.

“Would that help?”

“Would what help?”

“If you knew it was his decision.”

It took me a moment to realize what Alice was offering. I finally took my eyes off the road and found she was surveying my face as though she’d never seen it before. And I supposed she hadn’t, not really. She had never before seen the anguish I knew was written in the lines of my jaw and brow. Alice and Jasper had entered our lives ten years after all the chaos had ended. Edward had come home, Rosalie had found her mate and through him, made some modicum of peace with her new life, and Esme and I had been enjoying a relationship which grew more effortless by the day.

And now here I was, plunged back into the tumult of the years Alice had never experienced, when Edward’s absence had ripped a searing hole in my own existence. Esme’s own sadness and her feelings of inadequacy to quell mine had made those three years that much more unbearable. Now faced with the same pain once more, I was clinging desperately to the only bit of light I had. It was foolish; I knew it was. But paradoxically, I couldn’t relinquish my grip until I knew that I was not calling the shots for Tony. In 1918 I had made a decision about one boy’s life, healing myself from almost three centuries’ loneliness, but at the same time

thrusting him into almost nine decades of his own. My gut wrenched as I imagined Edward, alone wherever he was now, sick with worry over the girl he'd waited so long to find.

“Carlisle?”

“Yes,” I said quietly, returning my gaze to the long stretch of freeway ahead, seeing not the pavement before me but the waif of a boy who awaited me in my evening shift. I heaved a sigh of surrender. “Yes. If I knew it was his decision, I could let him go.”

Alice nodded once, and we drove the rest of the way home in silence.

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Steam rose off my skin as I reached for my towel. Esme had spent the last several weeks gutting the cast-iron pipes that had been installed in the house in the early nineteen hundreds and replacing them with the more modern copper. For having to work with a house which had contained no plumbing for most of its existence, Esme had done a remarkably nice job of retaining the original feel of the house while still giving it all of the modern conveniences. She had chosen to mask the shower's existence by building it directly into the walls and ceiling of the bathroom itself. There were no curtains and no glass walls—just water from three directions that drained into the floor.

Finishing with my towel, I began to dress. As I reached for the shirt hanging on the back of the door, I caught a glimpse of myself in the antique mirror over the sink. My reach had exposed the full line of my neck and collarbone, and the matching set of crescent scars that appeared there. I traced them with my fingers, the awful day resurfacing in my memory at once. Edward, entering our home with his eyes shining a foreign, honeyed burgundy, and his strength fierce as a result of the human blood he'd consumed. I had been too new to fatherhood then to recognize that my compassionate forgiveness would only anger him further. He had slipped, but more than that he had allowed himself to slip and had taken pleasure in doing so. He had wanted me to hate him. He had needed the permission my anger would grant before he could allow himself to leave. Soothing had turned to shouting, shouting had turned to screaming, and before I had realized what was happening, Edward had shattered my clavicle as he lunged for my neck. Seized by pain, I had broken his nose in my attempt to throw him off me.

We had both healed physically in a few hours, but the pain of that fight and its three-year aftermath still lingered for us both. Many times in the decades since, I had caught Edward staring

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at his marks when he saw me shirtless. For him, they were a sharp reminder of the years he considered his greatest personal failure.

To me, they were a testament that I had loved him enough to let go.

I massaged my shoulder as my thoughts turned, as they always did, to my wayward son. Again, nearly two months had passed since I'd heard from him. Alice had gotten no glimpses of him in that time, as she wasn't truly looking for him. She had been home from Mississippi two weeks now, and I had nearly succumbed on several occasions to the desire to have her just check on Edward. He wouldn't need to know. But I had not. I had respected his privacy, and kept Alice's promises.

I stroked the scar once more before it disappeared under the light blue fabric of my shirt. Fully dressed, I left the bathroom and descended the stairs at a human's pace, listening to the sounds of my family as they drifted up towards me. Jasper was entertaining Alice and Esme with saccharine country songs on the guitar, while Emmett fought an obvious boredom to keep up with Rosalie's fast-flowing commentary about the blueprints Esme had drawn for their new home. Rosalie had managed to veto somewhere around three dozen houses during her and Emmett's periodic stopovers in the past months. It was finally decided that we would buy some land outside of town and Esme would design exactly what Rosalie wanted. The plans currently called for a house that would rival the one we had in Forks.

When I reached the sitting room, Esme and Rosalie were excitedly discussing the house, Emmett was ribbing Jasper good-naturedly about the music, and Alice and Jasper were snuggled with each other on the couch as Jasper played. Alice had an expression of content as she leaned against her husband; Esme was laughing over the idea of another thousand square feet; Emmett was pulling faces at Jasper as Rosalie bored him with the house plans. As I looked around the room, a swell of pride and a terrible pain came over me at once.

My family was happy.

This moment had both taken too long and come too soon. As I looked around the living room, I saw the six of us as Edward must have always seen us; indeed, as I *knew* he had always seen us—three pairs of blissfully matched partners, with Edward as the unnecessary excess, merely taking up space in a world that did not truly include him.

I closed my eyes as the harmonious peal of Edward's laughter came to the ears of my memory as surely as though he were in the next room. My son had come so close to knowing



what he had stood on the outside of for almost ninety years. For six months I had watched him unfold, until he was but the blithest reflection of his former self. Bella Swan lit him up from the inside, and his joy had become my own.

How fleeting that moment had turned out to be.

I sank to the stairs, resting my head in the palm of one hand. The rustling of the blueprints ceased as Rosalie's voice fell quiet. Jasper's song stopped on an unresolved chord, and the strings of his guitar slowly throbbed their way into silence.

"Carlisle?"

It was Esme's voice. She had been at my side the moment I'd sat, and her hands now frantically roamed my face, searching for the source of my sudden melancholy.

How was I supposed to tell my ebullient wife that her joy was the source of my sorrow?

"Carlisle, what's wrong?"

"This," I whispered.

My wife gave me a confused look. "What's wrong with this?"

It was like one of those puzzles you give little children: what's missing from this picture? A happy family, sitting in the living room, laughing, singing, enjoying one another's company. Rockwellian, almost, if he had ever seen fit to paint the supernatural. My eyes glanced quickly to the piano, which sat closed, the keyboard cover undisturbed since Christmas when Rosalie had managed to play only one piece for us before stopping. Esme followed my gaze and nodded sadly when she recognized where I was looking.

"Edward is all right, darling," she said soothingly, taking my hand. "He'll be all right. He's survived away from us before."

The words were meant to be comforting, but they weren't. I recalled again the scene my memory had played for me minutes ago in the bathroom. Edward's eyes that day in 1927—sullied by human blood, burning with anger, and yet painfully, unmistakably full of fear. And then, eighty years later, the same sentiment in his voice this Christmas Eve—"*I'm scared.*"

I wanted him to grow. I wanted him to make mistakes and experience that loving someone sometimes meant personal pain. But I also harbored an undeniable urge to just take him by the hand and personally keep him from harm. It had been this urge that had driven my actions that cold October morning when I'd leapt to my feet and growled at my wife. Some terrible,

bestly part of me had shrugged my usual control and responded fully to the threat of losing my son once more. And now, he was gone again and it was I who was in pain.

I felt a cold rage flush through me.

“Jasper, no!” Alice’s voice rang out as the words I would regret slipped through my clenched teeth:

“I wasn’t the one who asked him to leave.”

Four pairs of eyes snapped to the staircase. That Esme’s face screwed up was a testament to habits that still lingered from her human days—clenching shut eyes to stem the flow of tears that were no longer forthcoming. When she did open her eyes a second later, my wife’s face was twisted with a wounded anger I’d never seen before. She rose from the steps slowly, lifting her hands from my face. She stood over me like that for a moment, motionless in the way only our kind could manage, before she found her voice again.

“You aren’t the only one who misses him, Carlisle,” she said darkly, and then she was gone. I heard our bedroom door click shut.

The rush of anger left me as quickly as it had come, and my stomach twisted as I realized what I had just allowed myself to say. It was only then that I became aware of Alice’s frantic voice as she asked the same question of Jasper again and again: “Why?”

I looked over to where they sat on the couch, feeling Rosalie’s and Emmett’s eyes follow me as I did so. Jasper’s hangdog expression told me exactly what had happened.

“Jasper?” My voice was steady again, and I was relieved to hear my usual self-control.

“You were never going to tell her,” he said quietly. “And that’s been bothering you for almost five months.”

Had it? I hadn’t consciously been angry. But Jasper had a better read on it than I did. As I thought about it, I supposed he had been right. I had been careful not ever to bring up that morning, knowing how Esme berated herself for Edward’s departure. To add my own disapproval would be simply cruel.

“You had to start talking,” Jasper added quietly. “But I’m sorry, Carlisle. I didn’t foresee that she would stalk off like that.”

“Yeah, too bad there isn’t anyone who could have seen that for you,” Alice snapped.

“Alice,” I said, and she gave me a doleful look and was quiet.

“Esme’s right, though,” came a voice from across the room. Emmett was striding towards me, his face pained. “You aren’t the only one, Carlisle. I want—” he paused just long enough for me to wonder if he was actually getting choked up “—I want that little twerp back here, too.”

Emmett’s face was grim; sadder than I’d ever known it. I knew that he was unhappy with Edward’s absence; Rosalie availed herself of every opportunity to remind me of this. But to see grief etched on his usually grinning face said more than his wife could ever hope to.

Behind him, Rosalie nodded. I expected to see a triumphant glower on her face at my breakdown, but there was only a pained sadness in her eyes. I glanced over at the piano and remembered her single song on Christmas Eve, her utter avoidance of the instrument otherwise.

“It’s not the same, without him,” Alice whispered. “You and Esme are the only ones who’ve done this before.”

“And you two aren’t holding up well,” Jasper added.

From my perch on the stairs I surveyed the living room: the silenced guitar on its end leaning against the couch, the house plans recoiled into a loose tube on the middle of the dining room table. My children, the four who had completed the tiny family I’d made with Esme and Edward, looked back at me.

I had been wrong to think it too soon that they were happy. We were sad together. It was just that no one else had let grief stop them in their tracks.

I stood from my seat on the stair step to head towards my bedroom and Esme, but found that Emmett had fully advanced on me. For a split second I wasn’t sure what he would do—Emmett’s methods of dealing with his emotions tended to involve some sort of physical match-up.

But this evening was different. This evening he just held his arms out slightly from his body, palms up. He shrugged his shoulders as he met my eye, and I understood. I fell more than moved into his crushing hug and we stood there like that for several minutes in the silence as my other children looked on.

A few minutes later, my pager began to beep.

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“Dr. Cullen.”

I recognized Janine Debenedetto, one of our volunteers from the Tompkins county hospice services. “Janine.” I nodded to her.

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She gave me a sad and exhausted smile. “He’s been waiting for you,” she said quietly, nodding to the patient room she had just exited. She gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder before disappearing down the corridor. The emphasis on the word *waiting* was very subtle, but I understood her meaning immediately. It wasn’t uncommon for patients, especially those who had battled a long illness, to hold out for someone they wanted to see. Over the centuries, I had watched patients who for all medical purposes should have expired within minutes cling to life for hours and even days while they waited for their loved ones to be with them.

That Tony felt I was worth waiting for was humbling.

I entered the darkened room. Per standard protocol, the curtains had been drawn and only a few lights were still on. The boy on the bed was a far cry from the one who had recommended video games to me in December. His body was emaciated in some places, but in others had added weight from the chemotherapy so that the overall effect made him look inhumanly disproportionate. His hair was gone now, and like many patients, he had taken to wearing bandanas. Like everything, he had taken this in stride. Just a week before he had complained about not being able to get his ear pierced to have the full pirate effect.

His eyes brightened when he saw me, and I saw his oxygen mask move in what I could only assume was his muscles pulling into a smile. He lifted a shaking hand and tugged the mask down just long enough to address me plainly in a hoarse croak:

“You look like hell, Dr. C.”

“Anthony!” His father looked shocked, but I could only manage to laugh as I went to my patient’s bedside.

“Look who’s talking,” I said quietly as I took his hand, and the mask moved again as Tony gave me a sheepish grin. His temperature was significantly elevated; his body’s last attempt to ward off the inevitable. My hand must have felt like holding ice. But he didn’t release it from his grip.

Kurt cleared his throat, putting an arm around Anne. “Dr. Cullen,” he said quietly, “Tony told us earlier that he had some things he wanted to ask you in confidence.” He nodded solemnly to his son. “We’ll leave you for a moment, if that’s okay?”

I raised my eyebrows as Tony’s eyes met mine. I nodded, and Kurt and Anne disappeared after each kissing their son’s forehead. I dragged a chair across the room to Tony’s bedside, and took his hand again.

“Tony?” I asked quietly.

He nodded to me and beckoned me closer with one hand. Again he deftly pulled down his mask—he had clearly been doing this often—and asked clearly, “Is it going to hurt?”

I let out a sigh. “No,” I answered quietly. “But it might seem frightening. Are you scared?”

He nodded, and I squeezed his hand.

“It’s normal to be scared,” I told him, and my mind shot back to a crowded, dirty hospital in Chicago. I had spoken these same words to Edward so many years ago. I swallowed, and went on. “Your body is just going to do something it normally does. It has a process for this, just like it has a process for everything else. It’s like turning out the lights, one by one. Your eyes adjust as you go.”

He nodded solemnly, and for a long moment, the only sound was the soft hiss of the oxygen. I didn’t offer any more; I simply watched him as he watched me. A breeze from the window on the other side of the room rustled the charts at the end of the bed and I looked to Tony to see if he was bothered by it. When I met his eyes, however, I discovered that his gaze was transfixed on my arm.

A shaft of sunlight, maybe two inches wide, was streaming through the curtain where the wind had pushed it slightly open. It shone directly over my forearm where I had reached out to Tony. His heart rate sped as he looked at the band of my skin glimmering against the rest of my arm.

For a split second, I panicked, and the vision I’d had two weeks before rushed at me. I could hear the weakening throb of Tony’s heart and the whoosh of the blood flowing through his jugular vein. It would be too easy. His neck would yield easily to my teeth, his blood would flow into my mouth like the most refreshing water. We were on the second floor of the hospital, and his room overlooked the woods. I could spring out the window with him and race away into the forest. No one would ever need to hear from the Cullen family again.

But I left my hand where it was placed reassuringly on his arm, and let him stare at the light for a while longer.

He waved a little, and pointed to his mask. I lifted it, fearing what he might say. His voice was trembling, his eyes wide and incredulous.

“You’re...not human,” he whispered.

I closed my eyes. This was after all, the boy who had pinned my physical age exactly in one of our earliest conversations. Of course he would come to the correct conclusion. Looking back at him, I slowly shook my head.

“But...real?” He looked confused.

I nodded. “I’m very real.”

His head cocked to one side, and he beckoned me to give him the mask back, but only took a quick breath before speaking again.

“An angel?”

An angel. Not “demon,” not “vampire.” Not something evil, or threatening, or even frightening. A force of good, sent by God. I closed my eyes and bowed my head over Tony’s bed. After more than three centuries of life, after ninety years of questioning the rightness of my own action, here I stood here over the deathbed of another young man who had captured my heart. And he had the audacity to presume first that I was an *angel*.

Tony’s guess was praise beyond what I deserved—had I not just entertained the idea of biting him?—and yet, as I looked into his beseeching eyes, I knew that he needed to see an angel right now more than he needed my honesty. Perhaps later he would look down from Heaven and see the conflicted, melancholy beast where he had imagined there to be a seraph. But for now, all he saw was his Dr. C. And he thought me an angel.

It was a bizarre absolution, and there was only one answer I could give him that might satisfy us both.

“Tony, I’m a doctor,” I whispered, squeezing his hand. “That’s all I am.”

Tony smiled and nodded slowly as he closed his eyes. I pulled my arm out of the sunlight, and moved to close the curtain once more.

“Dr. Cullen?”

I turned to see Kurt and Anne reentering the room, both red-eyed. That happened a lot—that families would be brave for their patient, but the moment they were out of reach of the room, they let emotion fly. I gestured to the bed.

“We’re finished talking,” I said quietly, and Tony’s eyes opened a crack.

Tony’s parents gave me tiny smiles as they moved to his bedside.

“I will be here on my shift,” I said quietly, as I edged toward the door. “You can have a nurse page me, if you’d like.”

Tony shook his head violently, and his father looked to him and gave him a sad smile in acknowledgement.

“I believe Tony would like you here,” he said to me. “That is, if you’re able to stay.”

I was floored. It was a very unusual request, and no one had ever made such a request of me before. But then, I had been very careful about developing attachments to patients after Edward.

Perhaps too careful.

I nodded to the Masons, and took a seat in the corner of the darkened room. I heard Anne mentioning something about Tony’s sister—it seemed they had decided she was too young to accompany them and she was with a grandparent. I wondered about this. In my experience, children often were capable of far more understanding than we adults gave them credit for.

As Kurt and Anne spoke quietly to their son, I let my mind wander. It went all the way back to that terrible October morning five months earlier. My young patient, bleeding out under hands I’d thought were sure. His weeping parents, breaking my confidence in my own son’s state. Esme’s terrifying suggestion—and yet, it had been a good suggestion. Even as much as I missed him, I had to admit that Edward seemed to be faring better with his newfound purpose than he had ever managed at home.

But Jasper was right. I was not managing without him. Venom surged again as I remembered what I had nearly done just a short while before. I closed my eyes to stem these thoughts and Edward’s face swam before me; first joyous, laughing, as he had been with Bella, and then abruptly the corpse-like figure that had greeted me the morning he’d left.

I was almost lost to the terrible image when my pants pocket vibrated, at the same time that I heard a tentative, “Dr. Cullen?” I looked up first to see Kurt Mason’s wet eyes and knew immediately that the page was from Alice, even before I looked down to see the words that at the same time were frightening and a relief:

*It is his choice*

the pager read.

Reverently, I went to Tony’s bedside. His eyes were closed now, but the fact that they were closed meant that his muscles were still in control. His breathing was shallow and intermittent, but it was still there.

His father gave me an anxious look, which I understood at once.

“He’s still here,” I said quietly. Reaching for Tony’s father’s hand, I laced it through his son’s fingers, and whispered, “Talk to him.”

Anne mirrored this action, and together the two of them held Tony’s hands. They took turns stroking his hair, telling him over and over that they loved him, reassuring him even as he slipped away. I bowed my head again. I, too, had told my son that I loved him. And like the Masons, I also wondered if my words had fallen on already-deafened ears.

The room was still except for the voices of Tony’s parents, and I stood by quietly, respectfully, my head bowed as I waited, and listened to sounds I had heard hundreds of times before. But today they weren’t the sounds of hundreds.

Today, they were the sounds of only one.

In Tony’s rattling cough, I heard Edward’s, as fluid flooded his lungs just minutes after his mother’s final breath.

As Tony’s breathing faltered, it was Edward’s breath instead that came in short, intermittent gasps, signaling the beginning of four days of excruciating pain.

And when the sound of Tony’s heart shuddering to a stop seemed to echo in the room, it was my own son’s heart that I heard forever cease its beating as he lay in my arms on the twin bed in the tiny flat in a city ravaged by influenza.

To Kurt and Anne, nothing seemed different, I was sure. Their beautiful son only lay still, a tiny, strange smile still playing on his lips, even as his muscles lost their ability to keep it there. But to me, the silence of the now spiritless body before me was deafening. I had no need for my stethoscope, but Kurt and Anne would need to see me use it. Putting it on, I slid it under Tony’s hospital gown, and listened for the quiet I already knew was there.

The Masons had embraced each other before I even looked up from my patient to confirm what they, like I, already knew. I nodded solemnly, and they met my gaze with wet eyes. Bowing my head, I was moving toward the door to give them privacy when Kurt’s arm extended and caught mine.

“Dr. C,” he said.

I was startled. Kurt and Anne had always been cautious to call me “Dr. Cullen,” leaving the affectionate shortened form only to their son.

“Dr. C., thank you,” he whispered shakily. “For everything.”



I shook my head. If I were truly worthy of thanks, they would be taking Tony home now. He would be laughing. He would play more video games. He would tease his sister to tears again and again.

If I were worthy of thanks, Tony would not be gone.

"I couldn't do enough," I answered, but Kurt shook his head, barreling on in a shaking voice.

"You did everything you could. We watched you fight this. You threw everything you had at our boy, and I'll never know why. But he stayed fighting because of you."

I began to protest again, but his next words caught me up short.

"You did everything that it was in your power to do. We know that." He gulped. "Thank you."

*Everything in my power.* The sob that ripped from my throat took me by surprise and I threw a hand over my mouth to stifle it.

"You're welcome," I managed, regaining my voice as I said the words that were familiar to me, from thousands and thousands of patients over the years, "It was a pleasure treating Tony."

The Masons gave me identical sad smiles, and nodded solemnly before looking back to their son.

I stepped out into the hallway, the unnecessary breaths coming short as I remembered the words of my patient's father, his inadvertent echo of a mother I'd known so briefly eighty-seven years ago. Was this what Elizabeth Masen had meant me to do? To give it my all, but in the end to let her son—*my* son—simply slip away? Surely no parent would wish death on their child, but in its place, would she have wanted Edward to suffer as he was suffering now? My thoughts were so overtaken as I moved to go back to my office that I almost missed the woman waiting for me in the hallway, even feet from me as she was.

Esme was in the middle of the corridor, standing firmly as people brushed past her on both sides. Her arms were crossed over her chest comfortably as she waited, and her concerned eyes tracked my every movement as I approached her.

"Alice," I whispered, and she nodded. Of course Alice would have sent her. A part of me was stunned to see my wife before me, and another part chastised me for even doubting her ability to lay aside what I had said to come to me now.

“Esme, I’m sorry,” I began, but she shushed me, putting her arms around me and twining her fingers in my hair as she pulled my head to her shoulder.

“Not now,” she whispered, just barely loud enough for me to hear. “Not right now, Carlisle.”

Gratitude and grief together flooded through me as I collapsed into the stillness of my wife’s arms. We stood locked together, the anguished parents of another lost child, as the voices and sounds of the bustling hospital around us blended to a single, tranquil hum.

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*By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread until you return to the ground,*

*for out of it you were taken;*

*you are dust,*

*and to dust you shall return.*

Genesis 3:19 (NRSV)

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## Chapter 12: Fracture

“Eddie, I’ve got to hand it to you. You do travel light.” Peter tossed my black knapsack to me as he plucked it from the back seat of the taxicab. “Maybe there’s hope for you as a nomad after all.” *Except for the whole flashy car thing.*

I snapped the bag out of the air with one hand and rolled my eyes. “Ed—”

“—ward. I know.” He slipped an arm over Charlotte’s shoulders, much to the dismay of the half dozen or so skycaps who were already salivating at the prospect of getting to help her with her luggage. The three of us stood there a moment, under the glow of fluorescent lights as the thick air around us shook with the rush of jet engines.

*I wonder if we should offer to go with him. Or at least—*Peter’s thoughts became wordless, but I saw Jasper answering a phone.

“Don’t call Jasper, please.” That was the last thing I needed. I could only imagine what Charlotte and Peter would have to say about how I was doing, seeing as they thought me too

domesticated to survive properly on my own. I cringed to think what they would tell my family about our time together.

*Because you're going to call them, I'm sure.* Peter rolled his eyes.

"I will." I remembered briefly Carlisle's thoughts as we stood together in the corner of the platform at the train station. *If you find the need to use this, please call and tell us where you're going.* "I promised Carlisle I would call if I left the country."

Peter's eyebrows raised. "Only if you left the country? Well, that's lenient of him, I guess." *I'm still sort of surprised he doesn't have a curfew.*

I could always tell when Peter had once again forgotten about my gift.

We stood uncomfortably for a moment, avoiding one another's eyes. Finally, Charlotte threw her arms around me, pinning my arms to my sides.

"Good luck, Edward," she said. "We'll be rooting for you."

"Um, thanks?" She didn't let go. I wiggled my hands a little bit and shot Peter a helpless look.

He chuckled. "Char, Eddie has a flight to catch. He can't do that if you've got him in a body lock."

Almost reluctantly, Charlotte released her grip on me and backed away into Peter's arms, smiling shyly.

"By the way," I said as she moved away. Fishing my car keys from my pocket, I held them out to her. Her eyes widened.

"The car?"

"It's at the hotel. You should take it." She'd been lusting after it for some time—it was the least I could do. If I ever saw them again, I would have to take her for a spin in the Vanquish.

She still didn't reach for the keys. *What if he needs it when he comes back?*

"I'll buy another." I could use a car that was a little faster anyway. That was, if I came back at all. Assuming I found Victoria, perhaps being on a different continent from Bella would allow me some measure of peace. It was certainly worth a try.

Charlotte's expression changed to one of pure delight, and she took the keys, squeezing them appreciatively

"Besides," I said haltingly, and found I was suddenly unable to meet either of their eyes. "It's...well, it's a thank you gift." It was true that on some level, Peter and Charlotte had

absolutely driven me up the wall, but on the other hand, if it hadn't been for their insistence on coming to New Orleans in the first place, I would not be headed in the right direction now. It would be an hour and a half to Miami, where I had a two-hour layover, and then thirteen more hours would take me to Brazil. Easter, Lent, and thus Mardi Gras all fell late this year, so Carnival would still be going on for another week. Chances were Victoria was still in the thick of things. And if she was killing, there would be a trail.

My face must have registered my renewed resolve, because Peter nodded. "Let's get you outta here." He cuffed my shoulder. "We'll see you around, okay?" *Not to mention that Charlotte is going to want to drive that car as soon as possible.*

I nodded. "I'll see you guys." I turned from them and strode toward the automatic door that led into the airport that was still bustling even at this late hour.

*Somehow, I doubt it,* came the thought. Pitching my own mind behind me, I watched myself leave through Peter's eyes. He stared after me as I entered the brightly-lit terminal, his thoughts racing forward to Brazil. A fight between two vampires. A faceless female lunging for my neck.

I winced, but continued forward into the rush of the airport. Just before my mind was crushed by the scores of mental voices of passengers inside the terminal, however, I caught one last anxious thought:

*Eddie, I hope you don't do anything stupid.*

And then his voice was gone, lost in the rush of hundreds of bleary thoughts as I entered the terminal.

~|+|~

19 July 1921

*Fragile.*

*Although there are many adjectives with which I could describe my mate—loving, playful, sensitive, beautiful beyond belief—this is the one which comes to me now. As we lay in the woods near our new home this evening, I asked her what she liked and disliked most about her new existence. Her likes were just what I expected but it warmed me anyway to have her affirm her love for me and for Edward, her unending devotion to this unorthodox little family that we have unwittingly created. But her dislike took me by surprise. I had expected her to lament her new darker nature, the loss of her son, perhaps even a nice, civilized meal. But no, what she misses is sleep—the chance to dream.*

*As a human, it was her dreaming that took her to places from which she was banned. It was in her dreaming in which she imagined a life for her son that took him away from the*

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*torment she knew at the hands of his father. It was in her dreaming that she had envisioned a relationship with me. (She made sure Edward was out of range before telling me this—I'm unsure whether to be amused or appalled at the implications.)*

*Now, as a vampire, it is her dreaming that she misses. And I cannot help but feel that in admitting this, she has acknowledged a level of vulnerability that for seven months has been hovering, coloring her relationship with me and with Edward. This woman that I love is now all but made of steel, and on the surface, she portrays the same resilience afforded her by her new physical body. Yet when I see her, I see the pain of giving in to practicality over love, the horror of living with a human monster, the anguish of losing the one bit of light in an otherwise darkened life. And it was in her dreaming that she could let go of these things.*

*I worry that I've stripped this from her. As much as she assures me that with me as her mate and Edward as her son she now has what she'd dreamed for, surely there are facets of her new life she wishes were not as they are, just as there are parts of her old life of which she is still unable to rid herself. And in the face of this, I am helpless.*

*Nevertheless, something in this universe has brought the two of us together not once but twice, forcing us to accompany one another on this bizarre and interminable journey. If she is fragile and I am powerless, then perhaps it is our weaknesses that are meant to mesh, like the wood in the desk that Esme is hard at work fashioning for my office. Alone, the dovetailed ends are nothing but bits of wood, easily snapped from the board even by human hands. Yet brought together, they are stronger than any nail could ever hope to be. That we might be those boards—vulnerable apart, and yet as one, stronger than either could hope to be on our own.*

*Perhaps as fragile beings joined together, we can both still dream.*

--C. C.

With a soft thump, I closed the journal and lay my head next to it on the desk, staring around the room. The smooth wood felt cool against my cheek. Upon arriving in Rio, I had rented a little apartment to serve as my base of operations. It was furnished with a small bureau, a desk and a straight wooden chair, and a twin-sized metal cot with a flat, stained mattress. Every now and again the steaming breeze would whip through the small, single pane window, bringing with it the scents of seawater and raw fish.

It was nice to be still.

When Maria had mentioned Rio, it had made only perfect sense that Victoria would be here, at a party that was several times the size of the one in New Orleans. And so I had jumped on a plane without stopping to think about what that meant.

Rio at Carnival was absolutely surreal. Everywhere I looked there were women dressed in next to nothing, often adorned primarily by ostentatious feathered headdresses as they danced on the massive parade floats or on the edges of the streets. Like New Orleans, the atmosphere was oppressive—throbbing samba music, screaming crowds, drunken revelry in streets made

filthy by weeks of partying. Still, I threw myself into the midst of the revelry night after night. I had to. Victoria was here somewhere, and if she moved again, I might not find her.

When I'd first arrived in Rio, my focus had been absolute. Find Victoria. Destroy Victoria. Protect Bella. But as the weeks wore on, it became more and more difficult to force myself out of the apartment night after night, and I spent increasing amounts of time right where I was now, sprawled over the tiny desk next to Carlisle's journal. Nightly patrols had turned into every other night, then twice-weekly. I didn't venture out of the city in search of any other game than the redhead who was my sole object. Carnival went out with one last huge celebration of hedonism and a full night of pressing crowds, and the next day I watched from my balcony as people trudged through the detritus in the streets to their Ash Wednesday services. A Catholic city had begun its observance of six weeks of waiting and mourning. The fishing increased, the butchers sold less red meat, and I spent more time in my tiny apartment, listening to the honking and shouting of the busy city below as I huddled alone.

Only a few things in the room indicated that anyone lived here at all. My black knapsack sat crumpled on the top of the small bureau, Carlisle's clothes spilling out of it as though the bag had been disemboweled. Atop the desk lay my wallet, which was empty except for my credit card, my drivers' license, and two ten-*Real* bills. Next to it lay my cell phone, the thin silver reminder that there was still a world going on outside.

It had been Alice to whom I had spoken when I'd called the house my second day in Rio to tell them about my journey south. I had tried Carlisle's phone first, but it had been turned off. He was in surgery, Alice had informed me when I'd reached her. Esme had been at her workshop, and Emmett and Rosalie had been away on a trip to the Canadian Rockies. Alice had pitched all this information at me within two seconds of having answered the phone, having seen that I would want the answers. Then she had flipped the tables to ask how I was doing.

"I'm fine," I had said, and she had seemed skeptical.

"Edward," she began, but I cut her off.

"No, I really am." I explained to her about Peter and Charlotte and Maria, and how I'd ended up in Brazil.

"And Victoria?"

"No luck yet. But it will happen. I saw her say it in Maria's mind. This is where she was headed."

Alice sucked in her breath. She constantly warned me to be careful about people's thoughts. "Thoughts are not sure things," was her mantra. But Maria had been hiding something, and she had been shocked when I had plucked the notion of Rio from her head. I knew when I was seeing a thought that someone was trying to hide from me.

"And the fact that Victoria is potentially on another *continent* from Bella doesn't make you think that maybe she's not a threat?" my sister had continued.

I'd sighed. It was something that I had been wondering myself, if I were honest. The fact was nothing pointed toward Victoria actually going after Bella. San Francisco, Texas, and now South America—this was not a trajectory that seemed as though it would take her toward the Olympic peninsula. And then there was the blond vampire—perhaps her new mate? It made sense.

But that wasn't the only reason I was tracking her. Regardless of what she might have planned, the fact was she had been the one responsible for helping James get down to Phoenix in the first place. Whether she was after Bella or not didn't matter.

"It doesn't matter," I answered.

"It does. You aren't a vengeful person, Edward."

I wasn't a vengeful person? "Have you forgotten about the years I wasn't with Carlisle and Esme?"

"No," she answered thoughtfully. "But I also haven't forgotten that you came back."

Round one, Alice Cullen.

I changed the subject.

"How is everyone?"

There was a very long pause.

"Alice?"

"You should come home," she blurted.

Her tone took me by surprise. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," she said in that same tone. "But you should come home, Edward. Everyone misses you. Or at least—"

"At least what?" I prompted.

"We're going to Denali in two weeks, on the eleventh. Over Cornell's spring break. Carlisle decided he needed a vacation."

I frowned. Every now and again my father and Esme would go away for their anniversary, but he still always tried to change his mind at the last minute. Esme would first patiently explain to him that humans took vacations and so he had to take one every now and again to keep up appearances. But it never failed that when the time came for them to leave, she would practically end up dragging him out of the hospital by his collar. Before his family, his work had been the one thing that had given him purpose and direction. In the years I had assisted him, I had felt the peace that radiated from him whenever he was treating his patients. I knew humans who professed that they loved their work, but their feelings didn't hold a candle to Carlisle's. He became distinctly unhappy when he was away from his work for too long.

Something was not right.

"Carlisle decided he needed a vacation? What happened?"

There was a long pause. This was why I hated phone calls—the absence of my sister's thoughts was maddening. True, my family members were more than slightly adept at keeping information from me if they didn't want me to know, but most of the time I could still pluck something. Especially in a situation like this.

"Alice?" I repeated. "Tell me what happened."

"You should just come, Edward," she said finally. "It will only be a week. Then you could go back to...Brazil?"

"Brazil, yes."

"Just join us for a week. That's all I'm suggesting."

Immediately I saw myself in Tanya's lushly appointed living room, a fire roaring in the huge fireplace. Carlisle and Esme would be overjoyed to see me. Esme would fuss. Carlisle would be quietly happy to have my presence. Emmett, Jasper and I would go hunt some grizzly bears that were just coming out of hibernation. Rosalie and I would argue about nothing. And Alice would...probably try to convince me to stay, from the sound of it.

"I don't think it's a good idea." I knew where my family stood on the matter. "*You should be with us,*" Esme had said at Christmas. "*And we should be with her.*"

Alice sighed. "Edward—"

"Alice, I can't." And that was the truth. With crystal clarity I remembered Esme's pained face, Jasper's tortured expression, Carlisle's silent sobbing. I couldn't do that to them again.

"I can't," I repeated, less for her benefit than my own.



She drew a deep breath and exhaled it. “Okay. I won’t push. May I tell Carlisle that you called?”

Was that not the whole purpose of my call? “Yes. Please advise him I’m no longer on your continent.”

“May he call you?”

I winced. If Alice were the one to tell Carlisle how she thought I was doing, any conversation between me and him would end with a one-way plane ticket to Anchorage being couriered to my door. Unnecessary.

“I would prefer that he didn’t.”

This made Alice sigh again.

“Fine. But, Edward?”

“Mmm?”

“Take care of yourself.” Her voice had an edge to it, and I was again frustrated by my inability to hear her thoughts.

“I will.”

“Bye, Edward. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.” I’d meant it.

Alice had been good to her word; no one else from the family had tried to call me. My phone had been silent for weeks; I had stopped carrying it when I went out for patrols. I put a hand around it now, pulling it to within an inch of my nose, so close I could see each imperfection across the “M” debossed into the phone’s back. I ran my thumb across it.

They would all be in Denali now. I wondered what they were doing. If I didn’t exactly love Tanya and her sisters, even I had to admit they could be very entertaining companions. The years we had lived together as one coven had been—eventful, to say the least. But for the most part they had been fun. The last time I had seen Tanya had been the week I’d first met Bella. I had told her nothing of why I was in Denali then. By now my family would have filled her in on the entire sordid story.

Would Tanya hate me for giving my heart to a human girl instead of to her?

Closing my eyes, I was unable to stop my mind from making its trip back to the room in Chief Swan’s house—the upstairs room with the rickety desk and ancient computer, the rocking chair where Renee and maybe even Charlie had once spent nights soothing their infant daughter

and where seventeen years later, I had passed my nights keeping guard over her, too. And the scene came to me with precise clarity from that night when after over a century, my existence had been turned upside-down.

“*Edward*,” Bella’s voice sighed from a peaceful sleep, a half-second forever trapped in my mind.

“Bella,” I called back quietly, my breath disturbing the thin layer of dust and airborne sand that covered the small desk. I watched the tiny dust motes and grains of sand swirl upward in a vortex for a moment, then settle their way back into the layer on the desk.

I spent too much time alone here.

During the days, I huddled alone in the artificial light thrown by the single bare bulb in the middle of the room. Most days I never remembered to turn it on. Every now and then I’d wander out to the deteriorating cement balcony of my apartment, where I could keep watch over the wide *avenida* below. I’d first looked down on the raucous celebrations of Carnival, and now I saw into the mundane day-to-day routines of the citizens of Rio. During the days I could look up into the mountains and to *O Cristo Redentor*, the statue of Jesus Christ that looked out over the entire city and down to the white beaches below. On one of the occasions when I’d traveled here with Carlisle, we had raced each other up the mountain to the base of the statue at night after the gates were closed to tourists. Esme, Rosalie and Emmett had been with us that time, as it would be a few years before Jasper and Alice surprised us by their sudden appearance. But it had ended up that only Carlisle and I were curious enough to want to see the statue which had been erected about a decade before.

He and I had remained on the mountainside for hours; he curiously walking around the statue and gazing up at it, I merely standing and watching his fascination. Carlisle had been brought up to despise Catholicism and all its trappings, yet as he had lived on and on, the iconography that the denomination had inspired had slowly captured his imagination. Not to mention that it was very difficult for Carlisle to hate anything or anyone for long.

So we had circled the statue for some time as he examined its face, its outstretched arms, and its view down over the streets that even then formed a city of millions. And then we had sat at its feet in the darkness, his arm over my shoulders as he told me everything that he remembered about his human life. Perhaps it was the gentle face, or perhaps he saw some similarity in the way the statue stood sentinel over the city as he stood over this bizarre family

he'd created, but something in that moment had struck a chord in my father and he had talked like he had never talked before.

Carlisle almost never spoke aloud when it was only the two of us; he usually preferred to think and rely on my ability to hear and follow his complicated thoughts. But that night he had spoken each one of these thoughts, and I had heard the tiny echoes of his voice in the craggy mountainside and felt the vibrations of his vocal cords as I sat at his side. He spoke of how frustrated he'd been with his father's zealous persecution of those he deemed sinners. He told me how his father, who had wanted him to become clergy, had stood firmly in the way of the progress of his secular education. They had locked horns for years as Carlisle grew into manhood and his father grew old and weak, until Carlisle had finally resigned himself to at least doing his father's work even if he did not agree. A few months later, his mortal life had come to an end.

The two had never made proper amends.

I had asked him then if he regretted that, and he had laughed.

"Regret? I suppose I do," he had told me. "But, Edward—the paths we take aren't always of our choosing. If I hadn't been so at odds with my father and so thirsty to outsmart him and prove him wrong for all the people he had persecuted, I would have killed the same innocent people he did. Instead, my life took a bit of a different turn."

Carlisle had always had an incredible gift for understatement.

I had asked him if he regretted the "different turn," and again he had only laughed and ruffled my hair.

"It's been an interesting journey," he had mused. "But seeing as it was going to be almost two centuries before my wife and my son were even born, I can't say I'm upset about it. Like everyone, I just did the best I could with what I was given. I am definitely happy with the result."

And to my extreme embarrassment, he had kissed me on the forehead.

Although Carlisle and I had had many heart-to-heart talks over the decades, none had ever been quite the same as that one, as he pondered his own father at the feet of the *Cristo*. It felt as though he were seeking some sort of redemption of his own, telling this story to his own son as together we looked out over the city and the ocean below. We'd sat there the remainder of the night, retreating back to our rented villa just before daybreak. He and I had scarcely talked of that moment since, but the following year he had given Esme an island off the shores of Rio as an anniversary present.

I alone knew it wasn't merely the beautiful beaches that had drawn him to the locale.

I had not been up the mountain since arriving in Rio. In fact, I had not left the city. The rainy season was beginning to wane and clouded days were few, which meant that the bulk of my days were spent in the tiny apartment waiting for darkness to fall so that I could go out and hunt. My nights had been spent weaving through the throngs of drunken partygoers, desperate for a hint of the sickly sweet perfume of another of my kind.

There was nothing.

And so increasingly I stayed indoors. I knew every inch of the top of the desk as I'd spent a great deal of my time in this prone position over it, my throat burning as I failed to gather the energy or the will to hunt anything apart from my redheaded quarry. The wood of the desk was wearing smooth where my head naturally came to rest atop it.

From the street, church bells tolled, calling the city's many devout Catholics to Saturday evening services. My ears could pick out the individual overtones of the ringing bells, and I focused in on the lowest, longest-lasting ones which seemed to pour into my apartment through my window and throbbed their way into silence against the unadorned cinderblock walls. I listened, letting the sounds wrap me as I sat perfectly still at the desk.

Saturday. I had last left the apartment four days before, on a Tuesday, after dusk. The days were beginning to shorten again as Brazil hurtled toward the autumnal equinox. The streets had been deserted quite early on in the evening and I had trawled through the claustrophobic alleyways in search of anything that might tip me off to the presence of one of my own kind. In the minds of the people around me I saw children, tourists, the beach—but Victoria was nowhere. And of course even at night I was nothing if not conspicuous. Even the palest humans didn't spend much time in Rio without getting some sort of tan.

Now alone in my apartment as the summer sun began its descent, I closed my eyes and once again saw the visions I was no longer capable of stopping. Bella's face—happy first, smiling in the meadow I had long since thought of as *ours* and no longer simply mine, laughing at me, her eyelids fluttering peacefully as she slept. And then her shocked expression as I threw her away from Jasper, her confusion as we went through the motions the following day at school, her lip trembling that afternoon as the dark lies fell from my mouth:

*You're not good for me, Bella.*

*I don't want you to come with me.*

*It will be as if I never existed.*

A strangled noise escaped my lips and echoed in the empty room, dissonant as it met the tolling of the bells. *As if I never existed.* A self-fulfilling prophecy, if ever there were one. Even if I did go back to Bella, what would I have to offer her? This pitiful, broken being that was hunched over a desk in a tiny apartment in Rio? Every minute more and more of me ceased to exist, slowly burned to ash by the pain that I was growing too weak to fight.

But even as I thought the words, a strange warmth flushed through me. Weakness. Fragility. *Vulnerable apart, and yet as one, stronger than either could hope to be on our own,* my father had written almost ninety years ago.

As a human, Bella was fragile. Without her, I was even more so. At her side, I was a different person. I had seen Alice's memory of her answer to Bella's question as to why my entire family had sprung to her aide exactly one year ago: "*You can't see the changes that we see, we who have been with him for so long.*"

I had seen that change come over two of my family—first Carlisle, as he was inexplicably pulled toward Esme, and then fourteen years later as Rosalie had the same sudden turn towards Emmett. Both of them, and their mates, forever changed, forever wrapped in the rush of first love.

Had I looked like that? Was that what Alice had meant?

And if I had, how could Bella have possibly believed that I didn't love her? Because that was the problem. When we'd walked into the woods that day six months ago, I had been prepared. I had an arsenal of the best lies, the most unreadable expressions. I'd steeled myself to argue for hours, because I knew that she understood she was the very center of my universe now. But it had taken only one sentence to break her faith in me. I closed my eyes again and I went back to that day in the dark woods, seeing Bella's beautiful brown eyes registering an unbelievable shock and hurt as she stared up at me in disbelief.

The edge of the desk snapped into shards before I even realized I'd grabbed it. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I dropped the pieces of wood to the floor with a soft clatter.

*Vulnerable apart.* That much was true. But would Bella and I together be stronger than either of us could hope to be on our own?

Maybe I could just check on flights.

Before I could close my fingers around my phone, however, it buzzed to life.

I groaned. My meddling, precognizant sister. Had I even made a decision to return to Forks? The only thing she could possibly have seen was my decision to check flights—she would see me talking to a travel agent. How was that even remotely interesting?

I began to steel myself for the conversation. Alice's elation would not be easily contained. I flipped the phone over.

*Call from:*

*Rosalie*

it read.

*Rosalie?*

I flipped the phone open so fast the top almost snapped off its hinge. "I thought you'd be Alice."

There was a relieved sigh on the other end. "Thank God. So she called you. She said she wasn't going to. It figures. I knew she wouldn't be able to hold out, what with you being her favorite."

Hold out for what? "I'm sorry?"

"Look, Edward, I realize you're probably beside yourself. You sound good, though. I'm glad. You're okay?"

"I'm...fine?" If you counted lying doubled over a desk in a dank apartment for four straight days as "fine," at any rate. "Rose, what—"

"Great. Look. Alice said you were in Rio? How soon can you get back? Should we wait for you here, or do you want to meet us in Ithaca instead?"

"I—" How did she know I was even thinking about going back? And Denali? Ithaca? That hadn't been where I was thinking of heading, exactly. "What's going on?"

There was a sudden silence on the other end of the line.

"Rosalie?"

"I thought you said Alice had called you." Her voice sounded small.

"I said I was expecting the phone call to be Alice. I haven't heard from her since I called right after I got here. What is going on?" I replayed the beginning of our conversation. Alice had told Rosalie that she wasn't going to call me. About what, exactly?

"Where is Alice?" I demanded, when Rosalie still hadn't provided any new information after a few seconds.

My sister's reply was so quiet, I almost didn't hear it.

"Forks."

"Forks?!" My mind reeled. I had just barely begun to think about going back myself—I began replaying the last several days, searching for anything I might have done that would have tipped Alice...not to mention, hadn't we agreed she wasn't supposed to be watching me anyway?

"She left the day before yesterday. She went to be there for Charlie," Rosalie added unhelpfully.

"To be there for Charlie?" Alice didn't have a particularly close relationship with Charlie—yes, she had played the part of Bella's best girlfriend, but wouldn't she be going back to see Bella?

"You should come home. It's time. It's over. Come back."

I frowned once more, as Rosalie's words sunk in. *She went to be there for Charlie...you're probably beside yourself...it's time. It's over...*

*It's over.*

"No." I heard the voice as though it weren't coming from my own chest. It wasn't possible. Not what I thought she was saying. It couldn't be. "No..."

"I'm so sorry, Edward. But someone had to tell you. Alice saw her jump off a cliff—"

"NO!" The balcony door rattled with the force of my shout.

"Edward, please—" my sister's voice became more frantic "—just come home, please come home. It's enough. It's over...please come back. Carlisle, Esme, Emmett, everyone—just please come back. There's no reason anymore—"

The snap of the phone closing in my palm alerted me that I had hung up on my sister before I was conscious of having chosen to do so. The phone jumped erratically in my hand and it took me a few seconds to recognize that it was not the phone but my hand that was trembling.

She was lying. She had to be. Why Rosalie wanted me home so badly, I couldn't fathom, but she couldn't be telling the truth. Alice would have called. My phone would have rung the second Alice had seen whatever it was she saw. And Bella had promised. "*Don't do anything reckless or stupid,*" I'd said, and she'd agreed.

Rosalie was lying. There was no other viable option.

The phone rang again immediately. Rosalie once more.

I hit "ignore."

Unthinkingly, my finger jammed the number “1,” and my hands continued to shake as the phone on the other end rang once...twice...three times.

“Hello,” my father’s voice said, “you’ve reached Dr. Carlisle Cullen...”

A howl that sounded as though it were from some wild animal reverberated against the bare walls.

My mind raced through other options. I could call the Forks Police Department, but how would I explain who I was and how I knew that something may have happened? Or...I could call the chief of police himself.

The phone was ringing before I realize I’d even dialed the number, so familiar it was to my fingers. For my own good, I had not programmed her number into my new phone when we’d moved, but that did nothing to remove it from my own memory. Yes. This would do. I would confirm that Rosalie was lying, and then I could go back to deciding what to do.

“Swan residence.” The voice was masculine and unfamiliar. A friend of the family? He was too old to be someone from school, and I knew all those voices anyway.

I dropped the pitch of my own voice to match the gentle baritone of my father’s. “This is Dr. Carlisle Cullen,” I told the stranger. “Is Charlie Swan available?”

“He’s not here,” the stranger answered, his voice suddenly icy.

“May I inquire as to his whereabouts?” That was how Carlisle would put it.

“He’s at the funeral,” the man answered, and the line went dead.

A smash erupted from the window and I turned just in time to see that a rectangular hole had formed in the glass. Cracks sprang out from the hole like a firework, and a split-second later the glass spilled out of the window frame. In the street below, something clanged.

It took me a full second to realize that the phone was no longer in my hand.

This wasn’t possible.

The world was still turning. The sun was still beginning its descent over Rio. The church clock tower was still striking. Cars were still honking in the street.

Bella could not be dead.

I slammed a hand down on the desk, opening a deep fissure down the middle of it. Without thinking, I dropped my hand a second time, cracking the desk once more. Then wood was flying, metal was being pulverized beneath my fingers, entire drawers were being reduced to sawdust as I hurled them against the cinderblock walls. Soon the whole room was littered with



the splintered remains of the desk where I had spent what would end up being the final days of my own pitiful existence—the existence which had known light for a mere six months out of nearly a hundred and six years.

Instinctively, my eyes began to dart around the room, searching for the next thing that would fall prey to my anguished rage. And then I saw it, amid the wreckage of the desk--the thick black book that had been my companion and guide, the representation of my father that I had carried across one continent and onto another. Words from ninety years ago, calling me to a different kind of love and life, words which just hours ago I had thought were written for me. But not now. Not ever again.

With violently shaking hands, I again opened the journal to its beginning.

*9 January 1921*

*Thus I begin a new volume, though the old will remain unfinished. My life seems to have started over for a third time, and again I find myself questioning what to expect from this next chapter...*

My eyes were riveted to the second sentence. *My life seems to have started over...my life...my life. Bella was my life. All my life...*

A feral yowl erupted from my lungs and before I knew it, the page was in my hands, wrenched from the rest of the journal. I stared a moment more at the words that had shocked me so deeply four months ago, and then suddenly, they were gone. The page lay before me in tattered shreds, my father's tidy handwriting rendered illegible as it lay in pieces.

I stared at it a moment, a sick feeling crawling into my stomach. Then my hands were a blur as the rest of the journal fell under my fingers, and first one page at a time, then two, four and soon twenty at once were reduced to confetti in a pile on the dingy floor. The leather cover, stripped of its support, sagged empty. I scooped up the shreds of paper and carried them out onto the balcony.

Below me in the *avenida*, tourists strolled, some holdovers from carnival, others recently arrived in order to enjoy the waning days of summer. My body began to tremble as I watched them laughing, walking, breathing.

Living.

Why did the Earth not know that without Bella Swan, there was no reason for it to keep spinning? In my selfish choices to stay near Bella, to love her despite the danger I posed, I had first endangered her life. And then by leaving her, I had ended it.

A choked noise—part sob, part growl, part something I couldn't even identify—jerked itself from my throat.

Flexing my hand first around the shreds, I slowly opened my fist and watched as my father's hopes, dreams, fears and all of his love for his own mate dripped from my palm to the ground. I watched as the papers spread in the wind, some skittering down onto the street quickly, others blowing down several blocks before they settled to the ground. They rained down on honking cars. They rained down on hollering vendors. They rained down on the heads of the people who were unaware that somewhere, two lives—one mortal, one not—had just smashed to an end. And so from my perch above the oblivious city I watched them fall, until the last scrap blew its way into the distance, finally coming to a rest at the side of a filthy storm drain.

No one even looked up.

## Chapter 13: Missed

The light from Tanya's immense fireplace danced across the walls of the living room, and I watched intently as the flames raced their way up and down the already charred logs. Warmth. It was unnecessary in the strictest sense, as the cold wasn't uncomfortable for any of us, but it felt good nonetheless to simply sink into the wide leather chair and bask in the radiating heat.

I was alone in the massive house for the first time since our arrival. Like our family, Tanya and her sisters had managed over the centuries to amass a great deal of wealth, and the house they lived in now had once been a ski lodge built to accommodate almost thirty. Even I had to admit the space was refreshing. As beautiful as the Ithaca house had turned out after Esme's careful work, there was no denying that it was still very small, especially after our home in Forks. Ground had not yet been broken on Rosalie and Emmett's new home, and six of us living in such a tight space had been making for some very tense moments. Even Alice had been testier than usual—she and Rosalie had gotten into some sort of tiff about whose car got parked where and had wound up not speaking for several days.

Here there was room enough for all of us to spread out, even nearly doubled in number as we were. But it was nevertheless nice to have everyone out of the house for a little while. Irina had not been present when we'd arrived, and Tanya informed us she didn't expect her back for some time. It had something to do with Laurent, the member of James's coven we'd sent north to them, but I didn't discover exactly what she was up to. It would not have surprised me if he had given up the lifestyle, however. It wasn't easy to convert—Jasper was proof of that.

The remainder of both families had managed to be out of the house at once this afternoon. As it was an overcast day, Kate had taken Emmett and Jasper up to one of the most difficult ski slopes in the area. A hunting trip had consumed Carmen and Eleazar. Tanya and Rosalie had disappeared into town to get the parts necessary for Rosalie to tweak the engine on Tanya's Land Rover, and they had taken Alice and Esme and with them. The latter two had gone under the

pretense of shopping for handicrafts, but I suspected it was primarily an opportunity for them all to get out of my earshot.

I couldn't blame them. I had not been easy to be around of late.

Tony's funeral had been held a week after his passing, on a rare brilliantly sunny day in Ithaca. I had been forced to spend the day in my study instead, clearing out the scores of medical journals I'd accumulated over the last months in my frantic attempt to fight Tony's disease. I sent a small arrangement of sunflowers and tiger lilies to the funeral home--an appropriate display to express a doctor's sympathy, but one which was beyond inadequate to convey my true sorrow. Esme sat in the study with me all day, simply watching as I performed my own private ritual of grief. When I finished sorting the journals, she silently helped me load the boxes into her pickup, and we took them to the recycling center together at dusk.

Almost three weeks later I was still just barely going through the motions. I smiled at my patients and offered my counseling and guidance; I dutifully assisted Esme with the final touches on our bedroom; I washed small loads of laundry every other day, more often than needed.

I fooled no one.

So when the chief of surgery had suggested I take some time off, and Esme had added that it would be nice to come up to see Tanya, I had agreed to the trip. My family seemed perfectly contented to give me a wide berth, and so I'd spent a great deal of time exactly where I was now: curled up in the overstuffed chair and staring into the fire. Occasionally I would read from a century-old copy of *War and Peace* I'd plucked from Tanya's library, but most often I simply sat before the fire, stoking it and nurturing its flames as needed and then watching idly as it consumed log after log.

Edward was in Brazil. Alice had seen his call while he was still in the air over the Atlantic Ocean. I had wanted to simply sit by the phone for a day or two until I heard from him, but Alice had suggested that perhaps it was wise that she take a turn trying to convince Edward to veer from his course. I had reluctantly agreed, but my mind had been at home the entire time I was in surgery. I came home that night to find that she'd been completely unsuccessful.

I stared at the hearth in front of me, which was covered with a thick bearskin rug from one of the Denali clan's many fruitful hunts. I could nearly imagine my son there, lying on his stomach in front of the fire, paging through an old favorite from Tanya's library, perhaps Homer.

We would have a near-silent conversation: I would think, and he would answer me in his low whisper, occasionally ribbing me about the happiness I exuded with him nearby.

Closing my eyes, I forced myself to relax into the chair. *Enough*, I told myself. Edward was safe, and that was what mattered.

“Carlisle.”

Even if I hadn’t been able to recognize her voice, I would always recognize my name when spoken by Tanya. Although nearly all traces of her native tongue were centuries erased from her speech, the after-effect of ages in Russia meant that Tanya was the only person to accent my name on the second syllable instead of the first. Twisting in the chair to face her, I answered.

“That was fast.”

She shook her head, frowning. “We’ve been gone for nearly five hours.” Dropping gracefully to the wide ottoman in front of the chair, Tanya crossed her legs in front of her out of habit. Her eyes raked over me as she took in my entire appearance: my jeans and bare feet, my worn sweater, my slouched posture, the Tolstoy abandoned on the side table. She heaved a sigh.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen you like this,” she said quietly. “Even in those years we all lived together, when I saw you every day—nothing like this.”

“You’ve just never seen me on vacation.”

She laughed a hard laugh. “You’re confusing vacation with depression, if I’m not mistaken.” Giving me a sad smile, Tanya put one hand over my bare foot and began to massage it gently.

“Tanya—” I protested.

“Oh, calm down,” she said. “I’m just rubbing your feet. A gesture of comfort from a friend. Really, I go after Edward once, and for the rest of eternity you worry I’m trying to find a way into all of your—”

“It was more than once,” I answered, cutting her off before she could go any further. She simply laughed, pressing her fingers into the soles of my feet a little more insistently, and I let her. This was Tanya’s way of being with me, I knew. She and her sisters tended to approach men as though we all required seduction, even if they had no intention of bedding the man in question. Her everyday mannerisms were flirtatious. Strictly speaking, my muscles never reached the kind

of overworked states that caused humans' to require massages, but Tanya's ministrations were pleasant nonetheless. After two centuries of solitude, being touched had been one of the things that had taken me longest to get used to. Something like a foot massage still tended to catch me very off guard.

She continued the massage for several minutes. The room was quiet except for the crackling of the fire and Tanya's gentle hum. "I have to admit," she added a moment later, not looking up, "I'm a little surprised you didn't haul our new Romeo up here. Although I'm sure I'm not very high on the list of people he wants to see right now."

I let out a little laugh, recalling the way Edward's brow had furrowed when I had suggested five months ago that he might want to come to Denali.

"He's an adult," I sighed, closing my eyes. "I have to treat him like one."

At this Tanya threw her head back and laughed. "My *foot* you're treating him like an adult!"

My eyes snapped open and I stared at her. "I'm sorry?"

"You have been standing by and watching for half a year while Edward throws what amounts to a temper tantrum. That's what you do with a two-year-old, Carlisle."

I sat up, jerking my feet from under her hands and placing them on the floor. She shifted her own posture, straightening herself on the ottoman so that she could meet my eyes. A smile spread across her face as she regarded me.

"You're angry." She sounded as though this were the most fascinating thing in the world.

Angry? I stopped to assess myself. Frustrated, yes. Sad? Absolutely. But angry? It was not an emotion I felt often. Although I had few memories of my human life, as far as I could remember I had not been very easily angered then, and now my tendency toward peacefulness had been amplified a hundredfold.

"I am not angry," I answered cautiously.

"Yes, you are." She looked absolutely delighted. "Carlisle, I criticized your handling of this situation, and you look like you're about ready to strangle me." She patted my knee. "It's all right. Normal people get upset when they're criticized. You're allowed."

"Well, how exactly did you expect me to respond?" I asked, and discovered Tanya was right. There was an edge to my voice I wasn't used to hearing. "'Hauling him back up here' would be treating him as a child. Of *that* I am absolutely certain."

She laughed again. "It's not easy to lead, is it?"

Her question gave me pause. I did not customarily think it a burden to be the head of our family. In fact, it was a post which, on the whole, brought me great joy. And unlike Tanya, I had not been thrust into the position—I had chosen Edward, then Esme, and then Rosalie, and then Rosalie had chosen Emmett. It was my venom that ran in all their veins, and I felt it my responsibility to continue to care for and provide for them as best I knew how. But it certainly wasn't easy. My mind traveled back over the last several months. Edward, nearly catatonic on the couch when I came home from the hospital that fateful morning. Esme's shocked expression as I prepared to attack her; her look of wounded anger when I'd brought up that morning again just a month ago. Rosalie's dark eyes the night she came back from Europe; her pointed jabs as she lobbed accusations at me. Jasper's concern for my loneliness. Alice's quiet consolation in the car. Emmett's hug. And still here I sat, preferring the quiet to the company of my immediate and extended family.

"No," I answered Tanya finally. "It's not easy."

She gave me another sad smile. For a moment there was silence between us as I studied my friend. Tanya had landed herself as head of the Denali sisters when their mother had been destroyed by the Volturi centuries before. A woman of natural internal strength, a quality that had been only intensified when she became a vampire, she had been the one to whom the other two had turned in their grief.

I had never before gotten even an inkling that she felt the position was burdensome. But of course it would be. To become the leader of your family precisely because you had lost the woman who had created and loved all of you—it was more than a small load to bear.

"What would you have done?" I asked, my voice quieter than I had intended.

Tanya appeared to be studying my knee. "It's hard to say," she answered after a moment of thought. "I don't have children."

"Edward isn't a child." Wasn't that what we had just been arguing?

"No, of course not. But he's *your* child. And all of this? This is new to him. He needed your guidance. He *needs* your guidance. You and your mate have been together almost a century. He's been with--" she paused and raised her eyebrows.

"Bella," I supplied.

“He’s been with Bella for less than a year. You know Edward. He sees everything in black and white. He’s not going to think about the ripple effect of a decision—it’s either right or wrong. Having a mate is more complicated than that, and you know it.”

“Bella is his girlfriend,” I answered meekly.

At this, Tanya threw her head back and really laughed. “Oh, Carlisle. Sometimes I forget just how young you are. For a man with so much intuition and compassion, you can be so unbelievably *thick* when it comes to relationships.”

“Tanya, I’ve been married for almost eighty-five years.”

She laughed again. “Three words. Edward and *Rosalie*? It’s a miracle neither of them ripped your head off for that stunt.”

I winced. Those had been the tensest two years of my entire life. Esme had actually removed all the doors in the house at one point because between the two of them they were getting slammed and broken several times a day. She still tended to design her remodels with very open floor plans, which I couldn’t help but think was a preemptive strike against a repeat of the early nineteen-thirties. And of course both of them had been furious with me, to boot. It was why I had immediately gone back on my word not to turn another human when Rosalie had shown up carrying Emmett’s broken body. I had prayed he would be a deliverance, and he was. For all of us.

“I wish I had known you before you met Esme. That had to be a sight to behold--you actually falling in love.” Tanya smiled, squeezing my knee. “Of *course* Bella is Edward’s mate. If anyone knows the difference between a lover and a partner, it’s me. Trust me, I am not at all thrilled to concede that Edward has found a mate, but he clearly has. And with a mate comes responsibility, even if she isn’t a vampire. He needs you to show him the way, not bend to his will. You would never leave Esme, no matter what.”

“I could never leave Esme.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” a voice piped up from behind me. I twisted in the chair to see Esme approaching us, a small smile playing on her lips. She came over to the chair and stood behind me, running her fingers through my hair. “I’m glad to know I’m not in any danger of *you* ending up in Brazil.”

“Hey,” I greeted her, and she smiled.



“Hey, yourself.” Bending over, she put her arms around my neck and kissed my jawbone. “Did you enjoy your afternoon alone?”

That was debatable, of course. I recalled the image that I had produced of Edward lying on the bearskin rug, and a knot formed in my throat.

“It was fine,” I managed, and Esme kissed my jaw again, burying her nose in my hair.

“Alice had an idea,” she whispered.

“What?”

“She thinks we should go hunting for a few days. Just the two of us. So that we can regroup.” She pulled her arms from my neck and came to the front of the chair, perching herself on the other side of the ottoman from Tanya. “And you need to hunt, sweetheart. Your eyes are so dark I almost don’t recognize you.”

I raised my eyebrows. It figured. Alice was always the one to suggest things like this. Tanya removed her hand from my knee and it was quickly replaced by Esme’s. She gave me a gentle smile, and I was reminded of the moment months ago when we’d danced in the wreckage of the kitchen remodel. There would be no Beatles out on the glaciers, but perhaps we could still find some time to do some dancing.

A single, joyous round of applause broke out from some distant corner of the house and Alice appeared in the living room seconds later.

“You’re going to go! I told you he’d agree. He’s brooding, but he’s not *actually* Edward. He knows to take you up on something that will make him happy.”

I frowned. “Thank you, Alice, for that relatively unflattering assessment.”

She giggled and flitted over to the chair to kiss my cheek. “You know what I mean, Carlisle. And you two need this. We won’t bother you. In fact--” her hand flashed out so quickly even I almost missed it “—you won’t need this.” She held up the silver cell phone she had just plucked from my pocket.

“I—” I stood. “What if...I need it?”

She rolled her eyes and promptly answered the question I hadn’t actually asked. “How many times has Edward called in the last five months? Exactly. Twice. It’s time for you to focus on Esme for a little while. Just a couple of days. And you two can do nothing but talk about Edward the whole time if that’s what you want.”

“I wouldn’t,” a second voice piped up from the doorway. The mingled scents of grease and burned motor oil caught my nose as my other daughter entered the room. Rosalie frowned as I turned to face her.

“What good will it do you to talk about Edward? Neither of you is going to do anything about him. You’ll spend three days talking; you’ll come back just as devastated as you both already are, and he’ll still be in Rio.”

I sighed. Rosalie and Emmett had joined us in Denali after their most recent trip in the Canadian Rockies. On our first day together I had overheard her complaining to Emmett about how melancholic I had seemed and how she was surprised I hadn’t yet “gotten over the death of that boy.” I had decided to ignore it and chalk the complaining up to Rosalie’s sometimes convoluted way of expressing concern. I should have expected an outburst was coming.

“And what would you have me do differently, Rose?” I asked her calmly.

She shook her head. “You’re miserable, Carlisle. And because you are, we all are.” Her eyes flickered briefly over to the chair, whose shape had not quite yet recovered from my having sat in it all afternoon. I watched as she took in the abandoned book lying on the side table. Then she met my eyes again and went on.

“This whole family is mourning like Edward *died*. He didn’t die. He’s in South America! Just go get him!”

“Rosalie,” I began, but she cut me off.

“I know he’s in all this heartsick pain, but for heaven’s sake. You heard Tanya. He needs to grow up.”

“Rose—”

“And you! First you hide from the whole family, then you just fall apart. What good does that do the rest of us? For crying out loud, Carlisle. This is your family. I’m sick and tired of coming home to Emmett moping and Esme crying and you just sitting there.” She was squared to me now, her arms crossed over her chest. In her coveralls and work boots with her hair pulled up and grease streaked down her pale forearms, she didn’t look like the part of the devastating beauty that the rest of the world saw her as. Her eyes flashed with anger as she fixed her gaze on me, and for a moment I recognized again the Rosalie whose rage had once claimed the lives of seven men.

I closed my eyes and I saw again the vision I'd had no less than an hour ago—Edward, lying on the floor here in the living room, laughing, smiling, groaning good-naturedly about my happiness. But if I were honest with myself, I knew that vision was only a Edward who would have lain happily and peacefully on his stomach before the fire was gone, and even if I did retrieve my son from South America, what would I get? The same miserable being who had hidden himself in the corners of the house in Ithaca, his eyes black and circled, his body folded into a ball seemingly for protection, but from what? From me?

My arms recalled Edward's weight that morning that I had cradled him to my chest. I had tried. I had tried everything to keep Edward with me, to support him, not to lose him one more time. And I had failed. Repeatedly. Now he was on another continent, alone and frightened.

I was worried. No, I was terrified. My son was wasting away emotionally just as surely as Kurt Mason's son had wasted away physically. And like that, I realized I was done. I had laid down my sword weeks ago, and it had taken until now to realize that I'd done so.

"It's your family," Rosalie spat. "Stop talking about Edward. Stop mourning him. Stop obsessing over him. *Do* something. Go to South America and—"

"I have," I heard myself say quietly. My hand began to tremble at my side.

Rosalie paused, surprised by my interruption. "What?"

"I have done something. I've done many things. So has Esme, and so has Alice, and so has Jasper, and even Emmett. We've pleaded with him. We've cared for him. We've talked to him on the phone. We've heaped love and support on him. We've asked him to come home. We've *begged* him to come home."

"But—"

This time it was my turn to cut her off. "And you have done nothing. You have gloated. You have disappeared all over the world. You have complained incessantly while you have been at home. That's all you've done. So, no. This is not my family. This is our family. We make this family. The seven of us. And you are part of it, whether you like it or not."

The room was absolutely still. Esme, Alice, and Tanya had all stopped breathing. Rosalie's gaze was dark as ever, and I caught the hint of a sneer forming on her lips. I could hear approaching laughter outside—it was Kate and Jasper and Emmett, coming back. The clicking of the skis accompanied the sound of their footfall, and I heard their conversation—Emmett had

apparently taken a spectacular dive off a forty-foot jump that he hadn't landed quite accurately, and he was refusing to be ribbed about it.

Rosalie and I were still squared off when the front door swung open.

"Hey you al—" Emmett began, but cut himself off immediately when he saw the fire in his wife's eyes. He went to her side immediately and tried to put an arm around her, but she threw it off and continued to glare at me.

"Carlisle," she began, "what I meant—"

"I don't care what you meant." My voice was dark but even; its tone surprised even me. "What are you waiting for, Rose? My permission? Fine. You have my permission. If you want so badly for someone to do something, why don't you do it? If you think you can succeed where I've—" I swallowed "—where I've *failed*, then by all means do it. Please. It's not as though I don't want him back."

Five heads whipped toward Jasper as the words left my mouth, but he raised both hands, palms upturned, and shook his head slowly.

"Jasper has nothing to do with this." I told all of them, not taking my eyes from my daughter. "Rosalie, do something, or don't. It doesn't matter to me. But stop complaining. I have had more than enough of that."

Rosalie's mouth opened as though she was going to say something else, but she closed it again and resumed glaring at me. Her lips had dropped into a thin line, and her eyes were narrowed. As I stood staring at her, a hand ran its way down my forearm and I suddenly found my fingers intertwined with my wife's. Her lips were at my ear in an instant. "Darling," she whispered, "that trip you just agreed to?"

I nodded, still staring back at Rosalie. She scowled at both of us. Esme shot her an apologetic expression and gave me a little shove toward the door.

"Perhaps we ought to leave a little early," she said.

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"I think we may have just committed a federal crime."

"A federal crime?" Although I hadn't looked down to see her face, I could feel her brow furrowing against my bare chest. "Carlisle, I realize that with Edward and everything else that it hasn't exactly been frequent lately, but they didn't change any laws since the last time we—"

“Not that! Heavens, not that.” Laughing, I took her face in my hands and pulled it to my own, our lips melding slowly. When she sighed a moment later and pulled back to lay her cheek against my own, I continued.

“I was referring to the moose. I believe we chased it back into the national park.”

“Oh. That.” My wife giggled. “Yes, I suppose we did.” Lazily, Esme rolled off my chest and back onto the ice at my side. “If I’m not mistaken, our family’s murder record is against us when it comes to federal law. I would wager the moose is the least of our worries.”

We both laughed.

A layer of powder snow a few inches thick had recently fallen on the glacier on which we lay, and the wind whipped it across both our bodies. The sensation was pleasant, like feathers dusting across my chest, shoulders, and face. Esme and I lay in silence for quite some time, my arm over her shoulder and her palm flat on my sternum.

“Sweetheart?” My wife’s voice interrupted my meditation on the snow.

“Mmm?”

“Are you happy?”

“Of course I am.” I stroked Esme’s hair and looked down at her. “Nothing makes me happier than being with you.” Propping myself up on my elbow, I brought my lips to hers again. “In all senses of the word.”

She smiled shyly and gazed up at me. Her eyes were a perfect saffron, the product of several days of catching first small game, then finally a bull moose that we’d cornered together. I was sure mine looked similar, which had to be a vast improvement over the shining onyx I had seen in the mirror just before we’d left.

“I don’t mean right this minute, Carlisle. Overall. Right now, are you happy?”

*Of course not*, my mind screamed. Under normal circumstances, this trip would be wholly different. I would go hunting with Esme, and then maybe again later in the week with my sons. I would put on my unnecessary ski jacket and snow pants and we would hit the slopes as a family, making sure that Edward and Rosalie never wound up together on the lift. In the evenings I’d sit by the fire, as I was doing now, but I wouldn’t do so alone. I might play chess, or read alongside Edward or Esme or Jasper.

Instead, my family was all but avoiding me, and I had publicly castigated my daughter three days before. Esme had assured me again and again that, while I hadn’t been at my most

diplomatic, I had said nothing untoward to Rosalie. Yet, I still felt uneasy and ashamed about our quarrel.

I drew a breath and exhaled it slowly, watching Esme's pale hand rise and fall on my chest. "No," I answered.

"I didn't think so." Esme sighed, pillowing her head on my shoulder.

"Are you?"

She shook her head almost imperceptibly. We were silent awhile; the only sounds our unnecessary breathing and the wind whistling across the mountainside. I rubbed her shoulders.

"Why is this so difficult?" I muttered.

"I don't know," came the whispered reply.

"He's been gone before. For three years! It's been five months. How can it possibly be this hard?"

My wife's voice was quiet. "Carlisle, if I had known how difficult this would be, I never would have suggested that Edward go off for awhile."

I drew my breath slowly, and exhaled it against her forehead before pressing my lips to the spot my breath had just caressed. "I'm so sorry about that," I told her. "And I'm more sorry that I didn't tell you. Jasper was right. I let it eat away at me for months."

Esme shook her head. "It was wrong of me to even think about it in the first place. It's like that Bible verse, with the sheep?"

*"If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray,"* I quoted.

"Yes," Esme answered. "That's it." She curled up even further onto my body. "He's our one. I was thinking too much about our ninety and nine."

A short laugh bubbled from my chest, and I kissed her again. It was true, her decision had shocked me. But Esme's gift to our family was her boundless love—the love that had encompassed first me, then Edward, then each of our children in turn. The love that was now stretching to Bella, even tenuous member of our family as she was. She couldn't help but to consider them all. I had long since admitted to myself that Edward occupied a very special place

in my heart. However, I suspected that each one of us occupied the exact same place in Esme's: all of it.

"I'll let you in on a secret," I whispered. "That shepherd? He wasn't the mother of the ninety-nine."

She smiled, recognizing my comment for the forgiveness it was. "Thank you, Carlisle."

Esme settled back at my side and I stroked her shoulder while I thought. Of course, Edward had gone astray from our flock before. Then I had relied on him to return, and he eventually had. He'd come home defeated, and worse for wear, but he had come home. And that time we had merely waited.

"We didn't go after him in 1927."

"No," Esme agreed. She was silent for a long time, her breath lolling against my neck as she lay quiet. "He was happy," she said finally. "That's what's changed. We watched him for six months be the happiest he's ever been. And then..."

My wife didn't finish her sentence, but I knew what she meant. I recalled Edward's expression that afternoon in my study when he'd come to me to tell me he wanted us to leave. All of the light I had grown used to seeing in his eyes was gone, replaced by regret, pain, stubborn resolve, and most of all, fear.

It was the fear which unsettled me so thoroughly. To have Edward angry—I'd seen that before. To have him be sad and moody—I'd dealt with that for almost ninety years. But the fear—Edward's fear tore at me, because I had been there once myself. What was finding your mate if not making yourself totally vulnerable and afraid? I had once worried obsessively over the woman who now lay at my side—first that another had hurt her physically, then that I might do so emotionally. I had raged for years at the injustice that humans and the universe had done to her to lead her to that cliff that fateful afternoon, even as I thanked God for providing her to me.

I had gotten through that personal hell because Esme had been at my side, waiting for me every day with open arms. I had grown into an eternal love precisely because I couldn't run away from it. And yet ninety years later when I had been tapped to teach that same lesson to Edward, I had failed.

Yes, his situation was beyond unusual. Yes, there was an unequivocal threat to Bella through her association with us—both James and Jasper had proven that beyond any doubt, and Alice's vision of Bella among us was still just as unsettling as it had been a year ago. Was Bella

better off without Edward? I hoped this was the case; that some good was coming out of this six months. But not seeing her now, I couldn't be sure. What I could be sure of was that Edward was barely clinging to life without her. "*Of course Bella is Edward's mate,*" I heard Tanya's voice ring in my head. And if that was true, then there was no way he was going to recover from this in her absence.

"We have to go back," I heard myself say.

Esme's head jerked up from my shoulder, startled. "What?"

"Rosalie's right. We have to do something. If not go back to Bella, then at least get Edward. This has gone on long enough. It's going to destroy him. I can't—" I gulped. "He was first. I can't lose him. Not again."

The smile that spread across my wife's face could have made up for every cloud whose cover we lay beneath. She leapt to her feet, yanked me to her in a hug that constricted my lungs, and pressed her lips to mine in a searing kiss.

"Let's go back to the house," she said when we separated. "We can start talking this over with everyone. Make some decisions."

I nodded and within seconds we had both shrugged our way back into our scattered clothing and I found myself being tugged at full speed down the mountain.

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It was dark by the time we'd traveled the distance between the park and Tanya's home to the north. I saw the house in the distance when we were still several miles away. The fire had long since smoldered out—no smoke was winding its way from the chimney. I smiled. Without me sitting there and stoking it every hour, of course it had burned itself out. That was probably a good thing.

Esme and I approached arm-in-arm. The house seemed dark; I could see only a single lamp shining in the main living space. That wasn't unusual, however—although our family had habituated to turning on lights when we entered a room so that we would do so as naturally as the humans we interacted with, they weren't strictly necessary.

It took a long time to hear the sounds of the house as we approached, and this confused me for several minutes as we continued our journey homeward. For a fleeting second I considered whether I had simply forgotten my own hearing range. It wasn't until we were within



several hundred yards of the house that I realized the quiet was due to there being no sounds to hear—the house was as silent as it was dark.

“Something’s wrong,” I muttered, and Esme’s concerned expression told me she had already come to the same conclusion. We covered the ground to the front door in seconds. Now I could hear clearly the only sound from the house—a choking breathing coming from the living room.

All my anxiety dissipated the second I opened the door, and I saw Esme’s shoulders relax. Both of us swung our eyes immediately to Jasper, who stood against a wall and was staring intently back at us, his arms crossed over his chest. Kate sat in my usual chair, staring concernedly over to the couch. On the couch, Emmett and Tanya flanked a trembling Rosalie. Her morose face was thrown into relief by the eerie shadows cast by the table lamp whose light I had seen from outside. I realized immediately that it was Rosalie’s tremulous breathing I’d heard from the front of the house.

Rosalie was *crying*?

“Rose? What’s wrong?” I asked gently and began to approach, but Emmett threw up a hand to stop my forward motion and shook his head.

“She just wanted him to come home, Carlisle,” he said quietly. “Hell, none of us could have predicted—” He stopped and shook his head. “We just found out an hour ago.”

“Less,” said Jasper, his teeth clenched.

“Found out what, exactly?” I asked. Despite Jasper’s efforts, I realized that Esme’s hand was clenched around my upper arm, her fingers digging into my bicep. It was then I fully took notice that Jasper was standing alone.

“Where’s Alice?”

Jasper reached over to the end table and plucked something off it too quickly for me to see what it was. He lobbed it at me, and I caught it instinctively before I opened my hand to see my phone. “She turned it to silent right when you left, and then she left in such a rush that she forgot to tell us to turn it back on.” He swallowed. “No one saw it ring, Carlisle. I’m so sorry.”

My eyes were still on Jasper, Emmett, Rosalie and Tanya as my hand flipped open the phone.

### *I Missed Call*

Puzzled, I again met Jasper’s eyes.

Jasper gestured to the chair not occupied by Kate, and for a second I saw a glimpse of the resolute soldier in the authoritative gaze he swept over me and my wife.

“Sit down, both of you,” he ordered, his voice calm but firm. “Something has happened, and we all need to talk.”

## Chapter 14: Fathers and Brothers

Stillness.

Blackness.

I shattered both as I raced through the Tuscan countryside with the brutal wind as my welcome companion. It was an unusually cold March for Tuscany; I had heard the discomfort in the other passengers' thoughts as we had landed and disembarked our flight in the middle of the night. In the absence of the winter sun, the nighttime temperature had fallen to a few degrees below freezing, and the locals, used to milder weather, had complained bitterly, if not entirely aloud.

The cold was meaningless to me, but as I ran I wished I could feel its punishing sting. Purified by pain, like a medieval pre-execution torture. I would arrive to my deliverers fully prepared for what they might unleash on me; readied by the stinging cold for the peacefulness of my death.

But my body instead embraced the cold as though it were the most comfortable bath, readying me for nothing. It was no matter. I was but hours away from the physical pain which would end my grief which would result in my absolution,, and I would welcome it warmly when it was offered.

I was immeasurably grateful that the flight, the first I had been able to finagle out of Rio, had dropped me in Florence in the middle of night. The darkness meant I didn't need a car and was able to run the distance to the city which, for all intents and purposes, stood as capital for my kind. The city from which my father fled so many centuries ago. Although we had visited Rome and Venice, he had never brought me here except within the confines of his head, but his memories served as my guide as I navigated my way through the farms and vineyards in the foothills.

I shook my head forcefully, sending airborne a spray of the dusty earth kicked into my hair by my run. It was no good to think of Carlisle.

I pushed myself faster.

The smell of Volterra hit me well before I drew close enough to see it. The sweet cloy of my kind hung over the city's surrounds, an unmistakable shroud that warned of this coven's sheer number to any who might dare try to fight. To humans it would be a gentle fragrance that they would chalk up to the purity of the air, the growing grapes, the sun.

To me, it was the reek of the gallows, and I breathed it deep.

A faint glow hovered over the center of town as I approached, and the engines of light-duty vehicles emitted a low, slightly dissonant hum from somewhere inside the cluster of stone buildings. Slowing to a more humanlike pace, I slipped through the narrow cobblestone streets and dark, tight alleyways between the buildings—the relics of foot travel from centuries before that were now passable only by Vespa or bicycle.

The stone buildings were familiar, virtually unchanged from Carlisle's memories of two centuries ago. Of course now their tenants were entirely different—a sliver of light drew my eye toward a building through whose windows I could see a shopkeeper reverently mopping the floor. An as-yet-unlit green sign hanging over the door proclaimed the small shop to be a Starbucks.

Hidden from human sight by the predawn dark, I slid between the buildings and made my way to the town center in under a minute. The sounds and lights I had heard from outside the city's gates emanated from the large open square, the *Piazza dei Priori*. Golf carts zipped back and forth across the center of the square, at times narrowly missing one another and cornering quickly around the expansive fountain which occupied the square's center. The halo of light came from the headlights of several vehicles and from the floodlights which were in the process of being hung from freshly-installed rigging trusses. Two men in cherry pickers were raising a huge scarlet banner over what appeared to be some sort of main stage. At the square's perimeter, two vendors had already arrived to set up shop for their wares—red capes and banners, and plastic toy vampire fangs.

Saint Marcus Day.

Relief flooded me as I took in the actions of the dozens already gathered in the square at this early hour. A second lucky break in only a few hours. I hoped that when I asked the brothers to eliminate me, they would do so willingly and without question or fanfare. But I had thought of a few backup plans in case I needed them—lifting a car over my head in the plaza, attacking the Volturi brothers themselves, or at the least, their guard. I had briefly considered the possibility of

hunting within the city. Whatever would make the efficient assassins of the Volturi guard strike as quickly as possible.

The festival would make it unbelievably easy to draw attention to myself. To flout their law, in their city, on the day designed to celebrate them—even if the locals didn't realize exactly who they were celebrating—it would be the highest form of treason I could commit. The guard would have no choice but to deliver my sentence as swiftly as they were able.

I smiled.

Moving slowly, I started my way across the *piazza*. The scent that permeated the entire city emanated from a single alleyway on the other side of the square, which led to the winding road up to a castle of sorts. Carlisle's memory recalled him striding across this same plaza, dodging wooden carts and animal dung as he wove among the merchants toward this place where he had once resided. Carlisle had told me how the brothers had their guard bring back victims for them when he had lived with them, preferring to live a sedate lifestyle in the opulent home they had created. Now a professionally lettered sign near the alley advertised tours, directing interested parties to an office across town to purchase tickets.

It seemed the Volturi had now found an even more efficient way to feed.

A snapping sound from overhead drew my attention, and I looked upward to see a huge red streamer unfurling from the window of one of the buildings overhead. An obscenity in Italian sprang forth from the streamer's owner as the banner was ripped from his hands by the wind, and I watched as the shimmering cloth raced down the building like a river of blood, pooling into a puddle of scarlet on the cobbled street.

"*Alice saw her jump off a cliff,*" my sister's voice rang in my ears, and an instant the cloth did not merely resemble blood, it *was* blood. Flowing with Bella's irresistible scent. And her mangled body lay there in the wide puddle, her broken limbs splayed in the same grotesque positions in which I had seen Esme's in Carlisle's memory. Her dark hair lay fanned around her, matted with blood.

I hardly heard the choked cry that tore from my throat as I rushed forward to scoop up Bella's lifeless form, and I fell to my knees with such force that the stones beneath me split. But when my arms reached out, they plunged not into a pool of blood but into yards of silky cloth. Bella vanished.

My howl echoed off the empty buildings.

And then, a hand clamped down on my shoulder with crushing force.

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*He is handsome. And very young. A little giggle. Young! He's probably a thousand.*

"Only a hundred," I muttered, and the woman behind the high mahogany desk jumped.

*He hears thoughts. Like Master Aro.*

"Yes," I answered. Carlisle had long ago told me that Aro's gift was similar to mine. His experiences with Aro had been part of how he had discerned so quickly that I was answering his thoughts and not his words when I'd first awoken. I should have expected the woman to compare me to her master.

She raised her eyebrows. She was human; I had smelled her blood and heard her heart pumping when I'd still been a floor below in the elevator shaft. For a brief moment I considered how often the brothers must go through secretaries—surely, their employees periodically became a convenient afternoon snack. But this one seemed to have been with the operation for awhile—I listened as she chastised herself for forgetting that many of us had powers. Looking away from her, I tried to block out her mundane thoughts by counting the fibers in the lush green carpet in the reception area. The couch on which I sat was of a luxurious leather. The room's scent was too sickly sweet, and I noticed flowers distributed around the tables.

It was not often that someone came to call. From the thoughts of the thug, Felix, who had dragged me through an ancient sewer to the castle, I had learned it had been decades since a vampire had wandered willingly into this place. They had tracked my every move from the moment I drew within a few miles of the city, Felix had followed me throughout the city to be certain I was headed toward the castle. I had been too caught up in my own thoughts to hear his, and in the reek of the city, it was next to impossible to distinguish a single vampire that might be in pursuit. I supposed that was part of their very excellent defense.

A pair of feet glided across the carpet, but I didn't bother to look up until they were directly in my line of sight.

"You," a voice said. It was a high voice, childlike—a young teenager still not yet through puberty.

I raised my eyes slowly. The girl—for that was really all she was—was small, her light hair cropped short. The hood of her cloak cast a shadow across her face, but I knew her features anyway. And I knew her gift all too well.

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“Edward,” I answered quietly.

“They will see you, Edward,” she said, and beckoned for me to stand. “Come.”

Bella’s mangled body as I had seen it out on the *piazza* played before me as I followed the woman I knew to be Jane, one of Aro’s closest guards. I knew her by reputation—she had been a controlling force when the Volturi had swept in to stop the wars in the south, and Jasper’s memories of her were not pleasant. It was not surprising that she was the one sent to fetch me. Her power to instantly incapacitate meant that she was the safest to send to an unknown.

I almost laughed at the idea that they considered me a threat.

Jane led me down the hall and through a plain wooden door that was hidden by the ornate paneling of the reception area and hall. A voice spoke up while we were still in the antechamber, echoing on the stone walls.

“Ah. Thank you, Jane, for bringing our visitor,” the voice greeted us as we proceeded forward.

The room we had entered was perfectly round. Pressed to the edges of the room were several large, throne-like chairs. Two were occupied. One held a vampire with white-blond hair, his eyes narrowed to slits as he watched my every move, and the other chair contained an immortal with dark hair. Caius and Marcus, I recognized. While Caius watched me warily out of the corner of one eye, Marcus was staring at me fixedly. More than a dozen other immortals floated around the room, in robes of varying shades of gray. Those in the darkest gray stood nearest to Marcus and Caius, and I deduced immediately that the robes indicated some sort of order of rank. Looking away from the other two brothers, I focused again on the owner of the voice.

Dressed in a jet black robe, Aro was as formidable as he was graceful as he glided toward me. He, of course, was unchanged from the painting by which I knew him best, but to see him in person was shocking. His skin looked thin and almost translucent. It crossed my mind briefly that it was perhaps due to his age, but Tanya and her sisters were quite ancient as well, and none of them appeared that way. It was puzzling, and for a fraction of a second I found myself out of habit making a mental note to ask Carlisle about it—and then I realized there would be no such opportunity.

I gulped, and squeezed my eyes shut, bringing back the horrific image that I had seen out in the *piazza*. My world had ended almost twenty hours ago, now. Now it only fell to me to

finish the task. Squaring my shoulders, I forced myself to look at Aro. Confidence. I would explain the situation, convince him that there was no advantage to keeping me alive, and ask for the deliverance I sought.

Aro looked me over as he approached, and I saw his impression of me forming in his mind. I had worn the same clothing for at least two weeks now, and Carlisle's shirt and pants were dirtied by my exploits in Rio and my run through the Italian countryside. Falling to my knees in the middle of the filthy square had stained the front of my pants even further. I looked nothing like the other immortals around me.

My eyes surprised even me, however. They were the darkest black, and the rings beneath them were so dark it looked as though it had been months that I had not hunted. It had been no wonder that the airline flight attendant had had difficulty leaving me be on the flight north. I had pretended to sleep, but she had awoken me for almost every meal and grown more and more concerned when I refused them all.

*He looks as though he is dying*, came the thought, interrupting my own.

I nodded. "That's my intention." My voice sounded assured. Step one.

Aro's eyebrows shot up, but then a satisfied smile spread across his face as he recognized what had just happened.

"You are gifted."

"Yes." I met his eyes.

"And you hear from where you stand?"

"Yes."

The smile grew even larger. *How...useful*. "Jane tells me you are called Edward."

"Edward Cullen."

If he had looked surprised before, he now looked completely staggered. *Cullen?* I saw Carlisle's face flash in his memory. *But surely not...*

"Carlisle is my father," I answered, and gasps rose from several others around the room.

*Father?* Aro's face had dropped into a bemused smile. "Carlisle created you?" *But he so despised his existence...surely Carlisle would not have created another.*

I nodded. "He is my father," I repeated, turning Aro's words over in my head. *He so despised his existence...* For a brief moment I recalled the man to whom I had awoken in the tiny apartment in Chicago. Carlisle had told me his entire life's story as I was changed, or as much as



he was willing to tell then, at any rate. But behind it his thoughts had been tortured by loneliness and despair, and his mind had apologized thousands of times for my pain and for snatching me from death into this half-existence.

I had asked Alice not to watch me, and given that it had not been she who called when I'd decided to return to Forks, she was clearly keeping her word. How long would it be before Carlisle and Esme found out what had happened? They thought I was in Rio—would they travel there when my phone went unanswered? Track me here? But they had seen me in Ithaca as I had lost the battle to my grief. They had watched me hide in the corners of the house as it consumed me. And even Esme had given up.

Surely they would understand.

After all, Carlisle believed I still had a soul. He believed there was an afterlife for our kind. He would mourn as humans mourned, steadfast in his faith. And only I would know the truth, whatever the truth might be.

"Come now, Edward." Aro's voice beckoned me back to the present. "You are intriguing. I wish to know more about you." He lifted his hand and gestured for me to place my palm against his.

I hesitated, recalling what Carlisle had told me about Aro's gift. He had been surprised when I had heard his thoughts without contact, I remembered that much. So Aro's reading must have something to do with physical touch. But I remembered nothing else. Carlisle had a bad tendency to pontificate when he was telling stories about his history; I was now wishing I had paid better attention.

Taking a measured step forward, I put my hand to Aro's.

It was a strange sensation, like a subtle pressure on my consciousness. I couldn't be certain, but perhaps this was what it had once felt like to dream. I was startled to realize that my entire history was flashing before me—and it was all being read by Aro. Memories flew through my mind at an incredible speed—waking up next to Carlisle, hunting for the first time, meeting Esme, all those criminals I'd killed during my rebellious years, the first fight with Rosalie, hunting with Emmett. And Bella—Bella was everywhere, my images of her dancing in and out of earlier and later memories as though she had always been part of my life. Her scent wrapped me and I caught its salacious bouquet. That first day in Biology, when I had nearly done the unthinkable, the day in the meadow when our lips first met, the taste of her venom-laced blood

running down my throat as I sucked, and my own terror—first that she might die, and second that I might kill her.

And in the end, that been exactly what I'd done. First I'd put her squarely in danger—first James, then Jasper. So I had done the only thing that seemed right—and it had driven her to her end. I swallowed and looked down as in Aro's mind I heard my screams echoing off the walls of my apartment in Rio, and saw the pulverized desk and Carlisle's journal entries airborne in shreds.

I was barely aware when Aro's hand had left my own. He was silent for a moment.

"And so you wish to be destroyed," he said finally.

I nodded, and the room became alive with the thoughts of the other immortals.

*He is here to ask to be destroyed?*

*He no longer wishes to be of this world?*

*What happened?*

Images of my body, in pieces, being thrown onto a fire, flew at me from all directions. I winced.

Aro frowned, and now in his head I saw my own memories replaying, more slowly. Our family on Christmas Day four years ago, in our house in Nome, laughing and teasing as we took turns opening gifts.

"Seven," he muttered, and I felt a strange emotion from him. Concern?

*"The biggest coven in the known universe—hell, you guys are bigger than the Volturi at this point, aren't you?"* Peter's voice rang in my head. I stiffened.

However, Aro's mind shifted quickly away from the size of our family and back to Carlisle. It was evident he was trying to get as much a sense as possible of his former friend. He paused for a long time on a recent memory—five months ago, the morning I'd left, when Carlisle had held me in his arms. I looked down at the floor as I relived the memory with him, embarrassed by the flood of emotion pouring from Carlisle that I heard again in the recollection of my thoughts.

Aro regarded me with a look of amazement. "Carlisle's son you are indeed," he murmured. This statement caused somewhat of a stir among the others, and images of my father suddenly surfaced in at least half a dozen minds—minds which tried to put together an image of Carlisle with the sad being they saw standing before them. Aro, who had the privilege of ready-

made memories, remembered another scene from my own past: Carlisle and I hunting together for the first time since I had returned from Denali. Carlisle had been very worried then—I hadn't yet told any of them about Bella. Pausing to think about Carlisle's concern, Aro shot a look at one of the other seated and cloaked immortals, the dark-haired one. Marcus. *It would be nice to see...* and then, as though he suddenly remembered he had an audience in me, he stopped his thinking short.

*Carlisle continues to mystify us all*, he thought with a smile.

He turned to the other two, who were still seated in their formidable chairs. Caius was glaring at me as though he might be able to reduce me to ash simply by the ferocity of his thought. Marcus looked completely uninterested.

"He is created by Carlisle," Aro said, and I detected a note of reverent pride in his voice. "Our old friend has been hard at work in the New World, it seems. He has several...children." Our family swirled once more in Aro's mind, and again I detected the faintest worry.

Caius did not move his ferocious gaze. *And he comes before us to be destroyed?*

"Yes," I answered him, and his expression changed to one of wary amusement as he, too, recognized what I'd just done. "There is no life for me here any longer."

"He has met *la sua cantante*," Aro added. "And it seems Edward is as unorthodox in his feeding habits as our dear old friend." A brief flash—an argument? Carlisle appeared in Aro's mind, looking murderous. One of the times Aro had tried to shift his diet, no doubt.

"His singer lives?" Caius's eyebrows shot up.

A smile spread across Aro's face. "He has fallen in love with her."

Again murmurs erupted from the room

"But no, alas," Aro said, and this time it was in his mind that I saw my imagination of Bella's broken body, "she lives no longer, though it is not by young Edward's hand."

"That's debatable," I growled, and Aro chuckled. He glided away from me, returning to the chair on one side of the room. His cloak swirled as he sat, and almost immediately a woman, also robed in black, came to his side, laying her hand over his. I recognized Sulpicia, his mate. She looked at me with narrowed eyes, and I averted my gaze to Marcus, who looked at me with an intense curiosity. In his head stood a woman, dark-haired like he and Aro and with the same striking features as the Volturi leader. Even in memory, I felt his joy in her presence. She had made him nearly immeasurably happy. As Marcus's gaze shifted from me to Aro and Sulpicia, I

experienced an odd pulling sensation, as though I were holding two strong magnets apart by the force of my mind.

*“Marcus and Chelsea were a deadly combination.”* Carlisle’s voice rang in my head from almost a century before, when I had asked him about the other gifted vampires he had known in his long life. *“He saw the strength of relationships. And she could break a strong one, or strengthen a weak one.”* He’d confessed he did not know how either of their gifts worked. Now I was seeing it firsthand. I realized quickly that Marcus was getting this feedback from everyone in the room—one part of his mind was filled with the constant push and pull as the others moved around him, to their mates, to their friends, to those they disliked. Aro and Sulpicia had a strong attraction, as did Caius and the woman I assumed to be his mate, although she was across the room. Jane and the boy I recognized as her twin, Alec, were almost inseparable, although the feeling of that attraction was different in quality, almost as though an attraction could have a different flavor. I recognized the difference between a mate and a sibling.

Immediately my mind shot back to a moment earlier when Aro had recalled my memories of Carlisle. He had looked at Marcus, then. Did he want to know the strength of my relationship to Carlisle? Why? I studied Marcus’s mind some more as though it might yield the answer, exploring the pulsing magnetism spread around the room.

“But this request, Edward,” Aro said, interrupting my foray into Marcus’s mind, “we must take our time considering it.” *This does not often happen...* he shot a look at Marcus, but he again stopped, shooting me a wary look. “Nevertheless”—he beckoned to the corner and a tall figure cloaked in charcoal moved from the shadows—“you of course wouldn’t mind if Demetri and Jane escorted you back outside?” *He doesn’t mind the prospect of death, surely he will not mind a guard.*

A toothy, sinister grin flashed from under the cloak, and as I faced the approaching being, I found myself on the receiving end of yet another set of foreign sensations. It reminded me vaguely of being in Jasper’s mind as he read someone, except these weren’t emotions being cataloged. It happened very rapidly, and then I felt a confident satisfaction from Demetri as whatever he was doing stopped.

He felt he now knew me perfectly, and I had the immutable sense he was not wrong. His mind traveled and he began to imagine me running away from Volterra, back through Florence, and then to the United States—although his vision of what the United States appeared to be stuck

in the Reconstruction Era. Then he imagined himself following me nonchalantly, using the information he had just gleaned from my mind to lead him to my precise locale.

I gulped. I had just received the immortal equivalent of a tracking chip.

“It doesn’t matter,” I muttered. “I won’t be running.” There was only one thing I had come here to do, and I had no plans of leaving. At least, not in my present form.

He shot me a puzzled look.

Jane slid her hand reluctantly from Alec’s. She glided across the room as well, her crimson eyes shining. She regarded me carefully, and I saw in her mind the same question I was sure burned in the minds of all the immortals that stood in the round chamber: if I had not killed my mate, then what had I done wrong?

The answer was nothing and a thousand things at once.

I followed Jane and Demetri through the wooden door and back down the nondescript hallway to the reception area. I was surprised we did not go further, for it would not be difficult to hear the discussion in the chamber, and I could certainly still hear thoughts. However, when I heard the voices begin to argue, it was in a language I did not recognize, a tongue which sounded wholly unlike anything I had ever heard before. I recognized the voices as they rose: Aro’s was loudest, but arguing against him—or perhaps with him, I couldn’t tell—were Caius’s and Marcus’s. The only words I caught were “Carlisle” and “Edward,” both of which were repeated with roughly equal frequency.

Demetri and Jane flanked me as we stood in the reception area, ignoring me as I sank again to the couch. Their thoughts invaded my own, and I alternately saw myself being torn to pieces with a sickening metallic ripping noise, or instead standing with them, cloaked in the same dark, almost-black gray, my eyes turned from black to a deep garnet.

I put my head in my hands. St. Marcus day was March nineteenth. A year ago, I had been camped out on a rigid foam chair in the Phoenix Children’s Hospital, waiting for Bella to awake from one of her many naps. It had taken the doctors almost four days to release her. I had worried about the possibility of needing to be in Volterra then. My own personal hell had begun that day at the end of our baseball game—I would never forgive myself for allowing Bella to be put in that danger. Well, in truth, my personal hell had begun in a Biology II classroom one year and exactly two months ago. If I subtracted the six months since I had last seen Bella, and subtracted the weeks I had avoided her in Forks after our first meeting, and if I subtracted the

months that our joy had been marred by the cloud of fear instilled in me by her brief run-in with James, then it left me with ten days.

Ten days.

Ten days of blissful happiness out of nearly a hundred and five years. Ten days in which I had foolishly let myself believe that things might work out, that my life could change from the empty existence I'd known for so long. Ten days in which the love that would end us both had not been a burden to either of us.

Ten days had been all I was destined to be given.

I squeezed my eyes closed, willing away the gruesome image that had haunted me since the early morning and instead saw Bella, her eyes curious as ever, her smile enigmatic as she sat across the table from me in the Forks High cafeteria, nonchalantly eating the slice of pizza from which she had dared me to bite just moments before. Her trust in me had been complete, from the very first.

And I had betrayed that trust. I had lied.

*"My world is not for you."*

That, at least, had been the truth, but not in the way I had allowed her to hear it. My world wasn't for Bella, my world was Bella—and now my world was gone.

It was Demetri and Jane's startled thoughts that alerted me that my shoulders had begun to shake. I took a breath, but the breath quivered as I drew it. I sounded weak. In Ithaca, I had ignored my family. Burned my clothes. Uprooted and shattered a fir tree. In San Francisco, I had permanently killed the airbag of my Porsche. In New Orleans I had demolished a front porch in a single stroke. And in Rio, I had all but decimated an entire apartment.

But now, in what I hoped would be the last minutes of my own life, I found I could do none of that. The fire that had once burned, the monster who had been my present companion for almost six months was gone, leaving behind nothing but an aching hole of sadness and grief.

And so I buried my face in my palms and quietly began to weep.

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The room was as we had left it, except that the vampires who had once milled around it seemed now to be aligned in flanks. There was a buzzing tension in the air as over a dozen pairs of eyes fixed on me where I stood. When we were called in after the better part of an hour

Demetri and Jane had at once gone to their respective places next to Aro, leaving me standing a few yards from the doorway, facing the three cloaked brothers.

“Edward.” Aro’s voice called. He beckoned me forward, and I advanced until I was standing a few yards in front of where he sat. Caius’s gaze was fixed on me again. His brow was furrowed, but he had a satisfied smile on his face. Marcus no longer looked uninterested, but his expression seemed to convey...pity? Again I saw the beautiful woman dancing in his mind, laughing, and felt his limitless happiness in her presence.

Aro regarded me again carefully, but his thoughts were guarded this time. He’d had time to prepare to speak with me again. So it was only his eyes that raked me over before he spoke.

“I have seen what you intend to do,” he said quietly after a moment. “Make no mistake, Edward, you are perfectly correct in your assumption that we will not show you mercy should you choose to flout our laws in our city. We do not make exceptions for law-breakers.”

I set my jaw. “Then will you grant what I came here for?”

Aro’s brow set in a frown. “No, we will not.”

A cold rage flushed through my body. My feet moved, and my body lunged before I was conscious of telling it to. But Alec had been ready, and the haze he emitted surrounded me in under a second. The brief growl I’d managed echoed off the round walls for a moment before I could no longer hear at all. Blinded, I lost my footing, tripping over some uneven stonework in the floor and falling to my hands and knees. I groped helplessly in the darkness, pressing my hands to the floor to find the correct location to put my feet. As I managed to right myself, the haze lifted, and I slowly heard the shuffling feet and amused murmurs of the others. The room spun back into existence as my sight returned.

Aro was holding up a hand.

“I apologize for that,” he said politely, as though he’d merely stepped on my foot. “However, I felt it might be prudent to have Alec permit you a moment of thought before you commenced any rash action.”

I growled, and he chuckled. His nonchalant condescension reminded me vaguely of Peter—had it really been only a month ago that I had seen him and Charlotte? I shook my head, trying to fully recover my senses.

“I have an offer for you, if you will hold your attack at least a moment longer,” Aro said politely. *Although I doubt you will take it.*

“What?” The word forced itself through clenched teeth.

Aro gestured grandly to those around him. “To destroy a talent such as yours would be beyond wasteful, Edward. If there is truly nothing else for you to live for, then live for us. Join us. You would have a high place here.” Again he pictured my family—the seven of us on one of the rare times we all hunted together. I caught a twinge of worry from him. The word *powerful* swirled in his mind as he imagined us—I saw his mind flit from me, to Alice, to Jasper—the gifted ones. He wanted us all. Alice and Jasper disappeared and Carlisle resurfaced, but this time his face was contorted with rage. Aro’s mind flitted back and forth between Carlisle’s feelings as he’d held me on that morning in October, and this imagined anger.

I swore. He was concerned about what Carlisle would do if he killed me. Well, that was his problem.

“I didn’t come here for a place with you.”

Aro’s face fell. “But surely you see the potential!”

*Stay your course.*

My head swung in the direction of the thought, and I found myself meeting Marcus’s usually vacant expression. However, this time his eyes were fixed on me and his jaw was set. I stared at him. Again he brought forth the image of the beautiful woman—her smile, his laughter. Then his mind turned rapidly to his own supplication before Aro. The woman had been killed—by werewolves? By other vampires? It seemed Marcus was unsure.

But it was clear he had once made the same request, and received the same answer. *Stay your course*, he repeated, and the undercurrent of his thought was palpable—death was better than his existence.

Aro’s head whipped in the direction of Marcus as well, and I saw his eyes narrow. Marcus looked away, and Aro’s face swiveled back toward me.

“So, Edward? Might you consider?”

“No,” I answered quietly, being careful to hold Aro’s gaze. From beside him, Caius hissed.

*This was exactly what I said, was it not? He is far too mulish anyway. Let him die.*

Aro sighed. “Then we part ways, Edward.” He gestured to Demetri and Felix, and the two glided toward me. I turned with them back toward the heavy wooden door. *I am loathe to take away your will.* “But Edward?”



I raised my eyebrows.

“I beg of you. Run from here. Fly back home. Give my brother Carlisle my well-wishes. Do not force my hand, for it would be a travesty to lose you.”

Spinning, I faced Aro once more.

“It would be a travesty only to you.”

*I can think of others.* And again, Carlisle’s face swam in Aro’s mind. I winced.

“He won’t fight you,” I answered his unspoken thought. “He’s not a vengeful man.” I turned away from Aro and strode toward the door with the two thugs at my side. We had barely reached the door, however, when Aro spoke again.

“I hope for his sake that you are right, Edward,” he answered to my back. “But I confess that I learned a long time ago not to underestimate my old friend.”

And with a low thud, the door swung closed behind me.

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The alleyway reeked of urine, human and canine, and it was littered with trash—some fresh from the revelers in the square, others weeks old and turning to mush with decay. I stood with my back pressed against the cool stone wall. Humans would not recognize the nearly imperceptible difference in the height of the sun over several minutes, but I watched it move as my moment drew nearer.

It was deceptively simple, this plan. Demetri and Felix had released me into the dark sewers with a hissed warning to heed Aro’s advice, although their thoughts revealed that they were both looking forward to tearing me apart. I had remained in the sewers for several hours, pacing and planning. I had considered a hunt in the main square: mass disruption, mass hysteria. The guard would unfailingly tear me apart on the spot.

But in the end, it was too much. Carlisle wouldn’t have wanted it. And moreover, Bella wouldn’t have wanted it. At least I would depart the world with some shred of dignity. Bella had held steadfast that I was not a monster. And although I disagreed, I was loathe to make my last act one which proved her wrong.

I would simply step into the sun. It would be enough. The square teemed with thousands of people, laughing, dancing to the live bands, buying merchandise and food. They would all see.

I watched as the sun drew nearer to its apex, and the clock ticked closer to noon. A family passed near the mouth of the alley—two girls in crimson dresses, with their hair tied back in

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matching ribbons. The smaller girl tugged at her father's hand as they walked, begging him to stop at the cart ahead for a gelato.

I wondered how long it would take. I knew Felix and Demetri had been following me all morning. Surely the rest of the guard was nearby, but in the stench of vampire that surrounded the city and with the cacophony of thoughts and voices from the crowd in the square, it was difficult to be certain. Surely they would not risk further exposure by eliminating me in sight of the humans, but I hoped it would be quick.

The sun and the clock moved just a little nearer, and I closed my eyes, letting the sounds of the revelry wash over me. Bella's face swam behind my eyelids, her hair thrown behind her as she smiled. The thrum of the crowd became the pulse of Bella's heart, that day in the meadow when I'd laid my cheek against her chest for the very first time.

"Edward!"

I smiled as her voice came to me just as surely as her image had.

Would I lose these illusions in death? Would I lose Bella? If Carlisle's estimate were sound, then the answer was no. We would finally be inseparable and equal. If I was right—well, there was no hell worse than that which I was already in. I recalled Marcus's vacant eyes.

His fate would not be mine.

"Edward, no!"

The clock began to toll, and my eyes returned to the family in the mouth of the alley. The smaller girl clamped her hands over her ears.

I stepped away from my discarded shirt, focusing on Bella's beautiful image, and hoping to hear her voice one last time.

"No!" It came, more forcefully again, even as the clock tolled. "Edward, look at me!"

And I did look at her. In my mind I saw her, as I had always seen her, the beauty she failed to see, the love she exuded, that she was willing to give to a being as wretched as me. I saw her as she had never seen herself: as the only one I would ever love.

"I'm sorry, Bella," I whispered. "I love you." I felt the smile spread across my face as I lifted my foot.

If it weren't for my reflexes, I might not have known anything had run into me at all. The thing started to fall backwards, and I caught it before I even knew what it was. I realized that its heart thrummed and its warmth spread against my bare chest.

And the *scent*.

I opened my eyes to see that my illusion had become reality. There she stood, solid—or at least, it seemed so. I felt myself smile. How had it happened so fast? I shook my head and laughed. It was no matter. It had happened. And somehow, we were together again.

For one final time, my father had yet again proven me wrong.

“Amazing,” I muttered. “Carlisle was right.”

Her voice was gasping. She was out of breath? Was that even possible? Should she even need to breathe? “Edward,” she managed. “You’ve got to get back into the shadows. You have to move!”

I felt a light pressure against my chest as the clock continued to ring. It had not yet struck the full twelve. Demetri and Felix must have literally been right behind me.

“I can’t believe how quick it was,” I mused. “I didn’t feel a thing—they’re very good.” I smiled, thinking again of Marcus. He had been right, too. I had been delivered from the world I had managed to end and directly back to the world I wished to inhabit.

Pressing my lips to Bella’s soft hair, I recalled one of our last blissful moments together, as we watched *Romeo and Juliet* together on her couch. “*Death, that has sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.*”

The clock rang a final time.

Bella’s tantalizing scent still enveloped me, raising the searing pain in my throat. “You smell just exactly the same as always. So maybe this *is* hell.” I kissed the crown of her head again. It had been a small price to pay in life, so it would be in death. “I don’t care. I’ll take it.”

The pressure on my chest returned. “I’m not dead! And neither are you! Please Edward, we have to move. They can’t be far away!”

I frowned as she seemed to struggle to get away from me. Who was far away?

“What was that?”

“We’re not dead, not yet!” She pulled away from me. “But we have to get out of here before the Volturi—”

*The Volturi.*

Heaven shifted, and I crashed back to the world I suddenly realized I had not left. One part of my mind wanted to ruminate on the fact that this was *real*, Bella was not dead—but the other part threw me into instinctive action, cutting off all other thoughts. I placed my hands on

her shoulders and wrenched her behind me against the wall, throwing my arms to my sides and therefore to hers. My eyes darted, looking for the danger I knew was coming, and surely, it was.

From the end of the alley, the cloaked figures were already gliding toward us, their eyes shining in the reflection of the noon light. *Easy, Edward*, one thought, but I shook my head, steeling myself for their approach.

This time, I had reason to fight.

## Chapter 15: Vigil

His eyes were what startled me most. It had been over half a century since I had last seen another of my own kind, and I hadn't seen a newborn since my time in Italy. Even though I knew better, somehow I had imagined the boy with eyes like my own, as though he would wake from the change already outfitted with the same golden eyes with which I looked on him. But he didn't, of course—nature didn't work that way—and so it was the shocking crimson that greeted me when Edward finally opened his eyes.

It didn't matter. His eyes would change—how fast, I didn't know—and in the meantime, I would keep him safe. I gently released him from the embrace in which I'd held him for almost four days. As we both sat up, the sensation of Edward's body in my arms did not leave; my muscles still responded to the ghost of the boy who now sat beside me on the bed.

Blinking a few times, he stared around the almost bare room, taking in the Spartan furnishings and the walls lined with books and art. Then he turned back to me, a puzzled expression on his face.

"You are so sad," he said quietly. "Why are you so sad?"

"Sad?" I frowned. What made him think I was sad?

"Because you said so. I *felt* it—how did you *do* that?"

I gripped his now-muscled forearm. He was stronger than I and would remain so for some time. Perhaps forever. Fear sliced through me—what if I couldn't control him? What if he ran away from me? What if the brothers stepped in to destroy us both? My mind began to race with the possibilities I was facing. Swallowing, I tried to affect my most comforting bedside manner. "I haven't done anything, Edward," I said quietly. "What is it that you're hearing?"

"I don't want to run away," he said quietly.

Unbidden, Aro's face swam in my mind, his black hair wild as he laughed at some detail of information he had gleaned from someone who was reluctant to give it to him.

I dropped Edward's arm as though it were on fire.

He could hear me. The irony was palpable. I had left the man whose gift had invaded every ounce of my privacy. Now, over a hundred years later, I had finally succumbed to the desire for a companion only to have that companion manifest the same gift.

“I’m glad you don’t want to run away,” I said, letting my voice take on its most soothing tone. “I don’t want you to. You will be safer here with me.” Aro’s face appeared again, angry, as he ordered Felix to wrench the head off an unruly newborn. A newborn who happened to have a mop of unruly bronze hair...I cringed.

“Who did you leave? And what gift? Where am I? What happened?” The second I released Edward from my grip, he hit me with a barrage of questions, almost as though the loss of physical contact had induced a panic. He had folded upon himself, bringing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them as though he had need of his own comfort. I wondered briefly if he had noticed how quickly his body had moved.

Or that he was still hearing me.

“You’re still talking. Of course I’m still hearing you,” Edward snapped, but it was fear, not anger, that I heard in his voice. “Dr. Cullen, what happened to me?”

*Of course I’m still hearing you.* I took a deep breath, recognizing the implications of Edward’s statement even more thoroughly than he did. He heard me without touch—my exact thoughts were rebounding back to me from his lips. There would be no way to hide myself from this boy I had just brought into my life. For over two hundred years, I had remained trapped in the privacy of my own mind. Now I’d prayed for a companion, and had been sent a telepath. It made so much sense I almost laughed.

“A what?” Edward’s eyes were wide, panicked.

Doing my best to calm my thoughts, I placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He stilled almost immediately as I began to speak.

“Edward, there’s much I need to tell you. But to begin, you should probably start calling me Carlisle.”

“Carlisle?”

Edward’s voice had a strange quality to it. It wasn’t the clear tenor appropriate for a young man his age, it seemed mixed with higher and lower pitches at once. I tried to focus on it.

“Carlisle?” This time the voice was just high—a woman’s voice. Then it broke into several voices that all seemed to be speaking at once.

“What happened?”

“What did you do?”

“Jasper, do something.”

“I’m *undoing* something,” a deep voice answered, sounding frustrated. “Carlisle? I’m sorry.”

The apartment on Michigan Avenue disappeared, my books replaced by polished log walls. The bed with its simple bedclothes became a wide leather chair and I was aware of pressure in my lap.

And Edward vanished, too.

The sound that tore from my lips was more wail than speech: “Edward...”

“Shhh, Carlisle,” Esme whispered. Her trembling hands went to either side of my face.

“Darling, Alice is on her way to him. Alice and Bella both.”

*Alice is on her way to him.* The entirety of the last several minutes crashed back at once. I heard Jasper’s voice again in my head, his own speech strained and dispassionate as he laid down the facts as concretely as a general headed off into a deadly battle. Bella had jumped from a cliff. Alice had gone to Forks. Rosalie had called Edward. Bella was fine. But Edward...

I closed my eyes and Felix materialized again, only this time the bronze-haired man wasn’t a faceless newborn—he was the devastated, dark-eyed shadow of my son. I watched in horror as Edward closed his eyes peacefully as Felix’s hands gripped the back of his skull and twisted...

“No...” someone wailed.

“Jasper!” Esme’s voice rang out.

Oh. The wailing was still me, apparently. I shook my head forcefully, trying to come back to what I surmised was the present.

“I’m okay,” I heard myself say, and Esme’s hands stroked my cheeks.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. Edward was gone now, his image erased from my consciousness for the time being. Then I opened my eyes again and looked around the room. It was back to how it had been: no longer the apartment in Chicago, but Tanya’s living room once more. Tanya and Kate were flanking a still-trembling Rosalie. In front of the couch, Jasper and Emmett were squaring off at each other.

“I’m doing my best,” I heard my oldest son growl.

“Yeah, well, you practically knocked him unconscious,” Emmett’s voice replied a bit too loudly.

“Well, it’s not easy!” Jasper’s feet thudded as he paced across the floor. The sound was painful. “It’s not like I have a lot of practice keeping someone together when his child is about to die!”

Guttural noises rose from both me and Esme at once.

“Oh, nicely put, dipshit.” Emmett rose and advanced on Jasper. “You have a way with words, you know that?”

For a moment, I felt Esme begin to shake against me before Jasper turned his gaze on us again and both our bodies relaxed once more. The room dissolved again as I closed my eyes, and Edward reappeared, laughing at me as he ran through the forest not far from the shore of Lake Michigan. His hair whipped behind him and his mouth was open wide as he laughed and ran, his bare feet leaving a trail of kicked-up leaves and snapped twigs. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, sending speckled dots over the forest floor and occasionally lighting up parts of Edward’s skin as he ran. He was still young, and very fast—I knew I could never catch him if he became captivated by the scent of a human.

“Oh, stop worrying,” he called back over his shoulder. “I promise I won’t run too far.” And he laughed again, a beautiful warm sound that I still hadn’t gotten used to in the weeks I’d known him. I watched his lithe form spring ahead of me, and a small prayer of thanks rose from my heart that my impulsive gamble had turned out so well. Edward’s company made my life richer a thousandfold. I loved him.

“What?” He stopped so quickly that dirt sprayed up around him and then he whirled to look at me. His eyes were beginning to shift already, or at least, that was my perception. I felt that I already saw a lessening in their bright red color; the hints of the gold that was to come.

“I didn’t say anything,” I teased, closing the distance between us quickly now that he was standing still. It had become a joke between us, when he read something in my mind that I hadn’t meant to divulge. With each passing day I was both getting better at keeping my thoughts from him and yet also feeling less and less the need to do so.

“No, but you thought—” His brow furrowed.

I’d thought the words I hadn’t dared say aloud. I studied his countenance as he continued to look downward. Was he upset?



“Edward?”

He scuffed his feet on the forest floor, seeming to study the dirt. It took him what seemed like centuries to speak, and when he did, his voice was meek.

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“That you love me.”

There wasn’t much of another word for it, even as unpracticed as I was at having such feelings. In the centuries since my turning, the best I had managed were a few close acquaintances. But with Edward—already I felt like my still heart would rip if he were hurt. Every fiber of my being was now attuned to him.

Nodding, I waited for his reaction. Surely others had told him he was loved before. His mother, of course, and his father. Perhaps even a lady friend?

“My mother,” he answered, still frowning. “I don’t remember that my father ever did.”

“Your father loved you,” I told him. “I’m certain of it.” I remembered how devoted Elizabeth had been to her husband, how distressed she had been about Edward losing his father. Looking at Edward’s despondent face, I was again reminded that even though I had snatched this young man from the jaws of death, his transformation made him no less an orphan.

“Nevertheless.” He scuffed the ground with his toes again. Edward preferred to run barefoot, and as I had taken him away from the city to keep his cravings in check, it only made sense that he be allowed to run without his shoes here where no one would see him. He said nothing for a long time, and I found myself wishing that I were the telepath.

“He never said it,” he answered quietly. “At least, not that I remember.” He didn’t have to finish that thought for me to know its conclusion—remembering was getting harder with each day. It had happened to all of us.

I approached cautiously until I was standing close enough to him that I could feel his labored breathing—it was bizarre how it happened for him still out of habit, as though it were possible for him to be short of breath. We stood there for a moment, neither of us saying anything or moving. I didn’t know yet how Edward would want to relate to me—I was still just barely over the fear that his bloodlust would drive him away and be the destruction of us both. And I was well aware that the pain of his parents’ deaths had not even begun to abate. We were

friends, and that was asking for enough for now. But if he wanted to take me as a father...I would never let him go without hearing those words again.

Laying a reassuring hand on Edward's thin shoulder, I said quietly, "He loved you; I know it. You changed his life, as you've changed mine." I squeezed his shoulder gently. "I do love you, Edward."

It was the first time I had spoken the words aloud.

His hand crept its way to mine, and he placed his palm against the back of my hand. He said nothing, just left his hand resting there atop mine. For a brief moment he flashed me a shy and brilliant smile, and then he twisted from under my hand and bounded away.

"Catch me, Carlisle!" he called, beginning to laugh again as he flashed through the woods. I tore off after him, his laughter ringing in my ears and my own bubbling up to match it.

"We'll go," said a deep voice, and the forest disappeared, replaced once again by the honey-colored log walls of Tanya's living room. Trapped deep in the recesses of my mind, Edward ran on.

Jasper had stopped pacing, and was facing a determined Rosalie and Emmett.

"To Italy?"

Emmett nodded. "Somebody else has to go. If there's a fight" —Esme moaned again— "Alice and Bella don't stand a chance against the Volturi alone." He pounded his fist into the palm of the other hand. "I'll take these jerks. If they hurt my little brother..."

His growl echoed off the walls.

Jasper gave Emmett a quizzical look. "Edward is sixteen years older than you."

"Yeah, well, as long as he does dumb stuff like this, he's little to me." Emmett set his jaw. "How far do you think we could charter a flight? Anchorage? Seattle?"

The pacing resumed, and the sound of Jasper's feet against the floor was nearly painful. "I could join you...perhaps if I could control them..."

Emmett said nothing, but sent a worried look from Jasper to me and back again. Jasper nodded, and sighed.

"It's going to take you a full day to get there," he said. "By then it might be too late."

"Then we need to go now." Emmett turned to Tanya. "Can we borrow the Land Rover?"

Tanya nodded, standing. "I'll go get the keys." She disappeared into the kitchen and reappeared in the same instant, pressing a keychain into Emmett's palm.

“Rose?” It was Esme’s voice

Rosalie shook her head. She had stopped her tearless crying some while ago, and her expression was now the resolute calm for which I knew her best. “We have to go,” she said, answering Esme’s unfinished question. “I’m the one—” She stopped.

“Rosalie, this is not your fault,” Esme whispered, her expression still one of absolute panic. “Please...”

Our daughter’s lips were set in a thin line. “No, it’s not my fault. Edward is a melodramatic little freak, and he always has been.” She put her hand on Emmett’s arm, and the car keys glinted as they changed hands. Rosalie gazed down at the key ring, arranging the three keys in a little fan in her palm, and then she shot Esme an apologetic smile.

“But just because he’s stupid doesn’t mean we shouldn’t stop him.”

Esme let out a low moan. I closed my eyes again, and Edward’s laughing face swam before me once more.

*“Catch me, Carlisle!”*

And then Jasper’s voice replayed in my mind:

*“A full day....By then it might be too late.”*

Too late.

I had never been able to stop them. How many times had I begged Aro to spare the life of some wayward creature, only eventually to retreat to my chamber to try to block out the keening wails and the sick, metallic ripping sound of one of my own kind being destroyed? Again, unbidden, I saw Felix, standing over Edward as Edward knelt, looking serene, as though he were about to receive some sort of blessing. But when Felix reached for his head, suddenly it wasn’t Edward’s neck he bent toward, it was first Alice’s, then Rosalie’s, then Emmett’s...

The front door opened and slammed, and then there were only five of us.

This time it was Esme who wailed.

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Evening had descended an hour or so earlier and although I could smell the air quality changing, I’d been too distracted to take note of the approaching storm. It was only a fraction of a second before the thunderous downpour had begun, unleashing its fury on the roof and walls of our small home. A perfect Vermont spring rainfall: beautiful, cleansing, and tempestuous all at once.

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“The upstairs windows,” Esme said simply, and she and I raced to close them together before the water entered and ruined her furniture. It had been raining for no more than two or three seconds before we had the house closed like a drum. Then the two of us returned to the front window at a human’s speed. Esme stood in my arms as we looked out at the immense yard in front of our house—the yard the product of the land deal we’d made, the house created by Esme’s own hands. As we stood holding each other, the water pounded on the roof, echoing through the hallways and in the stairs. It felt as though it were raining all around me, within me.

Perhaps it *was* within me. It certainly seemed that way.

We stood listening to the rain in silence for a long time.

“We’ll have to move on soon,” I whispered finally, my lips brushing my wife’s ear. “It’s been too long.”

Esme’s chest expanded and contracted in my arms. She, like I, had the unnecessary habit of sighing. She did not respond, however, preferring instead to watch the droplets of water as they raced one another down the smooth window and pooled on the sill. I stared at them with her.

It wasn’t as though we hadn’t discussed moving before. At one time or another, each of us had broached the topic. For the first year, it had been out of pain. One or the other of us would suggest we move, as though a new home would somehow make it more difficult to notice the absence. And then inevitably one of us would stare into Edward’s room, or I would see myself shirtless in a mirror and touch the scars left by Edward’s attack, and we would reconsider. But now our choices were growing few. We had stayed longer than I’d ever felt safe in one place before. It had been one thing to pretend to have sent Edward off to Harvard; it was another for me to claim an age only a stone’s throw from forty.

But neither of us could force ourselves to leave.

“I’ve heard that there’s a need for physicians at the new hospital in Rochester,” I murmured. “We could go there.”

Esme turned to face me, her eyes wide. “And leave him?”

Another clap of thunder shook the house, seeming to reverberate through our bodies. My wife moved closer to me, as though thunder or lightning posed her a threat. I tightened my grip on her torso and pressed my lips to her hair.

It had been nearly three years since we’d seen him, and I had been living each day in the midst of my very worst nightmare. How many times had I worried that one day Edward would

run off? From the minute he'd awoken, every moment with him, every time I hunted, trailing behind his incredible speed, my love for him was tinged with the dark understanding that he could leave at any moment. And after nine years, he had done just that. He had rejected my lifestyle.

He had rejected me.

Yet he was not alone in his choice, I reminded myself for the thousandth time. We were the odd ones. Edward now lived as he had been intended to, the life the brothers in Italy had called me to and which I had renounced at every turn.

"There are other wanderers," I said, but my own words cut me deep.

Esme was out of my arms so fast even I barely had a moment to notice, and she spun to face me, her eyes flashing darkly.

"Edward is no wanderer."

In response, I reached my arms out to her, but she shook her head and moved further away. When she was facing the window, I heard her gasp.

A stroke of lightening sprayed brilliant light over the lawn as I turned to the window. But even after its momentary flashes had faded, I could still see him standing there, maybe two hundred yards from the house, his arms wrapped around himself as though the rain might cause him chill. His hair, so wet it looked black, dripped over his face. His clothing was plastered to his body, making him look emaciated, even though his frame had not changed in twelve years. His eyes were dark black, and deep rings showed beneath them. He stared at the front window, his gaze following our every move.

I threw the front door open so quickly it ripped from its hinges. The pine floorboards and furniture were forgotten, exposed to the downpour as Esme and I shot across the lawn.

My arms met my wife's as we threw them around him, pressing his soaked body between ours. Crying and laughing at once, we let the rain and our thoughts speak for us. Droplets raced down our faces, substitutes for the tears of joy and regret that we were unable to produce.

"I'm sorry," Edward said in response. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." He was trembling, and repeating his words feverishly, like a mantra—for us, for him, I wasn't sure. It didn't matter. I pulled him close and let my mind flood with a mantra of my own in reply:

*I've missed you...I love you...*

The phone rang, and I turned toward the house, recalling simultaneously that we didn't have a phone and that it certainly didn't ring with an electronic chime. The rain faded, and Edward's body disappeared.

I realized that I had been hearing Jasper talk to Tanya, Kate and Esme. Overlaying the rainstorm in my head had been a conversation about the best course of action for the three of us. Did we stay in Denali? Go back to Ithaca? Go back to Forks? Tanya and Kate were worried about leaving us, but Esme felt it would be better to be wherever Bella was. Jasper had been the one who had suggested that we go back to Ithaca and stay out of things as much as possible.

Assuming he got Alice back.

It was she who was on the other end of the phone. The phone itself made it difficult to hear her end of the conversation—it failed to put the words out far enough that we could pick them up, although I still heard quite a bit.

"I keep seeing him do different things; he keeps changing his mind." Her voice was rapid with her frustration.

"Like what?" Jasper was cradling the phone with both hands as though he could somehow keep his wife safe as long as her voice stayed near his ear.

She murmured a long list of things in response, and my stomach dropped a little with each one. Lifting a car, attacking the guard... a *killing* spree.

I was unable to suppress the moan.

"We can help," Jasper replied. "Emmett will fight them."

"No you can't," Alice answered, and then her voice became even quieter. I heard Emmett's and Rosalie's names mentioned.

"But more of us would be better."

"Think about it, Jasper. If he sees any of us, what do you think he will do?"

Jasper's jaw flexed and he looked over at me and Esme, still in the chair we'd been in when we'd received the news. He sounded defeated as he answered, "He'll just move faster."

In my arms, Esme shuddered and let out a short cry.

"Exactly. I think Bella is the only chance—if there is a chance."

Jasper's voice was hard, frustrated. "Alice... get him out of there."

"I'll do everything that can be done, but prepare Carlisle; the odds aren't good."

*Prepare Carlisle.*

Suddenly Jasper's voice seemed like it was far away, and Alice's even farther. Although I heard them both as Alice reassured Jasper of her safety, it wasn't their voices on which I was focused, it was Edward's once more, his face twisted in a deep despair as he stood in my office, panicked, frightened. I had wanted to take him into my arms and shield him from whatever was causing him such pain but he would hardly let me touch him. My hand recalled the feel of his shoulder sliding through my palm as he flinched away from me.

"Have you ever...has there ever been a time—" I watched as his eyes flickered with the light in my office as they darted nervously around the room.

"Has any one person ever smelled better to you than the rest of them? *Much* better?"

My face fell, a response I knew would hurt Edward and yet which I could not mask. I pressed my keys into his palm and urged him to go. I put a hand on his arm again, and this time I moved with him when he recoiled. "Do what you must to resist, son," I told him. "I will miss you."

He had moved out of my office quickly then, and I'd heard the distinct sound of the Mercedes pulling out of the lot as he sped away –toward Denali, as Alice would tell me later. The image of his slumped shoulders as he left my office had hung with me for days until he returned. His whole body had seemed to bear the weight of the problem he faced.

And I had been utterly powerless to help him shoulder it.

I sunk my head into my hands, simultaneously remembering the feel of Edward's shoulders under my palms that day in my office and also now registering the familiar lines of my own jaw. From that first moment that Edward had first dashed away from me on a hunt, when I knew that there was no way I would ever catch him, I had been helpless. I could guide him, but always from afar. He had always been free to turn away. To run.

To die.

The snap of the phone closing drew my eyes to Jasper. His bottom lip was sucked between his teeth and his brow was furrowed.

"Jasper?"

"Alice promised me she'll get out," he mumbled. His hand balled itself into a fist and then released as he turned to me with the most sorrowful expression I'd ever seen cross his face. He moved to the chair opposite us and sank, dropping his head into his palms. I watched as he settled into the chair and began to study the floor.

“That’s the first time she’s ever lied to me about something this important,” he said finally.

We sat in silence, Jasper staring at the floor, Esme still shaking against my chest, Edward’s voice still whispering in my ears.

“Carlisle?” Jasper’s voice interrupted the quiet after several minutes.

“Yes?”

“The Volturi...”

“Yes?”

“Is there any way?” His voice sounded hoarse. “The phone? The computer?”

Under any other circumstance, his question would have been humorous. “Jasper, I last saw them in the late eighteenth century. I don’t exactly have Aro on speed dial.”

Jasper’s shining eyes met my own. He, too, had hunted recently, before Alice had left to retrieve Bella, and we looked on each other, gold upon gold. He raked a hand through his hair. “So if Edward manages—”

Esme’s choked cry stopped him mid-sentence, and his expression changed to one of apology. We continued to stare at each other in silence several minutes more before he squeezed his eyes shut.

When the question came at last, it was meek.

“They’ll kill them all?”

My mind took me back to the eighteenth century as easily as though it had been hours ago. Single transgressors, a newborn who had run out of control, one member of a small coven who had revealed too much. I remembered watching the dark gray cloaks swirl, the pleas for mercy, the claims of innocence, always followed by the screaming, the ripping, the sickeningly sweet smell of burning venom.

Again. And again. And again.

I swallowed, meeting Jasper’s eyes as he reopened them. But when the voice answered him, I barely recognized it as my own.

“Yes. They’ll kill them all.”

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“She’s going to be just fine.”



Edward grunted, not looking up. His cheek lay on Bella's pillow, his nose resting millimeters from her neck. I marveled at the change from just two months before, when the hint of her scent had been enough to send him packing to Alaska. Now his lips were so close to her skin that his breath disturbed her hair, moving it away from him and back in a gentle rhythm.

"She wouldn't be here if it weren't for us," he replied.

I moved to him and laid a hand on the back of his neck as I looked over them both. Bella's leg was immobilized in a large brace, the sutured wound from her fracture and surgery covered with a white dressing. Her breathing, aided by an oxygen tube, was shallow, undoubtedly her involuntary reaction to her cracked ribs. Her visible skin was dotted with contusions, some as small as a dime, others larger than my fist.

She had gone to James to protect Edward. To protect all of us. On one hand, her foolishness had revealed how frighteningly little she understood who we really were, what level of evil one of our kind was truly capable of. On the other hand, that she had flung herself so willingly into harm's way spoke volumes about her feelings for Edward. But getting him to recognize that was always a tricky proposition.

Edward snorted, not lifting his head from Bella's pillow. "You see me just as unrealistically as she does."

For a moment I studied him again, watching as his chest expanded and contracted with each breath. I had a perfect recollection of James's hands around my son's neck. I'd moved without thinking, barreling at the blond vampire with my teeth bared. I had thrown Edward to the floor behind me with some force—the floorboards had shattered from his fall—and then locked arms with the evil creature. It had been only an instant before Jasper and Emmett were with me, but their absence hadn't mattered. James had been trying to hurt Edward, and that knowledge had constituted my entire world in that moment. If he had posed a threat to me, the risk hadn't registered.

Blindly laying our lives down for Edward's was something Bella Swan and I would forever have in common.

"We both love you," was all I said.

The door swung open with a quiet whoosh. In my memory, the woman who entered the room was Bella's attending nurse.

In Denali, the woman who entered the room was my daughter.

Esme shot out of my arms. “You’re safe,” she blubbered, embracing first Rosalie, then Emmett. “You’re both safe.”

Emmett grunted as he returned Esme’s hug. “We were in the airport,” he answered gruffly, his voice tinged with annoyance. “What were you expecting?” But it took only one quick glance into Esme’s panicked eyes for him to realize exactly what she had been expecting.

“What’s happened since we left?”

Jasper shook his head. “We’ve been waiting.”

The remainder of us had spent the evening in the living room, shifting around one another in absolute silence. Tanya lit another fire and a few candles around the room, and we all watched them, the flickering light playing across five pale faces and five sets of golden eyes. Every now and again one of us would walk to the wall, and stand by ourselves for an hour or so. Esme and I had spent the bulk of the night in each other’s arms in the wide leather chair. If my wife had been able to cry tears, I was certain that by this hour, my shirt would be soaked through. It was one of the unexpected curses of perfection—our bodies did not tire of sobbing any more than they did any other activity. Esme had been shaking against my shoulder for five hours straight.

Emmett and Rosalie took their places on Tanya’s wide couch once more. Esme moved to join them, clasping her hand in Rosalie’s. Without her in my lap, I suddenly felt empty. I stood, planning to join them at the couch, but instead I found myself walking toward the back of the house alone.

A brief movement of the couch springs told me that Esme had stood to follow me.

“No, let him go,” Jasper’s voice said, and I was grateful to hear my wife sit back down.

Esme had helped Tanya with the remodel on the ski lodge, and so the southern wall of their house had also been mostly removed in favor of thick plate glass just like our home in Forks. It was here that I walked, off the superfluous dining room, and pressed my palm to the cold window. A winter storm had risen in the hours we’d sat silent and the flakes were swirling in a mad tempest, the wind whistling under the eaves of Tanya’s home.

As I closed my eyes once more, it wasn’t Edward I saw this time, but another smiling boy, cracking jokes at me even hours away from death. Kurt and Anne Mason had waited, too, hand-in-hand, gazing down at their beloved son. I remembered the brave resolve with which my patient’s parents had stood over his deathbed. They would give him up after such a short life—less than sixteen years. A length that seemed to be only mere moments to me.

Edward had been my companion for eighty-eight years. Almost no human parents ever knew their children that long. My son was almost ninety years older than the Masons'. And yet—had he lived as full a life? *"You did everything in your power,"* Kurt Mason's voice echoed in my head. Then it abruptly shifted pitch and became the desperate voice of Elizabeth Masen: *"Everything in your power. What others cannot do, that is what you must do for my Edward."*

Had she truly known? And even if she had, was this what the beautiful green-eyed woman had wanted for the son she loved so much? Eighty years of pain, followed by the briefest glimmer of hope and happiness that was destined to be snuffed out in one misunderstanding?

I wanted Edward to be free. He had every right to make choices that would take him out of my life. The Masons had made the same choice for their son—when the pain of his disease had grown unbearable, they had let him choose to leave this world.

Placing a hand against the glass, I sighed deeply. How many thousands of times had I delivered the news to a family that their child had died at my hands? Even that very morning, the last morning I had seen my own son, hadn't my last act been to give just such news? I had thought myself to be a man of almost superhuman compassion. I had thought I understood.

I knew nothing.

I was supposed to be invincible, to experience physical pain only at the hands of another of my kind. Yet my chest was heaving, threatening to rip to pieces. Was this what it felt like? Was this what Tony's father had felt? And if so, how had he kept standing? I recalled how the Masons had looked: sad, but content. Kurt Mason had even thanked me for all I had done for his son. Tony's parents had been at peace. And now I found I didn't understand how that was even possible. How was a father supposed to accept the death of his son?

Again I barely recognized my own voice as it rose against the howling wind:

"Edward..."

"Carlisle."

Startled out of my thoughts, I spun, catching the glint of my daughter's golden hair.

Rosalie came to the window beside me, pressing her palm to the glass. Like our own home in Forks, Tanya's family's home had a spectacular view of the mountains. The snowstorm would obscure the view to human eyes, but we could see right through the flakes to the amazing vistas beyond. We stood side-by-side, staring out at the frozen tempest. Drifts were piling against the side of the house, and she and I watched the snow accumulate in the darkness.

I knew why Rosalie, of all my family members, had come to my side. In the quiet recesses of my mind, I heard again the words I'd slung at her so unthinkingly. *"If you think you can succeed where I've failed, then by all means do it."* Of course, the problem was she had no sense of whether or not her action would succeed.

*But would you have known any better?* the voice from within me piped up. Given the information I had now--the pain, the worry, the fear—it was too easy to say of course I would have behaved differently. Naturally, I would have flown down to Rio to deliver the news in person so that I could collect Edward into my arms as soon as he heard. It only made sense that I would have waited to hear from Alice in Forks before taking any action. But I had been gone, and Rosalie had called because I'd all but asked her to. If Bella had jumped just a day earlier, if we hadn't been gone...would anything have changed?

Or would it have been my phone call that sent Edward running to his destruction?

Rosalie and I stood in silence, watching the snow. Our breath, warmed by the heat of the house, made little uneven circles on the cold windowpane. Rosalie ran a single, perfect fingernail down the middle of hers, slicing it into two crescents. The displaced condensation dripped down the window and I watched as a single droplet rolled its way slowly to the floor.

With a soft thunk, Rosalie dropped her forehead to the window. "The whole time we were driving—Emmett and I, I mean, down to the airport—I was making all these deals with myself," she said. "Like how I'll help him with the cars if he comes back. That I'll be best friends with Bella, like Alice. That I'll stop fighting with him."

"Bargaining is part of grief," I said simply, and she nodded. She was, after all, a trained physician also, albeit one without practical experience.

"Not to mention that I don't think Bella likes you very much," I added. "I don't think she'd take to you the way she does to Alice."

The smile that spread across Rosalie's face was almost imperceptible, and it disappeared as quickly as it came.

"She'll like me even less if they all make it out of this."

I stepped behind Rosalie, putting my hands on her shoulders. "I wouldn't be too quick to assume that. If Edward makes it home—I find it hard to believe that Bella will hate you."

She said nothing for a long time and together we watched as hundreds of little flakes collected on the glass, melting quickly into tiny droplets as warmth radiated from the house.

“And if he doesn’t?”

I swallowed, squeezing my eyes closed. The grey cloaks moved across the square that I had known so many centuries before. A part of me knew that now it would not be full of ox carts and donkeys and merchants, but that was nevertheless what I saw in the surrounds as three painfully familiar faces looked up to the demons in terror. Pale hands reached forward to grab them...

When I opened my eyes, I forced myself to make my voice as steady as possible before I answered:

“If he doesn’t make it home, none of them will.”

Rosalie choked and I felt her shoulders begin to shake under mine. Gingerly, I turned her to face me and put my arms around her back, tightening my grip little by little, expecting her to spring away at any moment as she usually did. But instead, her body continued to shake, wracked with the tearless sobs that were all that was left of her human ability to cry.

“I’m sorry, Carlisle,” she whispered finally. “I only wanted him back.”

Resting my chin on my daughter’s head, I nodded.

“I know.”

The snow in the window turned, becoming Edward’s nose, his lips, his face, his hair, as he stood there on the train platform in Syracuse six months ago. Fear, determination, sadness—his turmoil was written so plainly on his face.

*When?* I begged in my mind, hoping for a reply that I knew wasn’t coming.

He shook his head in reply, his bronze hair fanning out as he did so. Maybe two days. Maybe months.

Maybe never.

*I love you, son,* I thought at him forcefully.

Edward’s smile was pained. *“I love you, too, Dad.”*

Then the Edward in my memory boarded the train, his black backpack the last part of him to disappear. I raised a single hand in farewell as I watched him leave for what I now knew was the last time.

And as I joined Rosalie in tearless sobs, I watched the Edward in the snow break apart into a thousand flakes, like ashes swirling away into the wind.

## Chapter 16: *La Mía Cantante*

*I can't believe it. He's actually annoyed with me. Good deeds never go unpunished.*

My expression appeared in my sister's mind as we were rapidly ushered down the same ornate hallway that I'd come down only—had it even been twelve hours ago? In Alice's memory of the moment that she'd joined us in the alleyway, my jaw was tensed, my lips pursed, and my brow furrowed. The same expression had apparently also crossed my face a moment before when I'd begun to lunge at the hulking Felix, only to be stopped by Alice's sharp rebuke.

"Sorry," I muttered, quietly enough that Bella wouldn't hear. "I'm not annoyed. Just"—a glance down at Bella's trembling form—"worried."

Worried didn't cover it. In fact, I couldn't think of any word I knew that quite captured what it felt like to be standing in this foreboding hall with Bella in my arms.

Bella. My Bella was in my arms.

Every move she made left an echo of her body on my muscles. Through no conscious thought of my own, my body wanted to stay around her, to subsume her if it could. When she moved even a millimeter further from me, my body closed the gap.

She was thinner than when I had left her, and her hair was almost four inches longer. Her hips, too, had grown even just a fraction of an inch wider. All these things reminded me of her exquisite humanness, the truly living *life* that I loved the most about her.

The life that was about to be taken away.

It had taken only an instant for me to be plunged from the height of Heaven into Hell itself. I recalled speaking calmly to Demetri and Felix as we stood in the alleyway, but Alice's memory revealed a constant growl that I had somehow not noticed myself making. It hadn't been until Jane appeared in the alley that I'd dropped my offense and resigned myself to going with them. In my sister's memory I saw the defeated look in my own eyes as we all fell in line behind the tiny, light-haired nightmare.

Now it was Jane, hand-in-hand with her brother, who slid open the door to the chamber I had seen so recently before. Bella's heartbeat sped as we entered, and I pressed my lips to the crown of her head once more. I was unable to keep myself from touching her, even as a part of

my mind questioned why she was even here. For even if there had been a mistake, even if she was simply “into extreme sports” as my sister had explained, wasn’t Bella’s world still better off without me? Surely in the time we had been apart she would have lived a life I couldn’t offer her, a life with living friends.

And now she had once again come to my aid, and within mere seconds of being reunited with her, I had once again put her life in serious jeopardy.

*Easy, Edward,* came Alice’s forceful thought.

I realized that I was growling.

“Jane, dear one, you’ve returned!”

The voice was unnaturally jovial, and I was reminded of hearing it through Carlisle’s memories—Aro’s ebullience seen through the filter of my father’s disgust. As Aro stood from his chair and floated toward us, a wide smile on his face, I felt Bella pull away just a fraction, as though she were drawn to him. I tightened my grip as Alice saw a hazy image of Bella touching Aro’s strangely wizened face.

Aro surprised both me and Alice by kissing Jane on the lips before stepping back.

“Yes, Master. I brought him back alive, just as you wished.” Jane smiled in my direction, and the image of Felix tearing my head off in the alleyway was accompanied by a deep pang of regret.

“Ah Jane, you are such a comfort to me,” Aro sighed before turning his gaze on the rest of us. His smile became even wider as his eyes landed on Alice, who was standing very uncharacteristically still.

*Two*, he thought, and his voice took on an overly joyous tone: “And Alice and Bella, too! This *is* a happy surprise! Wonderful! Felix, be a dear and tell my brothers about our company. I’m sure they wouldn’t want to miss this.”

“Yes, Master.” And Felix was gone.

“You see, Edward? What did I tell you? Aren’t you glad that I didn’t give you what you wanted yesterday?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied, even as I felt my lip curl over my teeth.

He turned toward Alice, sighing. “I love a happy ending. They are so rare. But I want the whole story. How did this happen? Alice? Your brother seemed to think you infallible, but

apparently there was some mistake.” I cringed as he recalled the resolute death wish he had detected earlier.

Alice beamed at him, even as I caught her patronizing thought: *One of these days you’re going to actually understand how this works.* “Oh I’m far from infallible,” she trilled. “As you can see today, I cause problems as often as I cure them.” *With a little help from people who are prone to taking drastic measures.* Her image of me stepping out into the sunlight appeared briefly in her mind.

I rolled my eyes.

“You’re too modest,” Aro answered, still smiling. “I’ve seen some of your more amazing exploits, and I must admit I’ve never observed anything like your talent. Wonderful!” Jasper appeared in his mind—not even my memory, but Alice’s, gleaned from her by me and now the property of the being who would decide all our fates. Aro recalled quickly Jasper and Alice’s cross-continental journey from the diner in Philadelphia to our family’s secluded home in the Canadian Rockies. How surely she’d tracked us, using only her image of what we were up to—even without having met us.

Aro’s eyes flickered briefly to Demetri and then back to Alice.

My sister frowned. *Edward, what are you not telling me?*

He caught her intent gaze, even brief as it was. “I’m sorry,” he offered, sounding perfectly cordial. “We haven’t been introduced properly at all, have we? It’s just that I feel like I know you already, and I tend to get ahead of myself. Your brother introduced us yesterday, in a peculiar way. You see, I share some of your brother’s talent, only I am limited in a way that he is not.”

Only Aro would describe his gift as limited. “And also exponentially more powerful,” I responded. “Aro needs physical contact to hear your thoughts, but he hears much more than I do. You know I can only hear what’s passing through your head in the moment. Aro hears every thought your mind has ever had.”

Alice’s eyebrows shot up, and her thoughts swiftly became a jumbled mess. *Every thought...* The idea seemed to fill her with hope. She recalled waking up to her thirst in the dark woods outside a building, which, I was startled to realize, was no longer the indistinct “asylum” I had seen ever since James had tortured Bella with his story of my sister’s change, but instead a real building, flickering back and forth between a modern, bustling hospital, with SUVs its



parking lot to an imagined version, smaller, and flanked by packed dirt roads in the twentieth century. A sign, which also vacillated back and forth between a carved wooden version with chipping paint and a professional, modern version, identified the building as “Mississippi State Hospital.”

My sister knew considerably more about her past than she had when I’d last seen her. A puzzled frown crossed my face, which Aro did not miss.

“But to be able to hear from a distance,” he sighed, gesturing to my changed expression. “That would be so *convenient*.” For the briefest of moments I saw myself again in his mind, cloaked in black, with Alice similarly attired at my side. The image disappeared however, as something else caught his attention.

*Ah, the others.*

I heard Aro’s thought before he even glanced away from us, and the whole room seemed to come to attention as the other two brothers entered. Instinctively, my arms tightened around Bella’s torso. Her heart, which seemed to have briefly accustomed itself to its level of stress began to race once more, its rapid thrumming reverberating in the otherwise quiet chamber. I ran my hand gently down the back of Bella’s neck, feeling the smooth hairs of her skin slide beneath my fingertips and absorbing a little of the warmth I had missed so sorely.

“Marcus, Caius, look!” Aro crooned. “Bella is alive after all, and Alice is here with her! Isn’t that wonderful?” He beamed at Bella and me. “Let us have the story.”

Caius’s sneer was fast, but his thoughts were clear as he glided off toward his chair. *We should have destroyed him when we had the chance.*

Marcus, by contrast, gave me a very curious look, and as I shifted my attention to him, I felt an almost overwhelming force overtake my body.

It wasn’t attraction, not in the way Marcus had felt it for any of the other vampires in the room. Distinguishing whether the sensation was a pushing or a pulling was almost impossible—the essence of my being seemed to be soldered to Bella’s. As Marcus looked curiously at Bella, I felt my muscles flex as I pressed her as close physically as the mental inventory had seemed to suggest. Her pounding heart became my own, beating right through her back and her damp shirt and through my skin to race in my chest just as it did in hers.

As Marcus crossed the room and extended his hand, I buried my nose again in Bella’s hair. My throat erupted in angry fire as I allowed my senses to become engulfed in Bella’s scent.

She was really here. Her flesh against mine was like fire, even dripping wet as she was. I had tried to spare her the cold by pushing her away from me in the alley, but she, as stubborn as ever, had refused. It made no sense. Even Alice was irked with me—Bella had to recognize the danger I had once again put her in. Her pounding heart was evidence enough of her fear.

And yet she stood, plastered to my side, as I watched as Aro received Marcus's assessment of the relationship between us. A single eyebrow arched on the ancient face as Aro registered the same immutable connection that I had felt as I had journeyed into the mind of the other vampire.

*This connection...and to a human?*

Aro's thoughts drew me back from Marcus's mind, and I saw Bella through his eyes. *Plain* was the adjective that seemed to hover most. *Average. Ordinary.*

A snort of indignation escaped me. Ordinary, indeed. Hadn't she just made a transoceanic flight and thrown herself into what was nothing short of a den of lions, to come to the rescue of someone who had all but thrown her away?

I didn't deserve her. And she didn't deserve this. She was anything but *ordinary*.

"Thank you, Marcus," Aro said. "That's quite interesting."

Marcus gave a small nod as he drifted toward his own seat. Again as he walked away, I saw the beautiful woman in his memory, this time accompanied by his own assessment of their connection—one that he judged to be not quite as strong as mine with Bella. That I had formed such a bond with a human pained him. In his mind I at once heard his laughter and felt his crushing grief. There was another emotion there as well—envy, I realized with a start. He missed the connection he had had with the woman in his memory. He found Bella not unremarkable, but rather he saw himself in our bond. And he was jealous.

"Amazing, absolutely amazing." Aro's voice brought me out of Marcus's head before I could think more fully about what his jealousy meant for Bella's chances at survival.

*What is amazing? What did he see?* Alice's brow pulled into a tight frown.

"Marcus sees relationships," I explained loud enough that Bella could hear. "He's surprised by the intensity of ours."

"So convenient," Aro muttered again. "It takes quite a bit to surprise Marcus, I can assure you."

*No, he doesn't look like someone who is easily surprised,* came Alice's thought. She, too, was cataloguing everything that Aro was saying. She wondered briefly what bond Marcus saw between the two of us. Carlisle had always told us that our family was unique, that there was something about the animal blood that led to much larger covens, to a more peaceful existence than he had known, even while here among those he considered "civilized." Alice was trying to figure out a way to use that to our advantage.

My muscles contracted again, pulling Bella closer into my body. This did not escape Aro's attention.

"It's just so difficult to understand, even now," he muttered. "How can you stand so close to her like that?"

"It's not without effort." I remembered hunting with Carlisle after I'd returned from Denali, imbibing blood that had been unnecessary in any strict sense. I had drunk myself so full that I had nearly felt sick, and then it had still taken almost everything I had to stay next to Bella in Biology the next day.

But now I stood, thirstier than I could ever remember being, and although the incredible scent of Bella's blood made my throat burn, I could no more think of causing her harm than I could rip myself to pieces. The thoughts of the others in the room swirled, all the minds focused on how badly they wanted to complete the task at which they had judged me a failure.

Aro clucked his tongue. *Such a shame,* he thought, as my memory surfaced of Bella's exquisite blood sliding down my throat as I removed the last traces of James's venom, saving her life. From inside his mind I could feel the venom pooling inside his mouth, and a low growl rumbled from my chest in answer.

"But still—*la tua cantante!* What a waste."

"I look at it more as a price," I shot back.

"A very high price."

"Opportunity cost." Except that implied that there was another, less costly option. As Aro looked on in amazement, I pressed my lips to the crown of Bella's head once more. He had seen my thoughts. He had seen how wasted I had become as I waited out the painful weeks in Brazil. He knew that being apart from Bella was no longer a possibility for me.

“If I hadn’t smelled her through your memories, I wouldn’t have believed the call of anyone’s blood could be so strong,” he mused. “I’ve never felt anything like it myself. Most of us would trade much for such a gift and yet you—”

“Waste it,” I said with him, unable to keep the growl out of my voice.

A blond man swam into existence in Aro’s mind. *“They are people, Aro. They have lives—short, yes, but all the more sacred for it. If we are truly better than they, then we ought protect them,”* my father said, as Aro looked with him down on the humans moving in the *piazza*.

Aro smiled as the memory faded and he regarded me again. “Ah, how I miss my friend Carlisle! You remind me of him—only he was not so angry.”

My hand fluttered unconsciously to the pocket of my slacks, encountering the thin rectangle of stiff paper that was one of the only things I had not thrown away in Brazil. My passport, and inside it my credit card, the two documents that had been offered to me the last time I had seen my father.

*Edward Carlisle Cullen.*

And suddenly it was my mind, not Aro’s, in which Carlisle’s image appeared, his expression strained as he sat at our dinner table more than a year ago. Rosalie sat on one side, and me on the other. It was the first time he had spoken about Bella, the first hint of the hell that was starting to unfold that would lead us all before an almost certain death. We had been afraid about what she had seen then—and now she had seen so much more. Carlisle’s voice came back to me; calm, considered, unwaveringly paternal. *“I believe the risk she represents, whether she speaks her suspicions or not, is nothing to the greater risk. If we make exceptions to protect ourselves, we risk something much more important. We risk losing the essence of who we are.”*

I sighed deeply. I had been torn then. Rosalie’s idea had made sense—quietly taking Bella’s life in her sleep. She had been right that the humans would have chalked it up to a misdiagnosis, and by then her treating physician would have disappeared into the ether. But it had been my father who’d held his ground against my siblings, allowing Alice’s vision of my love for Bella to come to fruition.

If we made it out of this alive, I would have to thank him.

Looking back up to Aro, I answered, “Carlisle outshines me in many other ways as well.”

Aro chuckled, looking again from Bella to me and back again. “I certainly never thought to see Carlisle bested for self-control of all things, but you put him to shame.”

“Hardly.”

“I am gratified by his success. Your memories of him are quite a gift for me, though they astonish me exceedingly. I am surprised by how it”—he paused as though considering how high of praise to offer—“*pleases* me, his success in this unorthodox path he’s chosen. I expected that he would waste, weaken with time. I’d scoffed at his plan to find others who would share his peculiar vision. Yet somehow, I’m happy to be wrong.”

Again I watched my life flash through Aro’s mind. Esme laughing at a joke Carlisle had made. Rosalie beaming up at Emmett on one of their many wedding days. Alice sitting at Jasper’s feet as he played the guitar for her and sang. Then his eyes fell back on Bella at my side. “But *your* restraint,” he sighed. “I did not know such strength was possible. To inure yourself against such a siren call, not just once but again and again—if I had not felt it myself, I would not have believed. Just remembering how she appeals to you....It makes me thirsty.” Looking me up and down once again, he added, *It would be a shame to destroy one so strong.*

It seemed that every muscle in my body suddenly became taut at these words. I was ready to throw myself before him or anyone else who made a move at Bella. I would in an instant become the animal I never wanted her to see, the beast capable of sheer destruction, if it meant that she would be safe.

*So protective.* Aro’s gaze fixed on Bella, but it was Marcus who appeared in his memory—not the stoic being I saw today, but instead in a full-on fury, growling, snarling, screaming. I recognized instantly that he was seeing the moment that Marcus had found out about the loss of the beautiful woman. Then his mind shifted, and he felt again what Marcus had felt when he’d turned his gift on Bella and me, the immutable bond that seemed to have plastered us to each other.

“Don’t be disturbed, I mean her no harm. But I am *so* curious about one thing in particular.” His eyes seemed to light as he recalled that first day in the cafeteria, and I relived the moment with him. Together we gazed at shy Bella Swan, listening to the incessant external and internal jabber of Jessica Stanley, and we opened our mind to the inane thoughts around the cafeteria. As one we looked again at Bella and heard nothing. She stared back at us, her mind in perfect silence.

“May I?” he asked, and my memory abruptly disappeared.

“Ask *her*,” I shot back, and hoped that she would turn him down.

“Of course, how rude of me!” He turned toward Bella. “Bella, I’m fascinated that you are the one exception to Edward’s impressive talent—so very interesting that such a thing should occur! And I was wondering, since our talents are similar in many ways, if you would be so kind as to allow me to try—to see if you are an exception for *me*, as well?”

Bella’s heart sped, and her muscles contracted, making her solid beneath my arm. For a moment, I considered what might happen if it did work. I was mostly sure that it would not, but even if it did, *she* wouldn’t be harmed—and I realized with a start that if Aro could read Bella’s mind, I would be privy to it for the first time ever.

I found myself nodding.

Bella raised a shaking hand and Aro glided to her, a confident smile on his face. He pressed his hand to hers, and we both waited.

Nothing happened.

A smile spread across my face as I heard Aro’s mind stumble over itself. *It can’t be. A human? Amazing. Absolutely amazing.*

His hand dropped back to his side a moment later. “So very interesting,” he said, and I did my best to bury the smug smile that threatened at the edges of my lips.

Aro’s eyes danced back and forth, passing over Alice, then me, then Bella. *Powerful*, he repeated to himself, and Jasper appeared in his mind as well. And Bella was added, her skin white, her eyes crimson—then he shook his head and the images disappeared.

“A first,” he muttered. “I wonder if she is immune to our other talents...Jane, dear?”

“No!” The word ripped from my chest, and Alice’s arm was around my bicep before I had a chance to move forward. In her mind I saw myself lunge at Jane, and the room erupted in a fury as more than a dozen of the guard immediately attacked, scattering my limbs across the floor within seconds.

I yanked my arm from her grip and bared my teeth at Aro, even as Jane glided jovially toward him. Felix moved with her. *Perhaps now*, he thought, assessing my snarling demeanor, but Aro gave him one tiny glance and he retreated.

“Yes, Master?” Jane’s voice seemed completely innocent.

“I was wondering, my dear one, if Bella is immune to *you*.”

The thrumming of Bella’s heart increased. She had no idea what Jane could do. Even I had only a faint idea, from Jasper’s memories of the southern wars.

But I knew enough.

“Don’t!” my sister’s voice rang out as I lunged.

And then I was on fire.

Every neuron in my body was firing at once, sending only the message *pain...pain...pain*. The fire threw me to the floor and consumed me, licking at me from my arteries to my capillaries, trying to reduce my bones to cinder. I wanted to die. The others could attack me now, rip me to pieces, and it would be welcome. The fire of my change, of my father’s venom burning through my fragile human body, would feel as comfortable as bed of pillows compared to this. My body jerked out of my control on the stone floor.

But even through the pain, I recognized Bella, her own limbs flailing as Alice held her firmly. She screamed out for Jane to stop, and I clamped my jaw. I would not let her know the pain I was in. Instead I concentrated on her, letting her scent engulf me and its sweetness purify me from the inside out. These two things battled in my body—Bella and Jane, the most good of good and the vilest of evils—until I heard the word “Jane” and suddenly all was still.

The room was spinning as I sat up, and I shook my head. It was no wonder the brothers were so assured of their every victory—for creatures that never experienced disorientation, the sensation was doubly confusing.

“He’s fine,” I heard Alice whisper as I got to my feet.

Jane’s expression was fixed on Bella where she was imprisoned in Alice’s arms—had she tried to save me?—and my stomach dropped as I turned to face her. Bella was simply staring at me, her brow furrowed with worry. I glanced back at Jane, then back to Bella, and my body relaxed. Jane couldn’t penetrate Bella’s mind, either.

I touched Alice’s arm and she released Bella back to me. Her heart again beat against my chest and my throat protested once more to the call of her scent.

Aro laughed. “This is wonderful!”

I growled and Jane hissed, moving forward as Aro’s hand shot out. *No need*, he thought.

“Don’t be put out, dear one,” he said comfortingly. “She confounds us all.” *And what an asset she would be as one of us*. Turning to me, he added, “You’re very brave, Edward, to endure in silence. I asked Jane to do that to me once—just out of curiosity.” For a moment we both recalled the intense pain, and I heard Aro shriek...then he quickly shifted his mind away.

“So what do we do with you now?” he murmured, more to himself than to us.

*You let us leave*, came my sister's answer. Jasper's face floated in her mind. Bella began to shake furiously, and my body stiffened as I pulled her closer.

"I don't suppose there's any chance that you've changed your mind? Your talent would be an excellent addition to our little company."

*He isn't serious.*

*Allow him to join us?*

*What would we feed him? Cattle?*

I winced as around me the mental voices began to hum, and for a moment, I squeezed my eyes closed to help me shut them out. Then I answered Aro carefully.

"I'd rather not."

*Then the other?* "Alice? Would you perhaps be interested in joining with us?" *As a pair they would be magnificent, but even alone she would be invaluable.*

My sister shook her head, her eyes narrowed. "No, thank you."

"And you, Bella?"

Bella? He couldn't be serious. Turn her and *keep* her? Was that what this was going to come to? A year of protecting her from the evils of my kind, tearing myself apart to keep her safe, and it would all be thrown down the drain for her to join the worst of our kind.

Across the room, Caius hissed as he rose from his seat. "What?" he growled.

"Caius, surely you see the potential." Aro waved his hand in Bella's direction. "I haven't seen a prospective talent so promising since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us?"

The white-haired vampire resumed his seat with a resigned growl, but in his head I caught his wordless agreement.

Aro's eyes flickered from Caius back to Bella. He raised his eyebrows. *It's quite a high compliment I've paid you, human*, he thought.

My hand closed on Bella's hip, unconsciously holding her back. Would she join them? I knew that what Bella wanted more than anything was immortality. How often had we spoken of it in the summer? I remembered her angry tears on prom night, as she sat beside me in the Vanquish, frustrated that she was not being brought to her death.



She didn't understand what she would be giving up. I joked about her not having a sense for self-preservation, but it was no joke in the face of her desire to be changed. She really didn't understand how precious her life was and, moreover, how precious it was to *me*.

And now Aro was offering her what I had refused her again and again. The beauty she thought she didn't already possess; the immortality that would keep her near us, a chance at this thing she'd coveted for so long.

The air seemed to still, save for the low rumbling in my chest. I could hear the thoughts rolling through the room but I ignored them, focusing only on Bella as the time moved slowly forward.

At last she spoke, in a high, frightened voice.

"No, thank you."

My eyes closed in relief. There was hope, then. But what it meant, I wasn't sure. Did she no longer wish to be turned? Was she simply too frightened to admit this in front of Aro?

Or was it even possible, after all this, that she wanted to be with me?

*Sad. I would have enjoyed them all*, Aro thought, tearing my attention away from Bella. "That's unfortunate," he said. "Such a waste."

A waste. A rush of fear flooded my body, as once again smiles appeared on the faces around us. In the minds of the others I saw myself ripped to pieces as Alice screamed, and then Aro himself descending on Bella's trembling body...

"Join or die, is that it? I suspected as much when we were brought into *this* room."

As the words came out of my mouth, however, Carlisle's voice hit me from nowhere. It had been not long ago, when he and I had unpacked his study together in our new home in Forks. He hung the Solomina painting in its usual place in the center of the wall, and as we gazed at it, he had gotten to talking about Aro again. "*He always thought he was fair*," my father had said. "*It was the point on which he most prided himself. I set him on edge because I questioned his biases.*"

The memory played in a fraction of a second, and suddenly I saw the way.

*Nicely done, Edward*, came Alice's delighted reply, as the image of her in Jasper's arms wavered in her mind for a brief moment. It wasn't for certain, but it was there. A possible outcome.

Nodding to my sister, I chose my next words carefully.

“So much for your laws.”

*Our laws?* Aro blinked a few times, replaying my words in his head. *Join or die, is that it?* “Of course not,” he answered. “We were already convened here, Edward, awaiting Heidi’s return. Not for you.”

A growl erupted from across the room. *He’s going to let them go?* “Aro,” Caius hissed. “The law claims them.” *She is human!*

“How so?” I shot back. Forcing him to speak his complaint would let me argue my side, and if we could argue, then there was a chance...

Jasper’s image became clearer. Alice smiled.

“She knows too much,” he went on. “You have exposed our secrets.”

He had taken the bait.

“There are a few humans in on your charade here, as well,” I answered.

He smirked. *Just as smug as your so-called father.* “Yes,” he said, his voice careful, “but when they are no longer useful to us, they will serve to sustain us. That is not your plan for this one. If she betrays our secrets are you prepared to destroy her? I think not.” He shot a very pointed look at my arm, and remembered how he had seen me kiss Bella’s head.

“I wouldn’t—” piped up Bella’s voice from beside me, but Caius cut her off.

“Nor do you intend to make her one of us,” he went on. “Therefore, she is a vulnerability. Though it is true, for this, only *her* life is forfeit. You may leave if you wish.”

I couldn’t help it. Even though Alice’s vision was telling me we had our way out, my lips still pulled back from my teeth.

“That’s what I thought,” Caius said. He smiled ever so slightly. *We will keep the girl.*

“Unless...” Aro moved closer. Bella flashed in his mind again, pale-skinned and crimson-eyed. I winced. “Unless you do intend to give her immortality?”

This was the opening I needed. I pressed my lips together as though I was deep in thought.

And I decided firmly to tell Alice to show Aro her vision.

In her mind, Alice stepped forward and placed her hand against Aro’s. The vision of Jasper became solid. My sister gave an almost inaudible squeal.

Looking back at Aro, I answered, “And if I do?”

*Well, then, that will do. And then perhaps we can collect you all.* “Why, then you would be free to go home and give my regards to my friend Carlisle,” Aro answered buoyantly.

*Although of course...* “But I’m afraid you would have to mean it.” He raised his hand.

Caius let out a little laugh. *So much for that, you idiot boy.*

I looked down at Bella. I didn’t need to read her mind to know her thoughts. The look in her eyes was desperate, pleading. She wanted so badly for me to take her life from her, as though it meant nothing.

“Mean it,” she whispered. “Please.”

Even in the presence of the most loathsome of our kind, Bella still wanted to be turned to a monster. My face twisted, but before I had a chance to reply, Alice’s feet moved across the floor with a gentle swishing sound. Her hand was raised, as she had seen it in her vision, and a moment later, her palm was pressed to Aro’s.

The thoughts which tumbled out were disjointed and fragmented. I saw Jasper. A diner in Philadelphia. Peter. Bella, looking as though she’d been put through the wringer. Jasper, despondent after an accidental kill. Esme. Emmett. Rosalie’s voice, drifting up from under an engine. Carlisle, laughing at something I’d said. And alongside them emotions—pain, fear, love, happiness, despair.

I looked away, as though averting my gaze would do anything to change this gross violation of privacy. There were emotions and thoughts running through my sister’s mind that she had never shared with me. Private moments with Jasper that she had been careful not to recall in my presence, fears she hadn’t revealed she had. And around it and through it danced the future—many possible ones, some of us on a plane home, her in Jasper’s arms, Bella and I together.

And then, crystal clear, if anything, even more solid than I’d ever seen it, the image of Bella, her skin the icy white, her eyes crimson, with her arms around my sister. They were laughing...

And so was Aro. He looked up as he removed his hand from Alice’s. “That was *fascinating*,” he exclaimed.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” replied my sister flatly.

*A clairvoyant. And she is in Carlisle’s coven...* “To see the things you’ve seen,” he mused. “Especially the ones that haven’t happened yet!”

“But that will.” The image of a newborn Bella came to both Alice’s and Aro’s minds at once.

“Yes, yes, it’s quite determined. Certainly there’s no problem.” *And then there will be four.* Aro’s lips pursed in thought a moment.

*That’s it? He sees one thing from the little girl, and that’s enough?* A low growl emanated from Caius. “Aro...” he began.

“Dear Caius, do not fret,” Aro responded, turning and smiling at him. “Think of the possibilities! They do not join us today, but we can always hope for the future. Imagine the joy young Alice alone would bring to our little household.” He beamed at my sister. *Such a useful gift. And combined with Edward’s...*

“Besides,” he added, fixing his eyes on me. “I’m so terribly curious to see how Bella turns out.”

Bella looked extremely pained. I wanted to hold her close, kiss her again, bury my face in her hair and tell her that everything was going to be all right, whisper to her what Alice had seen.

Instead I settled for bringing her slightly closer to my body as I asked, “Then are we free to go now?”

“Yes, yes. But please visit again. It’s been absolutely enthralling!”

*Does he think he invited us for tea?* Alice’s lip curled.

“And we will visit you as well,” came Caius’s voice. “To be sure that you follow through on your side. Were I you, I would not delay too long. We do not offer second chances.” *Don’t think we’re finished with you.*

I appeared in the minds of at least four of the guard, each one imagining a different limb being ripped from my body. My eyes landed on Demetri, who was relishing the vision of watching my severed head fly into a bonfire. They would use him to find us, but as long as we hid Bella and her untouchable mind...I clamped my jaw tight to stifle the laughter and nodded once.

They would never know what hit them.

Caius smirked, drifting back toward Marcus, and I shifted my gaze to the other man. He had watched the whole proceeding with perfect disinterest, or so it had seemed. But as I turned my focus away from Aro and Caius, I found him still sitting, contemplating the intense pull he

felt between me and Bella. Again the beautiful woman appeared in his head, then, for a fraction of a second, his eyes fixed on me.

*Good luck.*

I stared as Marcus settled back into his chair, the same bored look sliding over his face.

“Ah, Felix,” Aro’s voice rose, pulling me back from Marcus’s mind. “Heidi will be here at any moment. Patience.”

Heidi. Carlisle had mentioned her to me. She was the one responsible for the Volturi’s quiet existence here in the middle of the city, the one who gathered their food, as it were. If she was on her way...

“In that case,” I said quietly, “perhaps we’d better leave sooner, rather than later.”

*Yes. She may not be my singer, but...* “Yes. That’s a good idea. Accidents *do* happen. Please wait below until after dark, though, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” I answered, and I felt Bella’s body contract into mine.

“And here.” Aro beckoned Felix forward, and in a swift motion the large man’s cloak was off his body and flying toward me. “Take this. You’re a little conspicuous.”

I caught it with a single hand and put it on.

*See, and it’s very becoming.* Again the image surfaced of me, Alice, and now Bella, cloaked in the dark charcoal of the closest of the guard. “It suits you,” he sighed.

I almost began to laugh, but swallowed it down as I caught the scent of humans. Several dozen of them, headed down the hall. I threw a quick look over my shoulder, but they weren’t visible.

Yet.

“Thank you, Aro,” I said tersely, my feet turning toward the door of their own accord. “We’ll wait below.” I turned Bella away.

“Goodbye, young friends,” Aro answered. *I hope to see you soon.*

I rolled my eyes as Demetri stepped in front of us, gesturing toward the door.

“Let’s go,” I whispered to Bella. She was still trembling slightly as I held her warm body against mine, and I began to tug her along as fast as I could.

“Not fast enough,” Alice muttered.

She was right. Before we made it out of the antechamber, the door slid open, and in pressed several dozen humans, all exclaiming loudly over the ornate decoration, the medieval

architecture, the perfect preservation. Out of instinct, my hand found the back of Bella's head, and I pressed her face to my chest, and rushed her through a tiny break in the crowd. Alice followed hot on my heels. The wool of the cloak became damp as Bella's eyes grew wet and spilled over.

She had realized what was happening.

"Shh, shh, shh," I heard myself repeating over and over, as I tried to drown out Aro's hearty greeting. Demetri and Heidi greeted each other in the hallway, but I paid attention only to Bella. She quivered against my breastbone, her tears flowing freely down my chest. I pulled her as fast as I could, but we didn't make it out of the hallway before the room behind us erupted into screams.

Shoving Bella into the reception area ahead of me, I slammed the door behind us. I could still hear every sound, but it would block the noise out well enough for Bella.

"Do not leave until dark," Demetri commanded, and then with a swish of his cloak, he was gone.

I clutched Bella to my frame. She was shaking so hard her teeth chattered, and low moans rumbled from her chest into mine.

"Are you all right?" I asked stupidly.

"You'd better make her sit before she falls," Alice answered for her. "She's going to pieces."

Bella's moans had dissolved into a strange, keening wail. I continued to shush her as I pulled her across the room to the couch.

"I think she's having hysterics. Maybe you should slap her."

I shot a look that I hoped was daggers at my sister as I pulled Bella into my lap. Her clothes were still wet—I had figured out that she'd run through the fountain in the middle of the square. I couldn't keep her as warm as I wanted to, but I would do my very best. I opened the cloak and wrapped one side of it around her, keeping one layer of cloth between my cold chest and her quaking body.

"It's all right, you're safe," I chanted to her, but it was myself I was reminding. She was all right. She was *here*, in the flesh, lying against me. Her heart beat into my chest, becoming my own, and my body was flooded with her warmth. My throat burned as it hadn't burned in months

as I kissed her hair, her forehead, her cheeks. It was the most welcome sensation I had ever experienced.

“Shh, it’s all right,” I repeated, running a hand down her back and trying to calm her enough to steady her for what would be an almost unbearable wait. Unbearable for her because it would simply be long, and she was so close to these vicious beings who right now were feasting on dozens of people just like her. Unbearable for me because for all I knew, this was all the more time I would get. We would leave here at nightfall, and Alice would figure out some way to get us back to Florence. We would fly back to Washington, and Bella would go back to Charlie. And I would go...where?

Bella’s face buried itself in the folds of the cloak, and I gingerly touched the back of her head. She didn’t flinch from my hand, but was that just because she was too in shock? Alice had brought her—did that mean she would not have come of her own accord? I knew she felt indebted to my family after the incident with James—true to form, she ignored that we put her in danger, and focused only on the rescue. Perhaps she had come only as a favor to my sister. And even if she hadn’t, would she want me back? Truly back in her life, the way I thought I possibly could be? My hand closed against her back as it remembered the feel of my phone as I had cradled it before nearly making the call to book the flight home. The flight home to beg her forgiveness, to admit to my devastating lie. The flight to try to claim my life again.

Her heart raced each time I kissed her forehead, and I held her close, my fingertips re-memorizing the planes of her face, the subtle curve of her shoulder blades, the outlines of her vertebrae. I didn’t know how much longer I would have her, so I would make perfect use of the time I had.

Almost unconsciously, I bent my head down and pressed my lips to the crown of her head, inhaling. The scent which had once driven me nearly to madness was now the only thing that calmed my thoughts. There was so much uncertain still. But I was here, and so was Bella. We were together, and that was all that mattered for now.

Closing my eyes, I pressed my forehead to Bella’s and lost myself in the gentle thrum of her heart.

## Chapter 17: The Fatted Calf

Esme's hand snaked its way down my forearm as I pushed open the massive front door. Her fingers laced into mine, but she said nothing.

There were not words to be spoken.

The door swung open reluctantly, and we stepped forward into the huge room and its looming shadows. We had drawn the huge metal shades on the back wall before leaving for Ithaca, and the whole house was now sickeningly dark despite the mid-afternoon sun. I was reminded of a conversation we'd all overheard just barely more than a year ago when Bella had first set foot in this place: "No coffins, no piled skulls in the corners; I don't even think we have cobwebs," Edward had told her smugly. "What a disappointment this must be for you."

The cobwebs were here now, hanging ominously from every join of wall and ceiling. A thick layer of dust had settled over every surface in the house—the bookshelves, the furniture, and the piano by the door. The lawn had overgrown and the driveway was nearly impassable for the weeds. For all its other appearances, the house might as well have contained coffins and skulls.

Emmett and Rosalie entered behind us, pulling a large suitcase in silence. Jasper was next, nodding as he regarded us and then quickly averting his gaze. He moved at a human's pace to the living room, sank onto one of the couches, and dropped his head into his palms. I watched him go, recalling how he had brought us here.

Rosalie and I had stood at the window in Tanya's home for almost an hour, saying nothing and staring out at the accumulating snow. A while later, our silence had been interrupted by the sound of a throat clearing behind us, and I had turned around to see Jasper standing there with a hard expression on his face.

"Carlisle, we need to talk," was all he had said. And my son the soldier had led me out into the whistling wind, out of earshot of the others, and painstakingly laid out the cover story.

The need to cover our tracks was an inescapable reality of our existence, and over the years we had learned to do it well. If the last break had been particularly bad—a very public slip from Jasper or some such—we often split up and changed identities just to double the effect of



disappearing into the ether. It was one of the most painful things about this half-reality in which we lived: the times we most needed to be together were inevitably the times we were forced apart. Usually the task of deciding on the cover story and the new identities fell to me. That this time it was Jasper who had needed to craft the story, did not escape me.

And the truly painful thing was that this time, the story was so close to the truth.

The tale was that Edward changed his mind about the breakup and ran away from home, and Alice came to Forks in hopes of convincing him to return. Not finding him, both she and Bella tracked him to San Francisco, and they all three had been on their way home via Highway 101 in Oregon when Edward fell asleep at the wheel and sent the car careening off the edge of the cliffs and into the frigid Pacific below. Jasper and I would find the car Alice had left at the airport and stage the accident, leaving enough debris to identify the car, but letting the wreck be pulled out to sea by the riptide.

So we had returned to Forks, at least for a while, under the auspices of coming after Edward and Alice. When the news came, we would mourn our children with Charlie Swan, and I would serve as the conduit for his anger. He would blame his daughter's death on my son's actions, never knowing how accurate his accusations truly were. We would stay long enough to show our worry and contrition, and then we would disappear—laden, as always, with the burden of the awful secret we carried.

But now, for the moment, we were in a holding pattern—waiting for news, or waiting just to wait long enough that we could be certain the news would no longer be good. I tried to meet Jasper's eye as he sat in the living room. He had taken my place as the family rock, giving me the freedom to fall to pieces over Edward, and yet in doing so, had denied himself the opportunity to begin to grieve for the woman who had unlocked his soul so many years ago. Now that the decisions had been made, Jasper's retreat back into himself was evident in his every motion, or really, in his lack thereof. He sat now in perfect silence, his hair falling forward over his temples as he bowed his head over his hands.

"We should go upstairs," I whispered, my lips so close they brushed my wife's ear with each syllable. After all he'd shouldered in the last day, the least we could offer Jasper was a little privacy. Esme turned her head just long enough to regard Jasper's silent stillness, and nodded. I began to move us toward the stairs, but Esme pulled away from me. My arms empty, I watched

as she crossed the room and laid a hand gently on the back of Jasper's neck. His shoulders rose and fell as he heaved a sigh.

"Would you like me to light a fire?" she whispered.

Jasper shook his head almost imperceptibly. Esme nodded, giving Jasper a brief pat on the back before returning to my side. We ascended the stairs in silence, arms around each other's waists.

The wall leading up the stairs bore a typical familial display—we had, over the decades, amassed a collection of family photos. I felt a slight tug on my midsection when Esme stopped to look at one.

It had been taken not long before we'd moved to Forks, by Tanya when she and her family had come to visit our house in Nome. The house had a wide driveway and the previous owners had installed a basketball hoop over the garage. Within a week of our moving there, Esme had relocated the hoop to the third story, and for a few years, basketball had supplanted baseball as our family's sport of choice. We lived far enough away from civilization then that we could eschew the formalities of human appearance, and at the time of the photo we had been playing three-on-three in the driveway, shirts against skins (bikinis, in Alice's case), in sub-zero weather. Emmett had just rebounded the ball from a missed shot by Edward, and Tanya had captured the ball in motion in Emmett's casual bounce-pass in my direction. Jasper's hand was a millimeter from Alice's waist as he ran a perfect man-to-man defense against his wife, and Esme, our perpetual referee, had a bemused expression on her face as she no doubt chastised Emmett for some sort of foul. All seven of us were laughing—siblings jeering at each other, wives egging on their husbands.

Esme stared at the photo for some time, eventually reaching out to stroke the glass with a single finger. I tightened my hand on her hip and pressed my lips to her neck, saying nothing. When Esme spoke a moment later, she startled me.

"We're splitting up again."

It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I murmured. It was the last thing Jasper and I had discussed—we were far harder to trace as three young married couples than as one unconventional family. Esme and I would go wherever I could find work. We would suggest that Rosalie and Emmett move within a few hundred miles, but of course that would be up to them. And Jasper...

“We’re going to lose Jasper,” my wife whispered.

I closed my eyes and exhaled. Esme could read me as surely as Edward when she needed to.

“Yes,” I sighed. He hadn’t said as much, but there was no need for him to. Alice was his rock, his only tie to our family. It had been she who had seen them together and seen them with us, and while I knew he enjoyed our lifestyle, without Alice, there was nothing to hold him here.

Esme pulled away from my body. For a moment I stood frozen, unsure if she was angry. But a half-second later she was in the living room, sitting down on the couch next to Jasper. Without saying a word, she placed a hand on his knee. Jasper’s head bowed further over his hands in understanding of her gesture.

A sick feeling crawled back into the pit of my stomach as I watched her with our son. I’d hoped immortality would spare Esme the pain of ever losing a child again. Now, that pain was to intensify four times over. How soon would Jasper leave, I wondered. Would he be gone right away? Would he stay until we split from Rosalie and Emmett? And, most importantly, knowing what he did now, would he stay with this way of life that gave him more spiritual peace? I hoped he would. I hoped that somehow, some bit of the man I’d watched Jasper become over the half-century I’d known him would remain—that the bellicose vampire would permanently give way to the genteel philosopher who laughed easily and whose eyes sparked in the presence of his wife.

His wife who was at this very moment likely inches from her death.

Something gave way under my hand and I realized that I had accidentally squeezed a nickel-plated door handle into a twisted lump. Sighing, I relaxed my grip, pressing open the door to the place I hadn’t realized I’d been moving toward.

As in the rest of the house, a thick layer of dust had come to settle on the shelves in Edward’s room. The shelves themselves were mostly empty—Edward had insisted on leaving almost every one of his possessions in Forks, but Esme had wandered in and packed his music collection and stereo without his permission. The records, cassettes, and CDs were still sealed in their boxes in Ithaca.

Along the edges of the shelves sat Edward’s other possessions, lined up neatly according to date of acquisition. Edward kept items the way I kept words and artwork—as my art and my journals told the story of my life, so his collection of oddities told his. I recognized some of them—a sand fulgurite formed one night when he and Emmett were out hunting in a storm on

Lake Superior, a diamond heart that had once belonged to his mother. And there were things whose origin I did not know—an ordinary metal bottle cap, which sat on the end with the most recent items.

I picked this last item up, letting it catch the light of the sun streaming through the window. The words “Nantucket Nectars” were stamped into the top, but beyond that I had no clue as to its origin. There was so much about Edward’s mind, about what was important to him, that even after ninety years I still didn’t know. So much that I would never know.

Gripping the shelf with a shaking hand, I worked my way down it little by little. I picked up each item and turned it over in my hands, removing the dust and polishing each one with my sleeve. At the end of the shelf, my hand closed around a flat, silver prism. It was simple, with a finish worn by over a century’s worth of tarnish. But as I turned it over, I saw that the monogram carefully tooled there was almost as clear as it had been the day I had gone to recover this trinket from the intake desk at that hospital in Chicago: *E. A. M.* Edward Anthony Masen. Senior.

I had barely known Edward’s father. Although Elizabeth Masen’s was a face I was sure I would have remembered even without my mental capacity, her husband’s was merely one of thousands I saw that terrible fall. Edward resembled him only a little—the lines of Edward Senior’s jaw were carried in his son’s, and Edward shared his father’s height and lean figure. But the rest of Edward’s features came from his mother. She had spent far more time with him than had Edward Sr., taking him to piano lessons, seeing to it that his Latin and Greek were up to par. Edward did not remember his father well at all. But I had the crystal-clear memory of his mother asking for her husband’s effects, and her feeble stumbling to her son’s bedside as she laid them beside him.

“He will live,” she had told me matter-of-factly when I had kindly reminded her to go to bed. “He should have his father’s things.”

And so Edward did have—his father’s rings, his life savings, and the Tudor house on the north side of Chicago. And this lighter, which I had not known until now was among Edward’s collection here. In the early twentieth century, nearly all men had smoked, and a well-bred gentleman always carried a lighter to aid himself and his friends in their habits. That Edward Sr. had it in his possession when he died was not surprising.

Rotating the metal rectangle in my hand, I stared at it. Edward Masen had known nothing of what might become of his son. He had been delirious on admission and had never regained

enough consciousness even to know that his wife and son had also fallen ill. And then I had inherited the mantle worn by this man who was Edward's father in all the ways I couldn't be. I had raised Edward out of adolescence, shepherded him into adulthood, and walked him through a life he had never been meant to live. Yet, when it came down once again to this moment, I was as powerless as the febrile Masens had been to save their son.

My finger ran across the initials on the lighter. "I am so sorry," I whispered.

The bedroom did not answer.

The living room, however, did.

A shrill scream erupted from the direction of the staircase, followed by a choking sob. My ears registered the delicate timbre of my wife's voice at the same time that my feet carried me from the bedroom to the landing. There was a sickening boom as Emmett's solid frame collided with my own, and one of the stairwell windows cracked from the reverberation. All three of us slowing at once, Emmett, Rosalie, and I stared down from the landing into the living room below.

Esme was doubled over, her face buried in her palms and her shoulders shaking with such force that the feet of the couch rattled against the floor. My feet were moving me down the stairs before I registered Jasper's voice. The heels of his shoes clicked against the floor rapidly in time with his speech—he spoke high, quiet, and fast, but I could make out the questions he was firing at the person on the other end of the phone call. "How long? When? What happened? Is Bella okay?"

*Is Bella okay.*

My brain, even capacious as it was, struggled for a moment to process that statement. There was only one person who would know the answer to that question and that was—

"Alice?" It was Rosalie's astonished voice that finished my thought. Her hand rose to her mouth, and Emmett's comforting arms immediately closed on her midsection.

Jasper nodded hurriedly, still listening to his wife's voice—I could hear her now, too, in little bursts cut off by the inadequate speakers of Jasper's phone:

"She won't sleep....looks awful...Atlanta, then Seattle...Fourteen hours."

Fourteen hours.

I met Jasper's eyes carefully. He had only asked about Bella...

"All of them?" I said quietly, and he nodded.

*They're all fine*, he mouthed.

Something seemed to snap, or perhaps it was the world coming back together. For a moment I wasn't sure if I had fallen accidentally or on purpose. But when I found myself on my knees on the floor of our living room, I knew that my body had simply reacted as it had been trained to so many centuries before. And the words which came from my quivering lips were the deepest, simplest prayer:

"Thank you..."

Then my wife's gentle arms closed around my shoulders, and my body was subsumed along with my wife's by what I knew now to be sobs of joy.

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And like that, it was over.

When Alice said fourteen hours, I had expected it to be the slowest half-day of my existence. But it seemed like only minutes later that the five of us piled into Jasper's car and headed for Seattle. And so it was that almost half a year of gut-wrenching worry and two days of agonizing grief ended with three of us standing in a run-of-the-mill airport baggage claim at the break of dawn as though we were merely waiting for a few vacationers returning on the red-eye. Others milled sleepily around us, reacting unconsciously to our unusual appearance by giving us a wide berth. On any other day, our family would mimic their state, pretending as well as we could that we were just as tired, that we had awakened at the same ungodly early hour. But this morning, to do so was impossible. None of us made any attempt to mask our alertness as we stared deep into the hallway where the new arrivals appeared.

It felt strange to stand waiting. I found myself searching the faces of the people around me for some sign that they knew that my life had just changed. My whole being felt raw and exposed--as though I was wearing a sign on my chest that read, "My children almost died today." But no one seemed to notice. Some merely shuffled slowly through the line for the metal detectors, others stood half-asleep while they waited for luggage to tumble out onto the carousels.

Rosalie and Emmett had gone off to scour the parking garage for Alice's scent so as to find the Mercedes. Esme had been crestfallen at this decision, but when Rosalie had murmured to her that she didn't want to be the first person Edward and Bella laid eyes on, my wife had reluctantly agreed.

A few yards from Esme and me stood Jasper. His whole body was tense in anticipation, and his hands rolled themselves into fists and unrolled again at a pace almost too fast for the human eye. Every now and then I would see his eyes flicker to the huge LCD screen labeled “Arrivals” and search out the status of the 5:32 flight from Atlanta.

Suddenly, I saw Jasper’s shoulders relax, and my eyes flew to the board. Where a split-second before it had read “ON TIME” it now showed “ARRIVED.”

Esme started to shake in my arms, but she was smiling. “Darling, you have to calm down,” she whispered, and I realized that it was actually my trembling body that was shaking hers.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered back. “I just—” I just what? There weren’t words to describe this feeling. My son was going to walk down that hallway and back from the dead. For the second time in a century, I was being handed back this gift, as though I were a child being gently rebuked for misplacing a favorite toy. “This time, take better care of this,” the universe seemed to be saying.

I had every intention of doing so.

“Just be gentle,” my wife said quietly. “Don’t overreact. They’ve been through hell.”

For the first time in days the edges of my mouth turned up into a smile. “You mean to tell me that when all three of them appear over there, perfectly unscathed, there is a category of reaction that you would classify as ‘over’?”

Smiling, Esme kissed my cheek and whispered, “Well, it’s just that having several vampires barreling directly at her might not be so helpful for Bella right now.”

A tiny bubble of laughter escaped my lips.

“I can’t believe either of you can joke,” said Jasper under his breath, so that the humans around him couldn’t hear. His eyes remained fixed on the hallway through which passengers stumbled groggily toward waiting family, drivers, and the taxi pool. Nodding to Jasper, I, too, put my attention on the hall, but the smile still danced at the corners of my lips.

He was right. We had made jokes in the last six months, and we had laughed from time to time. We had teased each other. But it had rarely simply slipped out as it just had. Perhaps the world was truly righting itself. I rested a hand gently on Esme’s hip, and her own hand came across her body to lay on mine.

Then, among all the humans and their deodorant, their laundered and dry-cleaned clothes, their breath mints and hand sanitizer, I caught three distinct, and very familiar, scents. A sharp, sweet vampire perfume, almost like peppermint; beside it a human who smelled of sweat and tears and whose blood was tinged with something floral. And engulfing the human, the scent I knew best—earthiness and spice. Each of us smelled slightly different to the others, and I had once made the error of comparing Edward’s scent to nutmeg. He had refused to speak to me for several days afterward.

But nutmeg or no, it was the scent I caught now. Esme’s hand tightened over mine, and I squeezed her waist as our eyes searched anxiously through the throng which was pressing through the narrow hallway toward us.

I saw Edward’s hair first. It caught the fluorescent lights and I could see the shine of red amidst the light brown. His body was hunched over—to protect Bella, I realized.

I couldn’t see his face.

My throat closed, cutting off the cry threatening to rise. Every muscle in my body tensed, and the sounds of the baggage claim became one dull buzz in my ears. We all retained the fight-or-flight response after the change—if anything, it intensified many times over. My entire being focused with a strict intensity on the young man now walking slowly toward us.

I couldn’t see his face.

“Alice...” I heard from my left, and I vaguely registered the grace of the dark-haired woman as she broke through the throng and flitted to her husband’s side.

The crowd wouldn’t move away fast enough. They lumbered in a tight knot in front of Bella and Edward, obscuring both of them from my sight. I stared at the crown of his head, my body at alert, willing him to look at me, but he didn’t seem to hear me. The panic increased. Had Aro done something to him? Was he unable to hear me any longer? Terrified, my racing mind finally fell back to something far more primal:

*Edward!*

And, finally, he looked up.

In that instant, my world exploded. He was there. Not the wisps of memories I could barely grasp through my pain, but solid. Unharméd. Alive.

My *son*.



His eyes were pitch black, with deep purple circles beneath them. He looked exhausted and weakened, as though either of those were possible. His pale face was drawn downward, pain written in its lines. As he lumbered towards us, every minute of his hundred and four years of age showed itself in his gait.

Bella stood wrapped in his arms, shuffling slowly forward as they approached, half-asleep but seeming content. However, as Edward bent repeatedly to press his lips to her head, no smile appeared on his face.

He was still in pain.

Six months of agony, his and mine, both, and here he was, standing before us with Bella, unhurt, in his arms. And everything about his sad expression, the way his shoulders slumped, the slight tremor in his arms as they kept a firm hold on the girl who had so changed his life—everything screamed that nothing had changed from that cool October morning when I had found him lying lifeless on the couch.

Whatever it was that he had been through, Edward was still hurting.

His head rose again and he met my eyes, blinking once.

“Don’t.”

It was a whisper, just barely loud enough for me to hear, but his raspy, tired voice was enough to arrest any forward motion I might make. His eyes cast themselves downward once more as he trudged forward a few more steps.

My breath caught. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. They were supposed to rush at us, and we at them—we would embrace and kiss, and try to look as though we were capable of shedding the tears that should accompany such a joyous homecoming. I wasn’t supposed to be standing here, frozen, while Edward stood only feet from me—alive, well, but avoiding my eyes.

Esme didn’t seem to notice. Ignoring Edward’s expression and demeanor, she began to fuss over them both. I watched numbly as she threw her arms first around Bella, then around Edward, thanking Bella and chastising our son. When Esme meaningfully jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow, I heard myself mumble some noncommittal platitude in Bella and Edward’s direction. My gaze, however, did not waver from my son’s despondent face.

I put out a hand to rest it on his shoulder, but just as I did, he was suddenly rushed away from me. Esme had wrapped her arms awkwardly around Bella and begun to march her toward

the sliding glass doors. Edward did not loose his grip on Bella's body, and so he walked swiftly beside her. Bella stumbled sleepily along between them both.

The three of them moved hurriedly down the wide expanse of the baggage claim area and disappeared into the dim orange haze of the parking garage, the automatic doors hissing closed behind them. For a moment, I stared blankly at the spot where they had vanished.

Then I closed my still-outstretched hand, shoved it into my pocket, and followed.

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The decision to move to Forks had always been a sound one, as the degree to which we were all able to move about during the daylight hours made all our lives seem almost normal. That I was now standing outside this little white house in the middle of the day bordered on a miracle.

That I was about to climb through the bedroom window of the police chief's eighteen-year-old daughter bordered on lunacy.

By the time I had reached the parking garage at the airport, arrangements were already being made for Edward and Bella to ride with Rosalie and Emmett, and it had taken a fair amount of force from Esme to move me toward Jasper's car. Naturally, as soon as Rosalie had informed me of Edward's whereabouts, I had come after him.

Now I stood beneath the huge spruce that grew directly outside Bella's window. Edward's scent was strong here—for some reason, he had needed to use this particular entrance to Bella's room not long ago.

I sighed. *Carlisle, you could be arrested for this.*

Well, it would be grist for the gossip mill, at least.

I leapt, causing the tree to tremble as I sprang into its branches. The jump felt odd—I rarely allowed myself to move to the fullest extent of my abilities unless I was hunting. Springing twenty feet into the air was an unusual occurrence for me.

Settling on a branch that led toward the window, I walked along it until I came within a few feet of the sill. Edward was inside—I could hear his breathing, which hitched when he heard me spring.

Less than a second later, the sash flew open.

"Carlisle?"

I crouched on the branch, bringing myself face-to-face with my son. His eyes were still as dark as they had been—he clearly had not left the house in the few hours since we’d all returned.

“Hi,” I offered.

He didn’t respond.

“May I come in?” I asked quietly.

Edward backed up a few feet and gestured toward the room. I swung my body through the window—it was a tight fit; Edward was of a slighter build than I—and landed quietly on the weathered wood floor.

For a moment, we stared at each other. Edward’s new shirt was rumpled from the flight, and his hair was tousled and filthy. As I started to contemplate ways to convince him to return to the house for warm bath and fresh clothing, he cut me off.

“What are you doing here?”

I recalled the painful image of him at the airport six hours ago—his eyes dark, his gait slow, his shoulders slumped.

“I needed to talk to you.”

He winced, then fired back, “Why didn’t you come in the front door?”

“I didn’t want to have to break the lock.” Remembering the strength of Edward’s scent on the tree and the windowsill, I added, “And you came in the window because...?”

His gaze dropped to the floor. “Charlie threw me out. He’s afraid I’ll hurt her.” He drifted backwards toward the bed, where Bella, still fully clothed except for her shoes, lay tangled in the bedclothes, her hair fanned out over the scrunched-up pillow. He ran a hand over her head, stroking her hair out of her face.

“He’s right,” Edward mumbled a moment later.

“Charlie?”

He nodded, not taking his eyes off Bella’s face. “I’ll hurt her,” he croaked. “He knows I’ll hurt her.” His lips trembled as he kissed her forehead.

Yet the fact that he was sitting here next to her, as thirsty as I knew he must be, said something very different. I moved toward the bed and gestured to the empty space next to him. “May I?”

He shrugged, and I sat down. The old bedsprings creaked, and for a moment Bella’s body shifted toward both of ours, pulled downward by my weight. Edward reached with one arm and

moved her into a more comfortable position, pressing his lips against her jugular as he did so. I felt a sense of awe. I had forgotten this, how comfortable he was with her. I had been so worried at first; we all had been. For as Rosalie put it, we had left rumors behind before, but not eyewitnesses. If he slipped—and at first, Alice’s visions had not been clear—we would all be in danger.

And yet now—after Phoenix, after he had tasted her blood and still left her alive and human—now it was almost impossible to remember a time when the chance of Edward hurting Bella had even been on the table.

My son gulped, his face screwing into an expression of sheer agony. “I could never hurt her that way,” he whispered. “I would *die* if she were hurt.”

At Edward’s words, Jasper’s face swam before me. His expression was resolute and his voice dispassionate, laying down the facts as though we were going off into battle. “*Alice saw Edward before the Volturi. He’s planning to ask them to kill him.*” And then there was screaming...

Edward’s head snapped up. His jaw had gone slack and his lips were slightly parted. He blinked a few times as he stared at me.

“About that,” I managed to choke, and the bedsprings suddenly recoiled beneath me as Edward launched himself to a standing position. He stalked to the window and dropped his forehead against it with a loud thunk.

“Edward,” I began, but he cut me off with a look that was equal parts fire and pain.

“Don’t you think I know?” he whispered forcefully. “Her, you, Esme, Jasper—don’t you think I know what I’ve done?” His hand balled into a fist at his side. “I almost *killed* her! And even if I hadn’t, I left her here! With *werewolves* and Victoria...” He shook his head in disgust. “And as if that wasn’t enough, she and Alice almost *died*, and now—”

There was a loud crack as a chunk of the windowsill he was clutching snapped off beneath his fingers. Bella stirred, mumbling something about grand theft auto.

Edward dropped the piece of wood to the floor and looked away.

On the car ride home, Alice had talked us through all she’d found out in Forks and Italy. Esme and I, of course, remembered the werewolves. Someone like Ephraim Black did not get lost among centuries of memories. A statuesque young man just barely out of his teens, he had been one of the most striking humans I had ever laid eyes on. But what had impressed me more

was his devotion to his family, his pack, and by extension, his tribe. I had been exposed to the culture of the Indians only by anecdote, and the picture painted in the years of settling the West had been anything but good. It still embarrassed me to admit that I had been surprised to find that the Quileutes were men of integrity, peace, and loyalty. And it had been this which had finally brought us to agreement after many failed attempts and my own family's near-destruction; there was something about our family and our ties to one another that had resonated with Ephraim's own sensibilities. We would be granted our part of the land in Forks, provided we abided by our diet, and more importantly, provided I was in charge. For however long we, too, lived in peace under a strong leader, we had the tribe's permission to stay.

Now the werewolves were back, and there was no treaty which bound Victoria. I understood my son's worry.

Edward's teeth ground together as he channeled this last thought, and I looked up to where he stood at the window.

"No matter what I do, she isn't *safe*," he spat, a little too loudly. Bella rolled over, her fist clenching over her pillow.

"Edward," she mumbled.

He turned to look at her, his face still drawn downward. Her face scrunched again, and she mumbled something about Italy. For a long moment we both stared at her, at the little streaks of daylight that filtered through the yellowed lace curtains and danced across her face and body as the clouds moved outside. Her sleep seemed at the same time both peaceful and troubled, as though she was fighting to recover from her ordeal and yet reliving it at the same time.

"She won't talk to me," Edward finally said. "The whole way back—she won't talk to me. I don't know what she's thinking. I don't know if she wants me. I don't know if I've hurt her so badly it can't be fixed..." His hands formed themselves into fists at his side. He was trembling, his jaw working frantically, even though no words were coming out. I knew this expression, the moment at which his anger with himself teetered on the verge of a tempest.

Timidly, I stood. "Son—"

Before I could move forward, however, Edward had thrust his hands out in front of himself. He turned his head ever so slightly, so that he was staring out the window instead of at me. A spring breeze pushed the branches of the spruce so that they swayed back and forth slowly. I watched them as I heard Edward begin to speak.

“I was coming back,” he said, his voice flat and eerily detached. “When Rosalie called. I had just picked up the phone to get a flight back to Washington. I couldn’t stay there any longer. I wasn’t surviving without her.”

That explained his terrible appearance. I found myself imagining the lifeless being I’d encountered in October, lying not on his couch in Ithaca, but on a bed in Brazil...

“We were coming to get you,” I heard myself answer. “Esme and I. We had decided that we were going to Brazil before we came back to Tanya’s and got the news.” For a fraction of a second I remembered the terror of walking up to the doorstep, not knowing why the house sat silent. And then the memory of Jasper’s news resurfaced.

Edward’s gaze shifted over to the small bed and the girl lying in it. “I can’t live without her,” he said, his voice sounding strangely hoarse. “I *had* to go.”

I swallowed, closing my eyes for a brief moment. Edward and I were alike in many, many ways. In fact, I frequently marveled at how, given the short time I had known him, I possibly could have selected a companion who was so like myself. But this was one area in which my years changed my outlook in a way that my son couldn’t appreciate. For a moment, the little bedroom in Forks disappeared, and I felt again the rush of the wind as I’d tumbled off the cliffs at Dover, shattering not my body but the boulders beneath me when I’d hit ground. Then I recalled the weight of the anvil-filled trunk tugging my body down beneath the English Channel. I’d sat there on the bottom, sucking water in and out of my lungs and praying I would drown before for roughly five hours before I’d given up.

“I know what it is to want to die, Edward.”

No answer came. Perhaps he had forgotten in the mess of this, and in his own emotions, that he was the son of two would-be suicides. It was not a moment I was proud of, although I was glad to have been strong enough to try to take my own life before I took a human’s. But all that had been before I’d discovered a way to live, and others worth living for.

“Yes, but you don’t have to worry about losing the people you love,” he said, his lip curling in response to my thought. “My *world* came to an end when I thought she was gone.”

His shoulders slumped as he stared over at the bed. Three days ago, I would have agreed with him. I hadn’t had to worry—I had been arrogant enough to think exactly this, even as I consoled hundreds of grieving parents over the losses of their children. But now I knew all too

well what it was like to stand helplessly by, knowing your child was on his way to a certain death. The pain gripped me again now, even standing feet away from him.

“Edward,” I managed, “are you really so naïve as to think there is no one who feels that way about *you*?” And stupidly, too abruptly, I moved toward him.

My son stepped back and growled.

The sound reverberated in the little room, and my feet seemed to be cemented to the wooden floor. As though there was any man-made substance that could hold them there.

But it was enough. Edward’s growl pulled me back to another, uttered on a crisp October morning in Ithaca, when I had suddenly found myself prepared to attack the woman I loved. Edward’s body became my body, his growl became my growl. And suddenly, standing there in the dim bedroom, watching Edward’s heaving silhouette illuminated by a halo of muted daylight from the window, I understood. This wasn’t anger.

It was fear.

Edward feared losing Bella. I feared losing him. And we both had fallen victim to these anxieties, letting them drive us away from the people we loved, instead of toward the one we didn’t want to lose. For a brief moment, I allowed the last six months to flash before me: my fight with Esme, Rosalie’s accusations of my absence, Jasper’s quiet company, Alice pondering her history at my side, Emmett’s hug. I relayed these things to my son, letting him in on the life he’d missed, on the things had brought me here.

And finally, I showed Edward a dark-haired boy, laughing—with me when he could, at me when I needed it. The memory of the moment just hours before he had breathed his last, when I had asked him if he was afraid—and he had answered he was. Then he had squeezed my hand, declared me an angel, and quietly slipped away. A fifteen-year-old, who lived and died in the presence of the fear of losing everything, and his parents who thanked me even though their own worst fears had come to fruition.

I was a fool.

A teenager, and a young teenager at that, had known better how to live his short life than I had, even with my centuries of experience. And Edward, guided by my injudicious permissiveness, knew even less than I.

I had nearly lost Edward; I had nearly lost myself. Tanya’s words returned to me—had it really only been a few days ago that we’d talked? “*He needs you to show him the way.*” It had

taken six months—really, it had taken eighty-seven years—but I was ready to step up to that plate.

Edward saw my intention to move toward him, and his teeth bared. Instinct overrode his mind, and he dove at me—exactly as I had intended.

When my arms closed around him, the world shifted as surely as though Jasper had just stepped into the room. My mind finally accepted what my eyes had been trying to tell it for hours—that my son was real, that he was whole. This one, the one I had chosen first, the oldest and youngest member of my unorthodox little family, had been returned to me, intact. Edward's body began to shake violently as soon as it came in contact with mine, and mine trembled in answer. It had been decades since we'd cried together—I cried rarely, Edward even more so. The last I could remember had been that rainy night in Vermont, when Esme and I had thrown our arms around our prodigal son and welcomed him home with open arms.

And now that moment repeated itself, three thousand miles and eight decades away, in the little bedroom of the girl who had changed Edward's life forever. In the shadows cast by the cloud-covered sky and the drawn curtains, Edward and I stood, father, son, brothers, the chosen companion and the one who'd chosen. Two broken men, brought together by our all-too-similar faults.

"I'm sorry, Carlisle," Edward finally choked. "I'm so sorry. For everything."

Lifting my hands from his back, I placed them on his temples, tipping his forehead toward me. "It's alright, Edward," I whispered, brushing my lips against his brow. "You are forgiven, son. Always." I swallowed once, and added, "I love you, son."

A strangled noise came from Edward, and it was a moment before he answered, "I love you too, Carlisle."

Behind us, the bed creaked once more. Bella thrashed violently, and for a moment I worried she would awaken and catch me standing here. But then she turned back onto her stomach, clenched her fist again, and mumbled, "Love..."

We both turned to look at her as deep sleep overtook the features of her face. "You know, I think she may be smarter than you," I teased, when we were both sure she was still asleep.

Edward nodded slowly, breaking from my arms and returning to the bed. He gazed down at the sleeping form of his mate, and then ran a hand over her cheek, tucking a wisp of hair behind her ear.



“I know that she is,” he whispered.

And at last, I saw him smile.

## Chapter 18: The Greatest of These

As far as I could remember, I had never particularly cared for nature as a child. Chicago was big, noisy, and exciting. I had liked the Christmas displays on Michigan Avenue, the alleyways, the cars. But the outdoors were a part of my being now in a way they never had been in my human life. The forest floor felt like the thickest carpet when I ran across it, and patterns of trees and underbrush that would befuddle a human hiker, were as clear to me as street signs.

Forks was nestled within the Olympic National Forest and boasted some of the oldest growth trees in the continental United States. Purportedly one could see the outline of the National Park from space, so visible were the protected old-growth trees that grew within it. Our home here was within mere miles of the mountain range—close enough that even a human could hike there without difficulty, and just a stroll away for us. It was probably the most beautiful place we'd ever settled, and it would forever have special meaning to me. It would always be the place where I finally found love.

Bella's breath whooshed against my neck as I ran, a comforting pulse that seemed to replace the one I no longer had. It gave me something to focus on, instead of the anxiety gnawing at the pit of my stomach. I didn't want to think about *why* we were running toward my home, and so I focused on the steady rhythm of ingress and egress, the expansion of the delicate ribcage against my back, the brush of warm air against my skin. As we drew nearer to the house, her breath became her warm lips, nestling a kiss deep into the join of my neck and shoulder.

It was all I could do not to throw her to the ground and begin kissing her at once. "Thank you," I said coolly. "Does that mean you've decided you're awake?"

She laughed. The sound was musical, perfect, but all too short, and left me aching. "Not really," she said. "More that, either way, I'm not trying to wake up. Not tonight."

I might have laughed had it not been so painful an ordeal to get here in the first place.

When Bella had awoken, it had taken me a good ten minutes to even convince her that she wasn't having a hallucination. I found that, annoying as it was, I had missed her obstinacy. Although even I had to admit, were it not the fact that I was completely unable to sleep, I might have doubted the existence of the warm skin and beating heart that were now pressed to my back.

It was fair for her to doubt me. I deserved it. After what I had told her—it only made sense that she would believe that I loathed her. I wished now that it were different, that I had chosen some other way.

But it was a deed I would never undo. That she could still doubt my love, even riding on my back once again toward the house where we had spent such a happy summer, was unbearable.

In her bedroom, a few hours earlier, she had asked of my motivations, and it had been the utterance of a single phrase that had brought me to pieces. I had told her that I had gone to the Volturi because she was dead, assuming she would see at once that without her, my world was filled with a sucking black void, inescapable, ready to consume me and all the joy around me.

Her response had been horrifyingly nonchalant: “So what if I *was* dead?”

She might just as easily have shoved a broadsword through my middle. For a moment, the image from the Italian piazza flooded my memory—Bella’s body, broken, bleeding, fading away as I tried to touch it. The air was suddenly thinner. The very idea of her dead, now that I had truly confronted the possibility—it made me shudder. But her words brought back another memory as well—six months and one week ago, when that awful expression had crossed her face in the woods behind the little white house where we both now lay. “*I don’t want you to come with me....You’re not good for me....It will be as if I’d never existed.*” The words clawed at me now, threatening to rip me apart from the inside as they had in Ithaca, in San Francisco, in New Orleans, in Brazil. She had believed me then, and she still believed the lie now.

“Don’t you remember anything I told you before?” My voice sounded funny, high. Pleading, like a little boy’s.

“I remember *everything* that you told me.”

I didn’t miss her emphasis. With a single finger, I reached out and traced the line of her lower lip. To my pleasure, she did not recoil, and so I went on. “Bella, you seem to be under a misapprehension. I thought I’d explained it clearly before. I can’t live in a world where you don’t exist.”

It was Aro’s voice this time that came to my ears. “*And so you wish to be destroyed.*” Of course I did. There was no world for me without this brown-haired woman in it.

Bella’s answer was halting. “I am...confused.”

“I’m a good liar, Bella. I have to be.”

I realized at once it was the wrong thing to say. Her whole body seized as though she was expecting me to hit her, and her eyes darted toward the window. Unthinkingly, my hand shot to her shoulder, shaking it. “Let me finish!” At least if she heard me out before she told me she never wanted to see my face again, I could leave knowing for certain that I would not be granted her forgiveness for this most heinous of my sins. “I’m a good liar,” I continued, “but still, for you to believe me so quickly, that was”—*like being knifed into small pieces*—“excruciating. When we were in the forest, when I was telling you goodbye, you weren’t going to let go. I could see that. I didn’t want to do it—it felt like it would kill me to do it—but I knew that if I couldn’t convince you that I didn’t love you anymore, it would just take you that much longer to get on with your life. I hoped that, if you thought *I’d* moved on, so would you.”

“A clean break,” she whispered, and I winced as my words returned to haunt me from her lips. A clean break, to let her move on even while I remained stagnate as ever, gradually losing my ability to reason and function. I told her the lie so that she would be so gloriously human and forget me, leave me behind in the dust where I’d always belonged. But that she’d believed it so quickly, and for so long!

“Exactly,” I said quietly. “But I never imagined it would be so easy to do. I thought it would be next to impossible—that you would be so sure of the truth that I would have to lie through my teeth for hours to even plant the seed of doubt in your head.

“I lied. I lied, and I’m so sorry—sorry because I hurt you, sorry because it was a worthless effort. Sorry that I couldn’t protect you from what I am. I lied to save you, and it didn’t work. I’m sorry!”

My breath shook as I remembered her confused, hurt face. “*You ... don’t ... want ... me?*” she’d said, and the words stung just as hard now as they had six months ago. I had to tell her the truth, to make her understand it for herself before I left once more; I had to at least *see* if she could forgive me. The words were out of my own mouth before I could stop them, fast, rapid, the cry of a desperate man.

“But how could you *believe* me? After all the thousand times I’ve told you I love you, how could you let one word break your faith in me? I could see it in your eyes, that you honestly *believed* that I didn’t want you anymore. The most absurd, ridiculous concept—as if there were any way that *I* could exist without needing *you!*” My hand went to her shoulder again. “Bella, really, what were you thinking?!”

To my horror, she began to cry. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down over her cheeks, leaving tracks through the thin layer of sweat and oil that had accumulated as she'd slept. I felt my own body seize again, readying itself to move as soon as she told me to get out. If she wanted me gone, then I would go—where, I didn't know, but I would disappear to the ends of the Earth if she commanded it. When I saw her lips part, I winced in anticipation of her words.

"I knew it," she sobbed. "*I knew* I was dreaming."

Were it not so gravely important, her obstinacy might have been funny. "You're impossible. How can I put this so that you'll believe me? You're not asleep, and you're not dead. I'm here, and I love you. *I have* always loved you, and *I will* always love you. I was thinking of you, seeing your face in my mind, every second that I was away." It sounded so simple in my head, so irrefutable, so empirical. "When I told you that I didn't want you, it was the very blackest kind of blasphemy."

The tears continued to fall, racing down her cheek and dripping onto the bedclothes in dark splotches. She was still cringing away from me, her body tense as she looked up into my eyes with utter disbelief.

"You don't believe me, do you?" I whispered. "Why can you believe the lie, but not the truth?" For so long I had told her again and again that she was my salvation, my rescue from ninety years of despair, the very center of my bleak existence. And yet one lie had broken that between us forever, because it was the lie that would linger, instead of the truth.

I was never going to make this right.

"It never made sense for you to love me," she said matter-of-factly. "I always knew that."

I blinked and felt my face tighten. Of course, Bella wouldn't see it that way. How many times had we talked last spring, over the summer, into the early fall, when she continually told me how unworthy of my love she was? She had never understood.

There was, of course, the possibility that she never would.

I didn't know what to say any longer. If she wouldn't believe my words, what would she believe? I had already apologized; I had already explained. And still, she wasn't budging, obstinately refusing to believe my presence and my contrition both.

I needed a plan B. And I needed it now.

My hands were on the sides of her face before I'd really thought to put them there. "I'll prove you're awake." *At least that will be* something.

She struggled. For a second, my hands lingered there before my heart registered what my fingertips were telling it. I could almost feel it beginning to fall to pieces before Bella gave it the final tap:

“Please don’t.”

I froze. It had been less than a day since I had uttered that exact word—not to Bella, but to Carlisle, as his thoughts had turned to my safety in the baggage claim at SeaTac. *Don’t*. Don’t move forward, don’t comfort me, don’t welcome me. The ache of having almost lost Bella was still cutting me wide open, and I wasn’t ready for anything Carlisle had to offer. And now here were my own words, back to haunt me, digging the same deep hole in my heart that I knew they had dug in my father’s. *Please don’t*.

“Why not?”

“When I wake up”—I just barely moved to answer when she corrected herself—“okay, forget that one—when you leave again, it’s going to be hard enough without this, too.”

The flight home came back to me at once. Stroking her arms, her face, her shoulders. She’d flinched each time I even came near—not so much that a human would notice, probably not enough that *she* noticed, but I’d seen it nevertheless.

I sat back a little. “Yesterday, when I would touch you, you were so hesitant, so careful, and yet, still the same. I need to know why.”

But that way was barred. *Please don’t*.

“Is it because I’m too late? Because I’ve hurt you too much? Because you *have* moved on, as I meant for you to? That would be”—the worst kind of pain imaginable; the end of my world—“quite fair.” I gulped. “I won’t contest your decision. So don’t try to spare my feelings, please—just tell me now, whether or not you can still love me, after everything I’ve done to you. Can you?”

She frowned at me, and for a moment, time stopped as I awaited her response. Again, I studied the features I had missed—the subtle curve of her cheekbones, the slight irregularity of the shape of her nose, the dusting of freckles she insisted didn’t exist. Her face had taken on a ghastly cast in the green glow of her alarm clock—she looked ill. It would make sense if she were, after all I’d put her through. I waited, tense, for the answer I expected. *Of course it was too much. How dare you do this to me? I don’t ever want to see you again.* After what seemed a decade had passed, her lips moved.

“What kind of an idiotic question is that?”

*Come again?* For the second time in only a handful of minutes, I found myself unsure of my footing. *I ask the gravest of questions, and she calls it “idiotic?”*

“Just answer it. Please?” *Or I might explode.*

Another long moment stretched as her heart thrummed and the alarm clock whirled. I didn’t move, afraid that somehow, the slightest motion would set her off, cause her to answer this question differently than she otherwise might. I couldn’t risk it.

She was still frowning. “The way I feel about you will never change. Of course I love you—and there’s nothing you can do about it!”

There weren’t gods enough to thank. The words barely got out of my mouth—“That’s all I needed to hear”—before my lips were on hers. My body remembered her as easily as my mind did—it shaped itself to her, knowing without any conscious thought on my part exactly how much was too much, exactly when and where it could exert no more pressure. Her fingers searched the planes of my face hungrily, and mine did the same to hers. Her name sounded again and again in the stillness, and it took me a few iterations to recognize the whispers were coming from me.

Finally she pulled away, and I took that as my cue. I slid down her chest and laid my head against her breast, my ear pressed to her skin. I was at once calmed by the familiar sound of her too-enticing blood as it rushed from atria into ventricles, accompanied by the rhythmic closing first of mitral and tricuspid, then aortic and pulmonary valves, each moving in perfect synchrony with the others. For a moment I had lost myself once more in the gentle pulse I had been certain I would never hear again.

“By the way,” I had told the darkness. “I’m not leaving you.” For as long as this heart would beat for me, I would stay glued to it.

That heart beat against my back now as we ran, as though somehow my exertion caused her to be short of breath. I felt its every pulse, my skin sensitive enough to detect the motion of the individual muscles beneath her breast. Listening to it made me calm and anxious at once, for I knew that despite its nearness, I had yet to win it back.

“I’ll earn your trust back, somehow,” I muttered, my feet slowing as I saw the faint light of my home in the distance. “If it’s my final act.”

“I trust *you*,” Bella said, her breath caressing my neck and chin once more. “It’s me I don’t trust.”

Trust herself about what? I frowned. “Explain that, please.”

“Well,” she began, and it was an agonizing few seconds before she continued. “I don’t trust myself to be...enough. To deserve you. There’s nothing about me that could *hold* you.”

Nothing that could hold me? I blinked in the darkness. I could never give this up again. Her hold on me was so strong, I could scarcely survive in her absence. Slowing to a stop, I pulled her from her from my back and against my breastbone in a single motion. I missed this—the feel of her body against my own. I would never voluntarily give it up again.

“Your hold is permanent and unbreakable,” I whispered to her. “Never doubt that.” But of course, she would.

Because of me.

“You never did tell me...” I began, but stopped myself. Perhaps it was something she wished to keep, although I burned to know the answer to the question I had asked her just a short while before.

“What?”

“What your greatest problem is,” I said quietly, finishing the sentence I’d begun. The Volturi. Then Victoria. Then the werewolves. I remembered so clearly the order in which Bella ranked the evils which faced her, when we had been alone in the bedroom.

“I’ve got bigger problems than Victoria,” she’d told me, and when I’d pressed, she had revealed only that she considered the Italian brothers above Victoria. It only made sense that Bella, who had never fully understood the dangers of our kind, would rank someone who was actively trying to make sure her life ended *behind* the threat of the men in Italy who probably wouldn’t recall her promise for at least a decade.

But she still hadn’t told me what she considered her biggest threat to be. I had to know, but I wasn’t all that sure I wanted to.

She sighed, her eyes searching mine in the darkness, but said nothing, her heart hammering. I was almost going to beg when after a long moment, her finger reached up to stroke the tip of my nose. “I’ll give you one guess.”



My gut twisted, but I found myself nodding. It was deserved. “I’m worse than the Volturi. I guess I’ve earned that,” I said, and my voice cracked as I steeled myself for her inevitable response.

To my surprise, she didn’t begin yelling. “The worst the Volturi can do is kill me,” she answered quietly. I stared at her, puzzled. I wouldn’t kill her—I wouldn’t put her in danger. Hadn’t that been the whole point? She took a moment to study my expression and then added, “You can leave me. The Volturi, Victoria...they’re nothing compared to that.”

Once again the monster returned, rending my insides as though they were the softest butter. It took all I had to keep myself standing upright. The pain must have registered on my face because Bella’s hand shot out, the warm pads of her fingers caressing my cheekbones.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “Don’t be sad.”

How could I not be sad? Every moment we spent together, my despair grew. I would never convince her that I would stay at her side forever, now. *You made a grave mistake, Edward*, the voice told me. *She’s right not to trust you.*

But I wanted it, nevertheless. “If there was only some way to make you see that I *can’t* leave you,” I whispered, and my voice sounded hard, frustrated. “Time, I suppose, will be the only way to convince you.”

A brief flicker of hope passed her face. “Okay.”

We continued on for a few moments, the warm glow of the light from the house growing brighter, although we were still too far out for Bella’s weak human eyes to see it.

“So,” she said after several minutes, “since you’re staying, can I have my stuff back?”

Her things. It figured—she had probably never even gone looking for them. I chuckled, remembering how easily the worn floorboards in her bedroom had pried upward under my fingertips. “Your things were never gone,” I explained. “I knew it was wrong, since I promised you peace without reminders. It was stupid and childish, but I wanted to leave something of myself with you. The CD, the pictures, the tickets—they’re all under your floorboards.”

Bella’s face absolutely lit up, her lips turning upward in an expression of sheer joy. “*Really?*” I found myself smiling.

She studied my face for a long moment, and I wondered how much of my expression she could see in the darkness. Finally, she spoke.

“I think...I’m not sure, but I wonder...I think maybe I knew it the whole time.”

Knew what? “What did you know?”

“Some part of me, my subconscious maybe, never stopped believing that you still cared whether I lived or died. That’s probably why I was hearing the voices.”

What? “Voices?”

“Well, just one voice,” she said quickly. “Yours. It’s a long story.” Her eyes darted back and forth, as though I were pressing for something she didn’t wish to reveal.

“I’ve got time,” I answered evenly.

“It’s pretty pathetic.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Do you remember what Alice said about extreme sports?”

*“In summary, she did jump off a cliff, but she wasn’t trying to kill herself,”* my sister’s voice said. *“Bella’s all about the extreme sports these days.”*

My voice was flat. “You jumped off a cliff for fun.”

She looked uncomfortable. “Er, right. And before that, with the motorcycle—”

“Motorcycle?” I had never before seen Bella on even a bicycle, and had long since chalked this up to her general lack of balance. To think of her on two wheels that were powered not by her feet, but by an engine—I shuddered.

“I guess I didn’t tell Alice about that part.”

“No.”

Her bottom lip curled itself under her top teeth as she shot me another look of discomfort. “Well, about that,” she hemmed. “See, I found that...when I was doing something dangerous or stupid...I...could remember you more clearly.”

My jaw dropped. She kept talking, but her voice became a dull buzz as my midsection tried valiantly to rip itself in two. Not only had I left her in pain, not only had I dragged her into being hunted by one of the most vicious of my kind, but I had driven her to a madness where she’d played with fire in order to fantasize about my *voice*?

She had stopped talking, now, and was gazing expectantly up at me. I opened my lips, but for a moment, no sound came out. When it did, it was strained and high.

“You...were...risking your life...to hear—”

“Shh,” she interrupted me. “Hold on a second. I think I’m having an epiphany here.”

Bella said nothing, gazing up into my face intently. Her eyes seemed to be studying mine, as though she might figure out some deep truth of the universe by staring into their blackness. I braced myself.

*You're not worth it, Edward.*

*How could you do this to me?*

*Do you realize how much danger I've been in because of you?*

And of course I did. I knew all of this. She had never known how dangerous for her my attraction was—she had not been inside my head that day in Biology when one instant of lost control might have resulted in her gory death. The dynamic had never changed. Perhaps now she finally recognized it for what it truly was.

I hung my head, waiting for her outburst.

“Oh!” she cried, jumping back a little as though my movement had startled her.

“Bella?” My hand shot out automatically to steady her shoulder.

She took a breath, still looking puzzled. “Oh. Okay. I see,” she said, her voice strangely distant.

“Your epiphany?”

For a long moment, she said nothing. Her brow was still furrowed, her eyes still darting back and forth as they studied mine. The intake of breath drew strands of her hair toward her face, and her shoulders rose as she prepared to speak.

“You love me,” she said at last.

A smile found its way to my face, even as I struggled to reconcile the words she had just spoken with the ones I had expected. Not “go away” or “you’ve hurt me,” but three words which right now carried far more weight than they would if they were turned the other way. Because *this* was what I worried she might never see again. This was what I should have shattered; this was the trust that should have fallen the moment those terrible lies had fallen from my lips.

But Bella, my Bella, the owner of my heart, saw fit to see past the lie. To accept the apology that I was trying to give with every breath and motion. It was more, so much more, than I could ever deserve. And I would spend the rest of my eternal life proving to her that it was an absolution that was not misplaced.

*You love me.*

“Truly, I do,” I answered, and pressed her lips to mine.

It was a little strange to see lights blazing in our home. Carlisle was the only one who turned on lights out of habit, both due to the necessities of passing easily among humans at work, and because even after well over a century, he was still a little fascinated by the omnipresence of electricity. One afternoon a few years ago, I'd caught him huddled over the desk in his study, rolling a compact fluorescent bulb back and forth between his fingers as his mind waded slowly through vignettes of a life lived mostly by candlelight.

My father sat now just off to the side of his usual place at the head of the table, light playing across his face from the chandelier that he had turned on only for Bella's benefit. Carlisle was not a leader who demanded his authority—the head of the table was his place by our deference, not his insistence, and he had ceded the position to Bella at once when she'd announced her plans. It wasn't often that we used the table for anything more than the occasional chess game or to spread out one of Esme's jigsaw puzzles. In fact, the last time I could remember that we had all gathered here had been the afternoon that I had saved Bella from Tyler Crowley's van.

The irony that we were once again assembled for the purpose of democratically debating her death did not escape me.

I had mistakenly thought that we were making progress there in the darkness of her bedroom. She had finally allowed me to kiss her—it seemed we were making up for lost ground, and lost time. And then I had stupidly mentioned *thirty*.

To Bella, who thought nineteen was tantamount to senior citizenship, thirty was unbearable.

When she'd pushed my arms away, for a moment my whole being had broken, waiting for her to tell me that she couldn't love me if I wasn't willing to put her body and soul to death. But she hadn't. She'd resolutely gathered her things...and invited me along.

"You're extremely opinionated," she had said, "and I'm sure you'll want a change to air your views."

I'd asked her on what.

"My mortality," she'd said, as coolly as though she was asking about which ice cream flavor she planned to order. "I'm putting it to a vote."

And so now here we were, at the long mahogany table. The Cullen Family Conference Room. My siblings and my parents had filled in their usual places around the table, each with his or her mate. Esme's delicate thumb traced circles over the back of Carlisle's hand. Jasper's hand rested on his wife's jiggling knee. Emmett and Rosalie simply looked perplexed, although I saw Rosalie give Bella a tentative smile.

Bella's heart hammered. I couldn't blame her. I was a little on edge myself.

*Edward looks pained, came Carlisle's thoughts. I wonder if I ought to offer to talk through this privately with them.*

Slowly, I shook my head just enough so that he would see it. He acknowledged me with a gentle gaze, shifting his weight more deeply into his chair. For the first time, the table was full—the eighth chair which usually sat empty was now occupied, and Carlisle now nodded to Bella where she sat at my side.

"The floor is yours," he said.

Bella gulped, and instinctively, I slid my hand into hers. Her palm against mine felt like fire. It had taken me months to get used to the heat of her body the first time, and I was strangely happy to find that it would take time for me to readjust.

She didn't pull it away, and for that I was deeply grateful.

"Well," she began. "I'm hoping Alice has already told you everything that happened in Volterra?"

"Everything," answered my sister, and I closed my eyes as the onslaught of images poured from my family members' minds. Alice's, of course, were simply memories, but the remainder ranged from Emmett's apparent fantasy that I had taken on the entire Volturi guard single-handedly to Carlisle's disturbingly accurate envisioning of Felix's hands on either side of my head as he prepared to wrench it from my body.

Bella's palm became slick in my grasp. "And on the way?"

"That, too." Alice shot me a meaningful glance, replaying our time together on the trip home. Although I had seen her conversation with Bella when Aro had seen it in her memories, she had taken the time on the plane to discuss it with me in her mind. I had seen how Bella had remembered right away who was in Italy, and what it portended for my future.

And I had seen Alice make the decision that meant that I had one strike against me before I even began.

“Good,” Bella said. “Then we’re all on the same page.”

For a moment there was silence, and I heard the question on all my family members’ minds. Only Alice knew what Bella was about to ask, and she apparently hadn’t told a soul.

“So, I have a problem. Alice promised the Volturi that I would become one of you.” Around the table, heads nodded. This part of the story had been shared.

“They’re going to send someone to check,” Bella went on, “and I’m sure that’s a bad thing—something to avoid. And so now, this involves you all. I’m sorry about that. But if you don’t want me, then I’m not going to force myself on you, whether Alice is willing or not.”

*My daughter*, I heard my mother think, and I saw her mouth move before Bella’s single finger lifted to shush her.

“Please, let me finish. You all know what I want. And I’m sure you know what Edward thinks, too.” I winced as my family members’ various assessments of my melancholy flew at me from around the table. Bella, thankfully, cut them off at the pass. “I think the only fair way to decide is for everyone to have a vote. If you decide you don’t want me, then...I guess I’ll go back to Italy alone. I can’t have *them* coming *here*.”

A growl rose unbidden from my chest. Bella returning to Italy was entirely unacceptable.

“Taking into account then, that I won’t put any of you in danger either way, I want you to vote yes or no on the issue of me becoming a vampire.” Bella’s pale hand gestured casually toward Carlisle.

*Becoming a vampire?* Rose’s thoughts reached me first, and I saw her wrinkled nose. Beside her, her husband grinned. *It’s about time at least one of them grew a pair.*

I shot him a withering look. “Just a minute,” I said calmly. My words were met by a dark glare from Bella, and I squeezed her hand even more tightly. “I have something to add before we vote. About the danger Bella’s referring to” —she sighed aloud—“I don’t think we need to be overly anxious.”

The fear grabbed hold of me once more as though it were this instant that I saw Jane turn her terrible crimson eyes on the woman who was my only reason for being. I felt again the rising panic, and again its slow ebb as I realized Bella’s mind was no more penetrable by Jane than it was by me. “You see,” I said slowly, “there was more than one reason why *I* didn’t want to shake Aro’s hand there at the end. There’s something they didn’t think of, and I didn’t want to clue them in.”

“Which was?” prompted Alice, as she thought back to the dark room, of her vision of her hand against Aro’s, of Jasper’s face finally becoming a clear, certain outcome. Her brow furrowed. *He didn’t tell me that he didn’t want to touch Aro’s hand...*

I took a deep breath and pressed my free hand more firmly into the table, drawing an almost immediate glare from Esme as she saw my arm muscles tense. *This table was handcrafted, Edward Anthony*, she thought. *Don’t you dare.*

My hand relaxed seemingly of its own accord. “The Volturi are overconfident, and with good reason,” I went on, my voice sounding surprisingly calm. “When they decide to find someone, it’s not really a problem. Do you remember Demetri?” Bella’s shoulders trembled slightly, and I took her response as a yes. Carlisle, however, flashed quickly through his memories of the entire guard and came up blank. Apparently Demetri had been a more recent acquisition.

“He finds people,” I explained. “That’s his talent, why they keep him. Now, the whole time we were with any of them, I was picking their brains for anything that might save us, getting as much information as possible. So I saw how Demetri’s talent works. He’s a tracker—a tracker a thousand times more gifted than James was. His ability is loosely related to what I do, or what Aro does. He catches the”—what was the right word for this—“flavor? I don’t know how to describe it. The tenor of someone’s mind. And he follows that. It works over immense distances. But after Aro’s little experiments, well...” I shrugged.

Bella’s response was without emotion. “You think he won’t be able to find me.”

“I’m sure of it. He relies totally on that other sense. When it doesn’t work with you, they’ll all be blind.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a wide grin spread across Emmett’s face. *Niiice.*

“And how does that solve anything?” Bella’s voice was smug.

Because just like we had on their turf, we would outsmart them on ours. “Quite obviously, Alice will be able to tell when they’re planning a visit, and I’ll hide you. They’ll be helpless. It will be like looking for a piece of straw in a haystack.”

*I love it, little bro.* Emmett grinned at me.

“But they can find *you*,” Bella replied, her voiced frustrated.

“And I can take care of myself.”

Carlisle and Esme frowned. On infrequent, but not entirely rare occasions, my parents would think as one, so in tune to each other they were. Both responded to my statement that I could take care of myself with identical images: first, me, black-eyed and unmoving as I huddled at the bottom of the staircase in the house in Ithaca; second, me emerging from the arrivals hallway at SeaTac, my hair disheveled, my clothes rumpled, and deep, exhausted circles under my eyes. I hadn't realized I had looked that bad. No wonder they were so worried.

I pretended I hadn't heard them, instead turning my attention to Emmett, whose hand was outstretched in a fist. "Excellent plan, my brother," he said, grinning.

Nodding, I put my own fist and tapped it to his.

"No," hissed Rosalie.

"Absolutely not," Bella added.

"Nice." Jasper grinned.

"Idiots." Alice glared at me. *Of course you'd figure out a way to get the entire family killed, now that we're all with you again.*

But it was Esme's shocked glare which stopped me cold. She didn't think anything directly to me; no orders, no commands. Instead her whole being flooded with the emotions of just a day ago, and my own body was wrenched with the pain of a mother who thought she had lost more than half of her children.

My head hung at once.

Beside me, Bella straightened her posture. "All right then," she said. "Edward has offered an alternative for you to consider. Let's vote."

Her gaze shifted to me.

*Like she doesn't know what he's going to say,* came Emmett's thought.

But I understood her strategy at once—if she got my vote out of the way, she could focus on the yes votes—Esme, Alice...and who else, I wondered.

"Do you want me to join your family?"

*Of course,* I wanted to answer. I wanted her in my family. I wanted her with me for as long as forever would be. I wanted her to wake in my arms and look on my face every morning. For as long as I might be privileged to it, I wanted to see that sleepy smile as she recognized that she'd spent the night with me. And I wanted my world to end when hers did. I wanted her; I wanted all of her, gloriously human.



With her soul intact.

“Not that way,” I answered, my words hissing through my teeth. “You’re staying human.”

*Edward 1, Bella 0. Bet that table is about to turn.*

I shot Emmett a withering look. In doing so, I nearly missed the split moment of Bella’s face falling with hurt. Again. I squeezed my eyes closed, and when I opened them, the soldierly expression had once again taken over her face.

She turned to my sister. “Alice?”

Bella’s image appeared, her arms pale, her eyes crimson, the two of them laughing together—and Alice’s unmitigated joy. My own mind went back to that day over a year ago, when we had been gathered around this table, deciding Bella’s fate. “*I love her, too,*” came my sister’s voice in my memory.

I couldn’t meet Alice’s eyes as her clear voice said, “Yes.”

Bella went straight on, not acknowledging the new score. Emmett, however, did. *I-I, brother.*

“Jasper?”

It took only a split second for my taciturn brother to flood me with two emotions—one, the depths of grief, the sucking emptiness he had felt rolling off me in waves as he stared at me at the foot of the stairs in the house in Ithaca. The other was an incalculable joy—me, sitting at the piano, playing for Bella as she sat on the bench, her hip to mine, her eyes transfixed on my hands as they moved over the keys. His eyes met mine for a brief moment. *I want your happiness, Edward. You don’t see you the way I do.*

My gaze fell, and I heard his vote before his voice spoke it: “Yes.”

“Rosalie?”

Rosalie’s brow was pulled taut. She looked from me to Bella again, and for a moment, Emmett appeared in her mind, kissing her, making her laugh. He was quickly replaced, however, by Carlisle, a sad expression on his face as he easily deflected the large end table that she had just hurled at him. “*I hate you!*” her voice screamed in her memory. “*I hate you, and I hate this!*” The table shattered into hundreds of pieces, Rosalie shrieked in anger, and the memory disappeared.

“No,” she said quietly.

Again, for a length of time almost impossible for a human to measure, Bella's face dropped. She recovered it with speed and turned toward Emmett, but Rosalie stopped her, holding out both her hands.

"Let me explain. I don't mean that I have any aversion to you as a sister. It's just that...this is not the life I would have chosen for myself." Another image—Rosalie, doubled over in the woods, Esme gently rubbing her back as her body shook with angry, tearless sobs. Nearby lay the desiccated carcass of a wolf...

Her voice was almost infinitesimally quieter when she added, "I wish there had been someone there to vote no for me."

Had I not had almost a century of conditioning, I might not have heard the tiny sound my father's Adam's apple made as it shifted downward. Without moving my eyes from Rosalie, I listened to Carlisle for a moment.

*Selfish...it was selfish. The real waste has been letting her hurt for this long. The choices I've stolen from them all...*

For a moment I saw the rest of the table through Carlisle's eyes, as he studied Alice's calm smile, Jasper's hand laid over his wife's, Rosalie's firm frown, and Emmett's...

"Hell yes!" my brother called, startling me out of Carlisle's head. "We can find some other way to pick a fight with this Demetri." *Bring him on, bro.*

I winced, and missed Bella's turn to face Esme.

"Yes, of course, Bella," my mother's voice said softly. "I already think of you as part of my family."

Bella murmured her thanks, and then set her eyes on Carlisle. He, however, was looking directly at me. In his mind I saw his teeth sinking into flesh—once, twice, three times, four. Me, then Esme, then Rosalie, then Emmett. And one more, except this was only his all-too-vivid imagination—the boy, the patient he had told me about a few hours before. Anthony.

I was stunned. He had planned to *bite* him?

The image shifted quickly to Carlisle at the boy's bedside as his parents held his hands. My father, in his memory, stood by, his head bowed reverently as the boy's heart thudded to its inevitable stop. He'd stopped himself, even though he had already thought through the escape, and the alibi. He'd stopped himself, not because he didn't want to turn the boy, but because the

boy didn't want to be turned. It had not been my choice, or Esme's, or Rosalie's, Emmett's, Jasper's, or Alice's, either, and ninety years later, he knew where he had misstepped.

His eyes shifted quickly over my shoulder, past the table and down the open hall to the kitchen. "*He's not the only one able to do it,*" said the Bella in his head as she sat before him at the table. And I saw the line drawn in his mind. The ones for whom he might never be forgiven...and the one who, for the first time, would join this life by choice.

The light in the room seemed to dim for a moment. Was it possible for me to go unconscious? A growl began deep in the back of my throat.

"Edward," my father began gently.

"No." My breath was coming abnormally quickly, and it was as though the walls were inching inward on me.

"It's the only way that makes sense. You've chosen not to live without her, and that"—a memory of him sobbing, his forehead pressed to a glass wall—"doesn't leave me a choice."

The wind rushed out of me, and my eyes darted away from the table toward the hallway. I need out of the room, and now. I threw down Bella's hand and had only a split-second to register her shock before I'd shoved myself back from the table and found myself in the living room. Behind me, I heard Carlisle's resigned voice: "I guess you know my vote."

"Thanks," came Bella's distracted answer.

*How dare he*, I thought. Carlisle had stood the most resolute a year ago, when Rosalie and Jasper had been dead-set on ending Bella's life. He had told me that he loved me, just hours ago, and now...this?

My breath was coming fast, and my body was beginning to shake as I gasped. I placed one hand on the wall to steady myself, but it didn't help—the whole wall shuddered under the force of my trembling hand. My fingers unclenched from their fists and fumbled blindly for the first thing they could close themselves around.

The TV was in two before I fully realized I'd grabbed it.

I inhaled deeply and forced myself to stare at the now-bare studs and shredded wiring, the TV sparking feebly at my feet, still attached to the chunk of wallboard that had pulled away with it. I had been betrayed by nearly every member of family, save Rosalie. They were still talking, all of them, and their thoughts swarmed around me like a dull buzz. I heard Esme comforting

Bella, and saw that she had put her arms around her. My mother was overjoyed by this turn of events.

It made me sick.

I was still trying to stop trembling when Bella's voice rose again. "Well, Alice, where do you want to do this?"

Do this? Now? She wanted to be changed *now*? Was she out of her mind?

"No!" My voice was strangled with the first iteration, but it became stronger with each successive outburst as my legs carried me back into the dining room. "No, *no*, NO! Are you insane? Have you utterly lost your mind?"

I didn't realize how close I'd come to shouting directly in Bella's ears until she clapped her palms over them, cringing away.

*You're scoring big points there, Edward*, came Alice's sardonic thought. But she didn't speak this aloud. "Um, Bella," she said with a loving patience, "I don't think I'm *ready* for that. I'll need to prepare..."

Bella's face fell. "You *promised*."

"Over my dead body," I hissed, dropping my pitch to one Bella couldn't hear.

Alice gave me a hard look, and I saw my limbs as she had seen them in her vision, separated and burning. *Edward*, she thought sadly, *it very nearly was*.

Oh. Right.

Turning to Bella, she continued her counterargument. "I know," she said patiently, "but seriously, Bella. I don't have any idea how *not* to kill you."

The hopeful look didn't disappear from Bella's eyes. "You can do it," she said. "I trust you."

I growled, and Alice backed down, shaking her head, but not missing the opportunity to throw her thoughts in my direction.

*This is not because of you, just so you know.*

"Carlisle?"

You couldn't say that Bella wasn't a quick thinker. In an instant I had her jaw in my hand, just barely remembering not to crush it. My father approached from behind me and I threw my hand out, growling.

*Peace, Edward. This is unnecessary.* Carlisle's thoughts exuded calm, and I recognized the tone he always used when he thought I was in danger of flying off the handle. He was worried—both for Bella's safety and for mine.

He was concerned he had hurt me.

"I'm able to do it," he said, as his eyes darted anxiously to where my hand was clamped on Bella's jaw. "You would be in no danger of me losing control." *But I would like to wait until Edward and I have spoken, at least.*

Bella mumbled something that sounded affirmative through her teeth.

"Hold on," I shot back, my voice again a little more forceful than strictly necessary. "It doesn't have to be now."

"There's no reason for it not to be now," she answered, this time working her jaw out of my hand just enough to enunciate.

"I can think of a few." Charlie's face as he told me off came back to me at once. For however little clout the Forks police department might have, I didn't doubt that Charlie would pull whatever strings necessary to have the FBI on our tails in a matter of minutes if Bella were to disappear tonight.

"Of course you can," Bella piped up. "Now let go of me."

Sighing, I released her face from my grasp, watching as the white marks left by the pressure of my fingers slowly turned pink once more. Stupidly, I realized that I might have bruised her in my haste to keep her from Carlisle, who, I saw now, had no immediate intentions of acting.

Bella was still glaring at me, rubbing her cheek absently with one hand. "In about two hours Charlie will be here looking for you," I told her patiently, "I wouldn't put it past him to involve the police."

And, the understatement of the year award is awarded to Mr. Edward Cullen.

Bella snorted. "All three of them." But her eyes shifted to the floor. Her brow crinkled the way it always did when she was thinking, the way it had just an hour ago when she had decided finally to acknowledge that I loved her.

Did she still believe that? Would she recognize my unwillingness to be moved on this matter a sign of my love?

She wouldn't the way I was behaving.

I took a deep breath, but found my jaw clamped right back into its tense, angry state. “In the interest of remaining inconspicuous, I suggest that we put this conversation off, at the very least until Bella finishes high school, and moves out of Charlie’s house.”

My father’s eyebrows raised, but he chose not to share his thought, instead directing his words toward the girl at my side. “That’s a reasonable request, Bella.”

Another silence passed as she thought. Her brow tightened once more, and her lips pursed.

“I’ll think about it,” she said finally.

“Think about it” was enough for me. My whole body relaxed. There would be time, and I would bargain for more. I could bargain for more time for the rest of her human life, if need be.

It was a start.

“I should probably take you home,” I told her. “Just in case Charlie wakes up early.” Not to mention that I didn’t need her to stay here with my family, any of whom seemed liable to turn her at the next available opportunity.

Bella shot my father a meaningful gaze. “After graduation?”

His eyes met mine for the briefest of seconds, then darted away to Esme’s, to Bella’s, and back to mine. *I hope someday you’ll understand that I’ve done this out of love.*

I shook my head furiously, but he drew a deep breath and said to Bella the sentence that would drive the dagger deep:

“You have my word.”

Hissing, I rushed Bella out the door.

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There was the distinct possibility that the weathered floorboards in Bella’s room wouldn’t hold up to the onslaught of my feet as I paced. She sat on the bed with her legs folded, her eyes tracking my movement anxiously.

“Whatever you’re planning, it’s not going to work.”

It might. “Shh. I’m thinking.”

The bedcovers rustled and she disappeared beneath them. For a moment, the gap in my middle threatened to break open again and I immediately flew to her side, reveling in the warmth that had already radiated from her body into the sheets as I pulled the comforter back from her face. A single strand of hair blew its way across the curve of her cheekbone, and I reached out to stroke it away.

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"If you don't mind," I told her quietly, as my fingers continued re-memorizing the lines of her cheeks, "I'd much rather you didn't hide your face. I've lived without it for as long as I can stand."

She sighed, but nodded once, gazing up at me in the dark.

"Now, tell me something."

Her expression was pure skepticism. "What?"

"If you could have anything, anything at all, what would it be?"

"You," she responded at once.

My heart, still as it was, leapt nevertheless. But she *had* me. I was never going anywhere, ever again. "Something you don't already have," I urged.

Again, her brow crinkled as she considered the question. Her thinking time would try the patience of a saint, much less a vampire. Finally, she spoke.

"I would want...Carlisle not to have to do it. I would want you to change me."

There it was. It was odd how, that moment I first met her, I had wanted nothing more than to sink my teeth into the alabaster neck which now caught the last bit of moonlight as Bella lay beside me. And now that she wanted exactly this, it was the furthest thing from my desires.

But I did desire *her*.

"What would you be willing to trade for that?" I asked carefully.

Her lips parted slightly in surprise. "Anything."

"Five years?"

Horror.

"You said anything."

"Yes—but—" she stammered. "You'll use the time to find a way out of it. I have to strike while the iron is hot. Besides, it's just too dangerous to be human—for me, at least. So anything but *that*."

This was not going to be easy. "Three years?"

"No!"

I imagined Carlisle's blond head at Bella's neck, his sharp teeth slicing into her, the blood spurting from the wound. I grimaced.

"Isn't it worth anything to you at all?"

Bella's whole face screwed up. "Six months?"

Six months would put us barely at her birthday. “Not good enough.”

“One year, then. That’s my limit.”

“At least give me two.”

“No way. Nineteen, I’ll do. But I’m not going anywhere *near* twenty. If you’re staying in your teens forever, then so am I.”

I would so gladly turn twenty—and every age thereafter—on behalf of both of us, if I were able.

“All right,” I said slowly. “Forget time limits.”

She still looked wary. It made me ache, but I deserved it. Her wariness of my intentions was just going to be part of our relationship from now on. Forever on, possibly.

“If you want me to be the one”—I winced ever so slightly—“then you’ll just have to meet one condition.”

“Condition?” Again, the skeptical look. “What condition?”

The only condition that mattered. I was through thinking that my life bore any meaning without her. It had seemed she understood that, at least, her epiphany in the woods had let me hope, even for just an hour, that there was a future. According to Bella, she wanted forever.

Well, so did I.

“Marry me first.”

I knew Bella well enough to know that she wouldn’t fly into my arms and kiss me, like some girls might, I hadn’t expected her to look...puzzled. Her face was lit eerily by the green light of her alarm clock as she stared back at me. She blinked a few times.

“Okay,” she said finally, “what’s the punch line?”

The punch line? Ouch. “You’re wounding my ego, Bella. I just proposed to you, and you think it’s a joke?”

“Edward, please be serious.”

“I am one hundred percent serious.” I couldn’t remember being more serious in my century of life.

“Oh, c’mon,” she scoffed, but her expression wasn’t joking. Her eyes were widening and her pulse increasing—she was starting to panic. “I’m only eighteen.”

“Well, I’m nearly a hundred and ten.” Perhaps a joke would help. “It’s about time I settled down.”



She looked away. “Look. Marriage isn’t exactly that high on my list of priorities, you know? It was sort of the kiss of death for Renée and Charlie.”

“Interesting choice of words.”

“You know what I mean.” The covers bunched under her as she tucked her feet to her chest.

“Please don’t tell me that you’re afraid of the *commitment*.” Although of course, this was the root of the problem—her priorities had always put vampirism on the wrong rung of the ladder.

“That’s not it exactly. I’m...afraid of Renée. She has some really intense opinions on getting married before you’re thirty.”

“Because she’d rather you became one of the eternal damned than get married.”

“You think you’re joking.”

I had met Renée only briefly, but I had read her thoughts. Bella’s mother was flighty, sure, but she had assessed me with the scrutiny only a mother could have. However dormant her parenting skills might have been, at her heart, she wanted nothing but joy for her daughter. If that joy included me, she was willing to have me; I was certain of it.

“Bella,” I said gently, “if you compare the level of commitment between a marital union as opposed to bartering your soul in exchange for an eternity as a vampire...” I shook my head. “If you’re not brave enough to marry me, then—”

She thought only a moment. “Well, what if I did? What if I told you take me to Vegas now? Would I be a vampire in three days?”

Hah. Two could play this game. “Sure. I’ll get my car.”

“Dammit.” A brief pause. “I’ll give you eighteen months.”

“No deal.” I grinned. “I like *this* condition.” More than she could ever possibly realize. “Fine,” she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’ll have Carlisle do it when I graduate.”

I beamed sweetly. “If that’s what you really want.”

“You’re impossible. A monster.” She was scowling, but it wasn’t the honest anger I had seen before. We were playing again. Bantering.

To my surprise, I laughed. “Is that why you won’t marry me?”

She groaned again.

I leaned in toward her, the joking gone. Her heart pounded. “*Please*, Bella?”

She didn't answer.

"Would this have gone better if I'd had time to get a ring?"

"No! No rings!"

That did it. I heard the bedsprings move in the bedroom across the hall as Charlie Swan lifted himself out of bed, roused, no doubt, by Bella's vehement protest.

"Now you've done it," I whispered.

"Oops."

"Charlie's getting up. I'd better leave." It was the last thing I wanted.

Her face dropped.

"Would it be childish of me to hide in your closet, then?"

"No," she answered, and my heart soared. If I hadn't yet secured forever, at least I had a firm hold on right now.

"Stay," she said. "Please."

I was in the closet before she blinked again.

Charlie was worried. I had never been able to read his thoughts, although, it hadn't been until Bella had arrived that I had realized why. However, I had access to the flavor of them, and right now that flavor was panic.

The door cracked open.

"Morning, Dad," Bella said cheerfully.

I slid down the wall and decided to give them what little privacy I could offer. I couldn't force my ears not to hear, but I could at least keep from actively thinking about their talk. I had practiced this for decades on mental voices before turning it to physical ones—it was the only thing I had ever been able to do to afford my family some of the privacy they ought to have had.

My family.

The sick feeling in the pit of my stomach returned as I thought on the six people who had sat around that table this morning. They were hurting, all of them. Carlisle had shown me some of the reasons this afternoon as we'd talked, some of the six months that I had been apart from them, but true to form, he clearly hadn't told me everything, as his image of the boy had shown. But then, I could never again presume to know Carlisle's mind.

Bella's clothing stroked my face as I recalled the expressions on each of my family members' faces as I'd moved around the table. Jasper, remembering the pain he had channeled

from me as I huddled at the foot of the stair. Alice's vision of my body, torn to pieces. Esme's crushing pain when she'd realized she was going to lose us all. Carlisle, weeping. And Rosalie, on the other end of that horrific call: "*Come back. Carlisle, Esme, Emmett, everyone—just please come back.*"

It was a miracle they had welcomed me at all.

There were so many things I had destroyed. Bella's trust, my family's bonds, my relationships with each and every one of them. There was so much to fix. Conversations I desperately needed to have, time I needed to spend making up for months lost—months when *I* was lost. Perhaps it was for this that one by one, they had voted against me. Perhaps it was for this that my father had cast the final die.

And yet—I knew Carlisle's heart. I had always known the mind and the workings of the man who I knew as father. He was not vengeful. Nothing made him happier than my happiness.

*I hope someday you'll understand I've done this out of love.*

Someday. Someday meant there would be time to talk. Someday meant that he wasn't angry. A hand went to my forehead, rubbing the spot where Carlisle's lips had brushed against it in the mid-afternoon hours.

"*You are forgiven, son,*" said Carlisle's voice in my memory.

"*You love me,*" said Bella's.

Forgiven.

Was it possible?

The voices outside the closet began to rise, and I let myself intrude long enough to catch a few words: "Not under my roof!"

Bella's voice was quiet, but firm. "Look, I'm not going to give you any more ultimatums tonight"—she had given him an ultimatum?—"or I guess it's this morning. Just think about it for a few days, okay? But keep in mind that Edward and I are sort of a package deal."

A package deal. I missed the remainder of their conversation, reveling in those words. Marriage or no, vampires or no...a package deal.

My heart soared.

Charlie stomped off down the stairs.

I was back in the bedroom in an instant, settled into the rocking chair. As soon as she was sure her father was gone, Bella threw off the covers and hopped out of bed.

“Sorry about that,” she whispered.

Well, he hadn’t thrown her out, nor locked her in her room. It had to be progress. “It’s not as if I don’t deserve far worse. Don’t start anything with Charlie over me, please.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she answered. “I will start exactly as much as is necessary, and no more than that.” She paused a moment, her bathroom things collected in her arms. “Or are you telling me I have nowhere to go?” Her mouth opened in a little ‘o’ of mock alarm.

*I would never have you anywhere but at my side as long as we live*, I thought, but played along.

“You’d move in with a house full of vampires?”

“That’s probably the safest place for someone like me. Besides, if Charlie kicks me out, then there’s no need for a graduation deadline, is there?” She continued around the room, picking up a hairbrush and going to her dresser for a pair of clean socks.

Still this. “So eager for eternal damnation,” I said, a little louder than I’d intended.

She stopped again. “You know you don’t really believe that.”

“Oh, don’t I?”

“No. You don’t.” She was smirking.

I opened my mouth to ask for clarification, but she cut me off at the pass.

“If you really believed that you’d lost your soul, then when I found you in Volterra, you would have realized immediately what was happening, instead of thinking we were both dead together. But you didn’t—you said ‘*Amazing. Carlisle was right.*’” She beamed. “There’s hope in you, after all.”

*Hope*. Really? I almost opened my mouth to contradict her, beginning to push myself to my feet, but as I did so, I laid my hand on the arm of the old wooden rocker, the one in which I had passed so many nights’ vigil, listening to the sounds of this strange human girl, whose single murmur of my name had been enough to change my life forever. This room, this chair, this girl—I was now returned to their world.

It was sublimely right.

“So let’s both just be hopeful, all right?” she whispered, interrupting my thought. “Not that it matters. If you stay, I don’t need heaven.”

My legs actually felt unsteady as I rose and crossed the room to her. Again I gazed into her eyes, knowing these were the eyes I would look into every day until my last. We hadn’t

solved everything yet—there would be a way for this to reconcile itself, I was certain. But I was here, and she wanted me here, and we were together, with no plans to part. My hands found her face as though it were for the first time. In a way it was...the first time of forever.

“Forever,” I whispered.

“That’s all I’m asking for.” She stretched up on her toes to bring her lips to mine.

I kissed her back...and hoped.

## Chapter 19: Debts to Ephraim

On the surface, it seemed our lives went back to normal. With the help of two forged transcripts from the Los Angeles Unified School District, Edward and Alice reenrolled at Forks High and prepared to graduate from high school yet again. Rosalie and Emmett discontinued their globe-hopping, and Rosalie jumped headlong into another full rebuild of Emmett's Jeep. Jasper continued his march through the works of the great ethicists with the aid of Alibris.com.

Forks Community Hospital took me back with delight, having never found a suitable replacement willing to relocate to such a small town. I returned to my old office at once, and one late-night unpacking session at vampire speed had the place looking as though I'd never left it at all.

Esme busied herself turning the house in Forks back into a home. She made two trips to Ithaca, the first to coordinate the shipping of the few belongings we wouldn't sell—my art, Edward's music—and the second to sell the house.

The house sale was a first for our family, and I had been surprised when Esme had suggested it. "Are you sure?" I'd asked. "We could find a property manager." We had over a dozen, spread throughout the northern US and southern Canada, each taking care of one of the homes we had bought over the decades. It was inevitable that we would need to return to those places, and not needing to buy a house when we did made it much easier to make our sometimes sudden relocations.

Esme had shaken her head. "I think it would be good to sell this one," she'd answered quietly.

"But you put so much work into that house. What if we need to move back?"

For the expression my wife gave me, one would have thought I had slapped her. It took her only an instant to break down into tearless sobs. Confused, I took her into my arms to comfort her, kissing her face as I asked her what was wrong.

Several minutes passed before she composed herself enough to reply. When she did, her voice was so quiet only I could hear it.

“Carlisle,” she’d whispered into the folds of my shirt, “Ithaca will always be the place we almost lost our entire family. I don’t *ever* want to live there again.”

We closed on the house two weeks later.

Life in Forks shifted slowly back to some semblance of normalcy, and we moved around one another uncomfortably as the wounds of the past seven months healed themselves. Edward spent every early evening and every night at Bella’s, and we saw neither hide nor hair of her—grounded, Edward explained, which I thought was a more than appropriate response on Charlie’s part. That Bella’s father was allowing Edward to visit at all seemed to stretch the definition of “magnanimous” to its breaking point.

Thus I was taken completely by surprise when one afternoon a timid knock came at the door of my office at the hospital. I recognized Bella’s scent at once.

“Come in,” I called.

The door creaked open, and in crept my son’s mate. Her eyes darted first to me, then to the wall behind me. She approached my desk cautiously, and I gestured for her to sit in one of my chairs.

“Hi, Carlisle,” she said quietly as she sat.

“Are you all right?” I asked. “Where’s Edward?”

“I haven’t hurt myself, if that’s what you’re asking.” A tiny smile appeared on her face. “Although, I guess that’s a fair conclusion, seeing as that’s the only time I ever see you here.”

I chuckled. “Yes, it would seem. And Edward?”

“Thinks I’m at work. Mrs. Newton needs to cut hours and so she asked if I would be okay with taking the day off.”

“Why didn’t Alice send him?”

“Because she saw me deciding to ask to speak to you alone.”

I wasn’t quite able to hide the smirk. Bella was a quick study. It had taken most of us years to learn how to make an end run around the Alice-Edward connection.

“Well done,” I muttered.

Bella gave me a shy smile, then gazed at the wall again. I had replaced in its usual position the painting I’d had in this office before our move, an original Hassam that Childe himself had given me—a view of the Boston Common, where the young painter and I had often played chess. Bella was silent as she studied it.

“Do you like it?” I prodded.

She nodded. “Edward told me that the artist is famous or something?”

“Childe Hassam. He was an American impressionist who lived at the turn of the last century. We were friends, and he painted this for me in 1890 before he moved to Paris. It’s of the park where we used to play chess.”

For a moment Bella said nothing. Finally she frowned at me. “I still have trouble wrapping my mind around that.”

I turned a little and gazed at the painting. The Boston Common of course still existed and looked remarkably as it had at the turn of the last century, when the painting had been done. Fashions had changed, but beyond that, the setting was still the same—serene, green, idyllic. For a moment I remembered my old chess partner’s laugh as we fought our slow, calculated battles on the gloomy Boston days.

Childe and I, of course, had gone our separate ways—he to Paris; me to Maine—and after a few years had passed, I had no longer been able to see him for fear he would see my unchanged features and guess at my secret. But he had left me with the painting that was behind me now, to remember our chess-playing days. It had been gifted before he became famous, and although many visitors to my office recognized his style, few actually guessed the painting to be genuine.

Turning back to Bella, I answered her statement. “You have trouble wrapping your mind around...”

“The fact that you played chess with the artist of that painting in 1890.” She looked at me. “And that you were already two hundred and, what, thirty? At the time?”

“Two hundred and forty-six.”

She swallowed, but said nothing, her eyes shifting back to the painting as her brow furrowed. The ventilation unit turned itself off with a shuddering thud, and restarted a moment later. Bella continued to watch the painting, as though she were expecting it to come to life.

I decided to prod. “You didn’t come here to talk about Hassam, Isabella.”

“No,” she said quietly, smiling. She heaved a sigh, and then her brown eyes met my own. It was still striking to look on her, to think of her as Edward’s mate, and yet to see by the color of her eyes and the flush in her cheeks that she was so wholly different from the rest of our family.

But that would be changing.



Bella picked a pen up off my desk. She twirled it between her fingers, watching as the faint glow of the fluorescent ceiling lights sent a beam across my desk. At last she said quietly, “Jacob Black showed up yesterday.”

Jacob Black? I recognized the name at once—Ephraim’s great-grandson, one of the wolf pack. The one who, as Alice had told us, had been there for Bella in Edward’s absence.

My surprise must have registered on my face, because Bella went on.

“He came over to talk about the treaty,” she said meaningfully.

“The treaty.” My voice was flatter than I intended it. I recalled the first time we had encountered the giant wolves, how the stench had sickened us all, how their hair had stood on end as they growled at us, ready to tear us to pieces. That moment had been the first time—and until a few weeks ago, the only time—that I had honestly feared the loss of my wife and children.

Most of the pack had been more than eager to kill us on sight. But Ephraim, their leader, had studied us with a calm curiosity and called his brothers down. They’d had no reason to trust us, but somehow, when they had seen Esme in my arms, Rosalie’s hand in Emmett’s, Edward’s nervous glances as he refused to move too far from any of us, something had stopped Ephraim dead in his tracks. Edward said that the word he’d used was in a language Edward did not understand; Quileute, I had always assumed. However, even though Edward was unable to understand the word, he was able to read the feelings that surrounded it—Ephraim Black had realized that we were a family, and this realization had given him pause. It had taken over a year for us to gain their trust enough to sign a treaty, but Ephraim’s realization had been enough to buy us the time.

And now it was all coming back to haunt us once again. Edward had told me last year that Bella had heard about us from Ephraim’s great-grandson, Jacob, who had technically committed a serious violation of the treaty even in telling her about us in the first place. That he had come to bring it up again—I wasn’t sure what this meant.

“Jacob came to talk to you about the treaty?”

“Yes.” Bella looked at me carefully. “He said”—she swallowed—“He said the terms of the treaty said that the truce was over if any of you—”

“Bite,” I finished for her.

Her eyes widened. “You *know*?”

I frowned. “Bella, I was the one who signed it.”

She took a deep breath. “So...”

I sighed. The Quileutes, it seemed, had had every reason to doubt us. Seventy years ago, I had been certain I would never turn another. In fact, I had sworn it off after Rosalie. It had never occurred to me that in doing so I would condemn her to an eternity of bearing the burden of a night whose terror should have been erased by a swift death. But then Emmett had come along, and the look of absolute peace that hid behind her worry as she looked on the broken body of this handsome young man had changed my conviction at once.

Bella Swan had been just as unforeseeable, and the change she wrought in Edward every bit as absolute. I didn’t want to go back on my word, but for Edward’s happiness, I would.

I looked across the desk at Bella, and spoke quietly. “We’re going to need to have a cover story for your...*death* any way you look at it. If I’m going to change you, we’ll be leaving before I do.” To say nothing of the need to keep her away from civilization for a few years while she got her thirst straightened out.

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “But you—”

“Won’t be able to come back?” I nodded. “That’s simply going to be part of the package, I’m afraid.”

Her face screwed up, her bottom lip pulling itself between her teeth. For a long time she said nothing, continuing to spin the silver pen between her fingers and watch the light dancing across my desk. For a long moment, she said nothing, but finally she shifted her gaze back to my face. She stared at me hard for a long moment, her brow still pulled.

“Carlisle?” she asked finally.

“Yes?”

“Why did you change your mind?”

I raised my eyebrows.

“In September. When I cut myself? You said you would leave it up to Edward. But instead you voted against him. Why?”

What a question. I sat back in my chair, and for a moment simply studied her, not answering. I had never thought to picture the girl that Edward would fall in love with. But then, who ever knew these things? I’d met Esme for the first time when she had been just shy of Bella’s age, and all I knew was that I found a joy and peace in her presence—even at sixteen—that I’d never known. It was only later that I discovered that peace had come from the balance

that I'd sensed even then—that my weaknesses were her strengths, my faults, her attributes. We were, at our cores, fundamentally suited for each other.

As I looked at Bella, sitting here in my office, her face pulled into a deep frown, I remembered the calm young woman who had commanded a dinner table full of vampires as though it were her everyday audience. I saw the unabashed resolution of the girl who had been the first of my family to agree with me about our kind and the afterlife. I saw strength; I saw serenity; I saw love—a boundless love that, given time, I was sure my son would learn to accept.

Isabella Swan was Edward's balance.

In September, I had understood this, but only vaguely. I had suggested to Edward what my own pain would look like were I to be separated from Esme, but I had, in the end, let him decide our trajectory, and in doing so I had let him decide Bella's as well. And we had all suffered for it.

"Bella," I said quietly, "I made a grave mistake in September. And I owe you an apology. I let Edward make decisions not only for us, but for you. I let him decide what was best for you, instead of asking you what you wanted. We"—I gulped—"we went through a lot this year. As a family. It wasn't easy. And I can't come to any other conclusion but that all the pain was because we were missing a member."

She nodded knowingly. "I can't imagine what it must have been like for you to lose Edward again."

"I was referring to you, actually."

It took a few seconds for my comment to register on Bella's face. When it did, her face colored, and her gaze fell to the floor. Somewhat unsurprisingly, tears welled in her eyes, and I was on the other side of my desk and handing her a tissue the same instant I saw her eyes begin to water. She accepted it gratefully, and for a few minutes the only sound in the room was her sniffing.

"Thank you," she said finally, crumbling the tissue into a ball and shoving it into her jeans pocket.

There was no reason for her to thank me. This was the state of affairs—the state of affairs which I had been far too slow to catch hold of. "Bella, you made a choice. And I'm no longer willing to stand idly by and watch that choice be taken away from you." I thought back to her

earlier comment about her worries about the treaty and added, “Now if *you* change your mind, that is quite a different matter.”

She shook her head quickly. “I’ve made up my mind.”

“Then I’m behind it.” I laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it. “I’m sorry I wasn’t before. I should have known better.”

Bella twisted in the chair and looked up at me, frowning.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re like Edward, you know that? Both of you—you think you need to be perfect. You made a mistake, Carlisle. You fixed it. It’s done.”

I stared at her, my mouth falling slightly agape. Was it possible that it was really that simple? Bella, smiling slightly, stood from her chair, and wrapped her arms awkwardly around my torso. I stood in shock for a few seconds. The most Bella and I had ever exchanged was a handshake or two. Her heartbeat raced as I returned the embrace.

“It’s done,” I muttered.

“It is.” Bella pulled back from me and grinned. “Besides, really, at this point, Emmett is going to wind up the only Cullen male who doesn’t feel dreadfully guilty about something he did to me. You guys have *got* to let up on yourselves.”

Much to my surprise, I laughed.

Bella glanced up at the industrial-issue clock over my office door and sighed. “I should go...I thought it’d be fun to surprise Charlie with dinner, but that means I have to go grocery shopping.”

I nodded. “You should do that.” There was only so much time that she and Charlie would have together—it was important they use it well. I did not dare speak this thought, however. Bella turned back to the chair, gathering her jacket from where she’d shrugged it onto the chair back. She was still frowning a little as she put her jacket back on.

“And the treaty?” she asked.

Ah yes. There was still that problem. Well, as I’d said, we would need to get Bella away from civilization as it was. And if the violation meant we would never again be welcome on the Olympic Peninsula...well, we could cross that bridge when we came to it. Seventy years ago we’d struck a treaty which had been unlikely in the first place—perhaps there would be room for negotiation.

Although I doubted it.

I sighed. "We'll figure it out," I said. "It will work out...somehow."

For a second, Bella looked confused, then a smile crept over her face and gradually became a grin. She said nothing, just stood there grinning at me.

"What?" I finally prompted.

"That's exactly what Esme said. A year ago. On the baseball field, that day. Word-for-word." She grinned. "You two are like, completely on the same page."

It figured. "We frequently are." Giving her a gentle smile, I added, "You and Edward will be too, someday."

Her brow furrowed once more. "I hope so," she said quietly.

"I know so."

She looked down at the floor a moment, and I saw her cheeks flush with color. But when she looked back up, she was still smiling.

"Thanks, Carlisle."

"Always. And thank *you*." I nodded to the door. "Now go surprise Charlie."

Bella grinned. For a second she made a motion as though she was going to hug me again, but then shrank back a little awkwardly and shrugged. She gave me a little wave instead.

"Bye, Carlisle."

"A pleasure, Bella."

She disappeared. As I listened to her footsteps in the hall, I sat back in my chair in wonderment. On my desk were five 5 x 7 photos, one of each of my children. They were the standard portraits that it seemed every American teenager had done their senior year of high school, although my own only participated in the ritual at every other high school they attended or else whenever the fashions in the previous set were out-of-date.

Four of the photos depicted smiling faces, gazing into the camera. The fifth, however, was in black-and-white, and showed Edward, looking pensively upward from his perch on a plain artists' stool. His face was taut, and his eyes were distant, pained. It was a haunting photograph, an excellent portrayal of my oldest son, but so excellent only because it perfectly captured the pain in which he'd lived most of his life.

For six months he had been happy, and we all had rejoiced with him, even as tenuous and fraught with danger as his relationship with Bella had turned out to be. And then the rug had

been pulled out from beneath us all. But now things had been set upright again, however precariously.

In the parking lot arose the deep, throaty grumble of Bella's ancient truck, its brakes squeaking in protest as she backed out of her spot. I picked up Edward's photo and turned it once in my hands, gazing at it. After a century of life, Edward had found joy, and as I listened to Bella rumble her way toward home, I vowed to keep it that way.

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The evening found me sorting through the day's bounty at the desk in my study. Somehow in a house filled with people with perfect recall, it seemed Esme and I were the only two who ever managed to remember to get the mail. There was the usual assortment of magazines: *Car and Driver* for Rose and a second for Edward, since they were incapable of sharing a copy, *Architectural Digest* for Esme, *GamePro* for Emmett, and my usual daily dose of medical journals. I subscribed to almost every medical journal in the US and Europe, which meant that on average, I got two a day. Beneath these were a slew of bank and credit-card statements for accounts held in all our names and pseudonyms. Beneath this was a small manila envelope addressed to Mr. Edward Cullen, with a return address in Seattle of *Jason Scott, Esq.* Puzzled, I laid this aside. I would ask Edward about it later.

I was just reaching for *The American Journal of Psychiatry* when I recognized Edward's footfall on the stair. Each member of my family had his own gait, which meant that we could tell one another apart even without any senses other than hearing. The lilting pace up the stairs and the earthy scent told me Edward was home for his nightly recess. He appeared on our doorstep each night when Charlie threw him out promptly at nine-thirty, and then disappeared again to join Bella once she'd turned in for the night. She had to be the only high-schooler in the country who religiously went to bed at eleven.

I expected Edward's footsteps to turn immediately toward his room as usual, but they did not. Instead they approached the door to my study and suddenly came to a halt. For several seconds he simply stood there, breathing in and out on the other side of my door, neither entering nor walking away.

When he'd stood there through a full rotation of the second-hand of my watch, I focused my attention on the door and thought that he should come in.

The door nudged itself open, and Edward entered. As was customary these days, he walked as though he was in constant pain, his shoulders curved forward and his head dropped a little.

We hadn't really spoken since the vote. He had stormed out that evening with Bella, and when he'd returned a day later, he had shrugged off all of our attempts to discuss the vote and its consequences. Between getting us settled back into our home, and the increased workload at the hospital that was a direct result of my nearly seven months of absence, I hadn't really managed to cross paths with him long enough to force the issue. The two times he had hunted in the past few weeks, he had gone with Emmett, both while I had been on shift at the hospital.

Although to be honest, I didn't want to scratch off the scab that so tenuously held our relationship at the moment any more than he did. I knew he was angry with me and hurt by my vote. So I had accepted his avoidance, knowing that eventually we would speak. We always did.

"I'm not avoiding you," Edward answered my thoughts quietly. "At least, not on purpose." He cocked his head toward my desk. "What were you doing?"

"Opening the mail," I replied. "And then I was going to write awhile." I gestured to the leather-bound book that lay face-up on the desk.

Edward swallowed audibly, and his gaze floated to the journal. I didn't need his gift to know exactly what he was thinking.

"You are beyond forgiven for that, you know," I said gently.

On the night of his return, Edward had told me about his ordeal in Rio, and what had become of the journal I had gifted him. It was of little use to attempt to mask one's reaction from Edward, and so I had let myself fully feel the anger and the hurt for a few moments. Even though I recalled every word written in that journal, that chronicle of the first year with Esme had been one of my most treasured mementos. To imagine my words lying in shreds in the streets of Rio was painful, to say the least.

Edward, listening to my thoughts, had begun to cry as we sat together on Bella's bed. I'd put an arm around him and reassured him that he couldn't anger me simply by destroying one of my journals. He'd shaken his head furiously, but had accepted the hug nevertheless.

A shuddering breath drew my attention back to my study, and I looked up to see Edward, his fist clutched to his mouth, his face pulled taut.

"Edward?"

He swallowed noisily, looking down at the floor. “Could you stop thinking about that please?”

Nodding, I studied him carefully. He still looked extraordinarily shaken, an expression to which I was getting more and more accustomed. Although my interactions with him over the past several weeks had been brief at best, it was impossible not to notice that he hadn’t returned to the state he had been in before Bella’s eventful birthday. There was an air of anxiety about him always, as though he were expecting the entire world to fall to pieces at any moment.

Although I couldn’t blame him, seeing as for both of us, it very nearly had.

Edward snorted at this thought, but kept his eyes fixed on his feet as he mumbled, “Bella went to your office?”

Ah. So this was why he wanted to talk. “She did,” I said carefully. “You two spoke?”

He nodded, still frowning. “She’s worried about the treaty, Carlisle. And so am I.”

The treaty. I sighed. I didn’t have any good answers for that. We were bound by the agreement we’d made, and said agreement was quite specific. I suspected that, were we never to return to the Olympic Peninsula again, we would be fine, as the wolves were concerned first and foremost with protecting the tribe and its lands. But if I bit Bella, the terms of the treaty would technically allow the wolves to kill any of us wherever they happened upon us. Although it was true that we outnumbered them at present, and would outnumber them further once Bella was turned...

Edward blanched. “Are you honestly suggesting that we fight them?”

“I am forced to consider the possibility.”

My son’s hands balled into fists at his side, and he began pacing back and forth before my desk.

“I don’t *want* to fight them, Edward. I would do everything in my power to make sure that this doesn’t come to that.” Years ago, we had been able to negotiate with Ephraim—surely we could negotiate again?

A snort. “I have my serious doubts.”

“And you’re welcome to them.” I stood and moved to the other side of the desk, laying a hand on Edward’s shoulder, from under which he unsurprisingly twisted away. “I will, of course, pursue the most peaceable resolution to this as I am able.”



Edward said nothing for a long moment and instead strode purposefully past the desk to the windows. It was a dark night—the moon was new, and the inky sky was littered with stars. My son stared out at them, his jaw set. Every muscle in his body was held taut—I could see in the carriage of his shoulders that he was upset. He didn't speak and I didn't either; he simply watched the night sky, and I watched him in turn.

A slight thunk signaled Edward's head dropping gently against the windowpane.

"Edward?" I called in a whisper.

For a moment, he didn't answer and his shoulders heaved slowly as he breathed in and out. When he turned to me, his face was twisted with anger and pain.

"Why, Carlisle?"

There were some things about living with someone for almost ninety years that simply became second nature. Yes, Edward could read my mind, but there were times that I didn't need the privilege of his gift to read his. His face was pulled into a gruesome expression by his pain, which caused my own stomach to wrench violently.

"Because it's time, Edward," I told him quietly, remembering the resolute young woman I had seen in my office just a few hours before. She wanted our lifestyle, she knew us for who we were and yet had never run. She had thrown herself into a den of lions to save Edward from a certain death while still believing that he didn't love her. Bella Swan loved my son as he loved her, and that was enough for me. Bella had risked her *life* for him. More than once. Surely he had to see at least that.

Edward's hand flew forward so quickly I didn't see what had happened before there was a loud crash and shards of glass began to rain to the floor. He and I both watched the little bits of glass trickle their way out of the window frame and onto the floor, piece by piece, each quietly falling onto the worn wood. Edward said nothing as the pieces fell, only opening his mouth once every shard was settled.

"She's almost *died* more than once because of me."

The wind whistled in through the now-empty window frame, whipping the tails of Edward's shirt as he stood. His hands clenched and unclenched themselves at his side, and the room filled with the sound of his ragged breathing as his shoulders heaved unevenly up and down.

I stepped forward, placing my hand on his shoulder, my fingers curling slightly over his collarbone. “Edward,” I whispered, “you have to let that go.”

He grunted something inaudible but made no effort to move away. We both stood before the empty window, listening to the wind as it howled its way into my office and rustled the papers on my desk. As we stood, my mind traveled from my small study to a night over a year ago, when I had been a passenger in Edward’s Volvo as it raced its way through the darkness on the sweeping curves of Highway 101. I remembered the tight grip of his fingers on the steering wheel, the unnatural stiffness of his posture. But most of all, I remembered his control. Edward, my son who had once been the darkest avenging angel, was now driving back not to kill, not to maim, but to let me settle the whole issue peaceably. Humanely.

That night, as I stood there in the darkness watching my son as he sped away on foot back towards our home—or not our home, but rather Bella’s, I had realized fully what a change this otherwise ordinary young woman had wrought in my son. I had watched the terrible pain cross his face as he listened to the twisted mind of the man whose life he had so very nearly taken just hours before. But because of Bella, he had stopped himself. And so it had been I, and not Edward, who’d lurked in the shadows that night, waiting for prey. When the man had stumbled out of the bar, I’d leapt on him and dragged him into the blackened alley, for the first time in three centuries closing an arm over a human’s body and clamping a hand over his mouth as I went for his jugular—not with my teeth, but with fifteen units of propofol.

As the man had fallen as dead weight against my body and I had spirited him easily away to Edward’s car, I hadn’t been able to stop myself from marveling. In the face of his nature, in the face of wanting to protect Bella with everything he had, he had instead run with Bella, and left this man alone. He saw himself as her protector, and at the time, I had merely been grateful for the control and compassion that had shone through him. But as long as they remained unequal, I knew my son could never let himself fall from his position as protector, and thus would never fully know the love Bella had for him.

The muscled shoulder beneath my palm trembled, heaving itself upward with Edward’s every intake of breath as he processed everything he heard in my mind.

Edward gulped, but his gaze dropped to the floor as his jaw clenched again.

“You want this too,” I said after a moment.

“Yes, and it makes me selfish.” He turned to me, in one quick motion sliding out from beneath my hand and squaring his body to mine. His eyes were a perfect ochre, but they flashed darkly as he regarded me once, and then resumed staring at the floor.

“No,” I answered carefully, approaching him. “Edward—*son*—that makes you human.”

He snorted again, not lifting his eyes. “I am not human. None of us are.”

One stride closed the gap between us, but Edward made no attempt to meet my eyes.

“Look at me,” I commanded gently.

His eyes flickered to mine, uncertain.

“Son,” I began quietly, “you asked me to take out a man who posed harm to Bella, instead of striking him dead where he stood. You tracked a beast over a thousand miles to make sure that he would never hurt her. You moved our entire family across the country because you feared for Bella’s safety, yet you nearly wasted away from your pain. You spent half a year trying to make sure that a threat you weren’t even sure existed was extinguished, and then when you thought it had all been for naught, you ran to Volterra. Putting aside the fact that it scared *me* half to death”—my voice was rising, and my lips trembled a little—“these are not the acts of a man who has lost his humanity. A demon doesn’t know sadness, or loneliness, or heartbreak. A soulless being doesn’t experience that kind of pain.”

My son’s jaw flexed, and he opened his mouth as though to say something, but I took a deep breath and cut him off.

“And he definitely does not experience love.” I took my eyes from Edward’s face for a fraction of a second, and his gaze dropped to the floor again at once as I went on.

“I am certain that I have a soul, Edward. And I know this because of you. If I had no soul, there would be no part of capable of loving you as I do. There would be no part of me to love Esme, and Rosalie, and Emmett, and Alice, and Jasper, and Bella. Demons don’t have families. They don’t love. And, more importantly, they certainly can’t accept love from others. Bella loves you, more than even I was willing to admit. And you love her. You wouldn’t be able to do that if you had no soul. I promise you that. But you have to be able to accept her love in return. You must be equals.

“And it took me all year to figure that out,” I whispered. Well, it had taken most of the year, at any rate. Six months of pain, anger, sadness, helplessness in the face of first the death of

my patient, and then of my child. “But you asked why”—I drew a shaking breath— “and that is *why*.”

Edward let out an audible gulp and backed up a stride, saying nothing. I watched him, at the way his eyes darted again to the floorboards, and wondered if he had understood me.

He nodded, looking a little thunderstruck. Finally he drew a deep breath, and uttered only three words:

“Thank you, Carlisle.”

And much to my surprise, he closed the gap between us in a fraction of an instant, and his arms closed around my body. I stood there in shock, not moving, before I finally returned the embrace.

“Always, son,” I whispered.

Edward drew a wavering breath, then stepped away from me awkwardly. We both hesitated a moment, as though unsure what to do. I watched as the wind through the window whipped through Edward’s hair, snapping it around his tense face. I wondered if he was still angry with me.

“No,” he answered, but this time his voice was softer, pensive. “I’m—still angry.” He shot a glance toward the broken window. “But I’m not angry with you. I’m just angry.”

“Can I do anything to help?”

He gulped and shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He slunk quietly across the room toward the door, but stopped abruptly, looking away toward the window.

“I just still don’t want her to *do* this,” he muttered.

“I know you don’t,” I said gently, resuming my seat at the desk and gazing across its expanse toward Edward. “But it’s the path she’s chosen, and I will respect that.”

A growl rose from Edward’s chest, but he suppressed it almost at once. He cleared his throat, looking away. “I’m going to go downstairs,” he announced a moment later. “I’ll play for a while until I go back to Bella’s.”

*Play for a while*, I thought. Esme had dusted the grand piano in the foyer immediately upon our homecoming, and we’d had it tuned a few days later. However, it had taken two weeks before Edward had truly sat down for more than just a quick run over the keys. The improvisations which came out now were more melancholy than they once had been, slower in tempo, more in minor keys. Rosalie complained about him never playing anything cheerful, and

Jasper and Emmett teased him about the racket. But somewhere deep, I knew that they, like I, were grateful that the terrible stillness that had plagued our home in Ithaca had fallen away.

I nodded. “You should do that,” I answered. “I have a few things to finish up here. Then perhaps I’ll come down and listen. Oh, and speaking of which”—I reached to the desk—“you have mail.”

My hand closed on Edward’s magazine and the letter at once, and I tossed them to him. He looked them both over quickly, his head nodding with recognition when he saw the letter.

“Who’s Jason Scott?” I asked.

Edward shrugged. “Oh, that’s the formal name that Jasper’s guy in Seattle uses. Since we didn’t have the library up and running when we got here, I thought I’d have him do my new driver’s license instead.”

I frowned. The library was our euphemism for the top floor of our house, where we kept the equipment for the occasional record forgeries and database doctoring that were a necessary evil of keeping our family solidly underground. Some of the equipment had traveled with us to Ithaca, and so it had taken a little while to have it all back in order. But we hadn’t changed anything about our identities in our move—we were all claiming the same ages and roles as we’d had when we’d left.

“Did you...*misplace*...the old one?” The question was absurd.

For a fraction of a second, Edward chuckled. “It’s right where I left it,” he answered. “But it’s not accurate any longer.” In an instant, he sliced open the envelope with a fingernail and threw a small piece of plastic directly into my hands. My eyes flew over the text, searching first our address, Edward’s photo, the fabricated birth date set nineteen years earlier for something on which I might have made a mistake when I had manufactured the previous one. Finally my eyes worked their way to the top line, and my breath caught.

*CULLEN, EDWARD CARLISLE.*

My jaw went a little slack. When I looked up, Edward was smirking. I swallowed over the lump which seemed to be fast forming in my throat and tossed the tiny document back to him. He caught it between two fingers and shrugged.

“Like you said,” he muttered, “it’s a good reminder.” He shoved the license into his jeans pocket and turned toward the door. He was nearly to the doorframe before I regained my voice.

“Edward,” I called, and he stopped, turning to appraise me over his shoulder, his eyebrows raised.

“I love you.”

My son looked down to the floor a moment, and when he lifted his head, the tiniest smile had spread on his face as his eyes shone in the darkness.

“I know, Carlisle,” he answered quietly, his fingers grazing the pocket where he had just stashed the license. “Trust me, I know.”

Then he gave me a nod, and was gone.

A fraction of a second later, I heard the piano bench scrape across the parlor floor, and soon music began to wend its way up the staircase from the foyer. I sat still a moment, listening as Edward’s fingers made purchase on the keys, sailing over arpeggios, striking chords, flying through scales and glissandi as he wove his concerns into a tortured melody. The music was as haunting as it was beautiful, twisting in a dark, minor key, but with the slightest hints of some happier counterpoint buried deep beneath its phrases. Edward’s music wound its way over itself frantically, and as I listened, I knew it to be coming to his fingers straight from within.

From his soul.

Pulling my eyes away from the empty door frame and back to my desk, I turned to where my journal lay open, a few pages having turned themselves backwards on account of the wind that still blew through the window. Bringing my body a little closer to my desk, I picked up one of my fountain pens, turned the pages forward until I reached one which was blank, and began to write.

*April 12, 2006*

*When a patient is released from the hospital, you release him with discharge orders. Don’t move too abruptly, you may tear your sutures. Exercise this amount on these days, increase little by little as you feel comfortable. You may feel nausea for a few days. Some bleeding is normal. Take Ibuprofen for pain. Make a follow-up appointment with the nurse.*

*For physical problems, there is a route to take. Directions to follow. A way to healing.*

*When your family has been to hell and back, there are no such orders. You walk around bruised for a while, trying not to move so suddenly that you’ll tear open the wound. Some things don’t function quite the way they did before. You find that in the absence of a clear path, there is nothing to be done to hasten the healing.*

*And so you simply wait.*

*We aren't finished healing yet—not by a long shot. Edward's every action insinuates that we cannot go back to how we once knew each other, and while the thought worries me, I suspect it is his own quiet wisdom. I see things as I wish they were, or would like them to be, but through his stubborn resolve, he reminds me to respect the way things simply are.*

*I lie to myself if I don't admit that I am fearful—that Edward's anger will not abate; that he will not see eye-to-eye with Bella, and that I will be forced to change her against his will. And I fear that either way, we will go back on our word to those who made possible the continued existence of our family so long ago. But in the end we are still that family, however wounded and uncertain. And I find that faced with a new chapter, I am still hopeful that whatever has brought us this far—Love? Fortitude? Dumb luck?—will carry our family through, however this may end.*

*I am grateful to be a father and a husband. I am grateful for each member of my family, for the ways they have each pulled me from my own lonely existence, and for the support they give me simply by being. And, while at least on one level I wish I could bury and forget these horrific seven months spent in Ithaca, I am grateful for them and for the lessons they have taught me as well.*

*And of course, I am grateful for Edward, my son...my friend. For him, I will always do all that it is in my power to do. He may be the one considered stubborn, but I find I can no longer stand by idly when his joy is so near at hand. I am firmly convinced that despite all that has occurred this past year there will nevertheless be a happy ending for my beloved son.*

*There simply has to be.*

—C. C.

~Fin~

# Chapter Notes

## Chapter 1: Mortality

1. "Ithaca is Gorges" is the slogan of the city of Ithaca, NY, because Ithaca is a) surrounded by natural gorges and waterfalls and whatnot which b) makes it a really gorgeous locale. You see the saying on t-shirts and stuff like you see "I Heart NY" around Manhattan. When I thought about writing the Cullens' time in Ithaca, the saying came immediately as the title, both because it represents Ithaca the place and because for the Cullens, Ithaca really is symbolic of a time when their family was rent apart like a chasm in the earth. So Ithaca is Gorges it is.

## Chapter 5: Primum Non Nocere

1. *Primum non nocere* is Latin for 'first, not to harm.' Although the phrase is technically no longer in the modern Hippocratic oath taken by new physicians, this principle from Hippocrates' teachings on the ethics of medicine has come to stand for ethical medical practice.

## Chapter 6: C. C.

1. Old English for 'happy guard' is *ead waerd*. The phrase was the basis for a popular English given name.

## Chapter 7: What We Have Left Undone

1. "What We Have Left Undone" is a line from the Litany of Penitence from the Book of Common Prayer. The BCP is used worldwide by the churches in the Anglican Communion, and its text is appropriated into the services of many Protestant denominations. The full line reads "We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

## Chapter 8: Intent to Kill

1. The Greek word *menis*, which means 'wrath,' is the first word of Homer's *The Iliad*.
2. The idea that Edward would enjoy hearing the minds of college students is borrowed from thatwitr's *In the Blink of an Eye*. I thank Katie for her permission to make reference to it.

## Chapter 9: In Giving

1. I *wish* that I could lay claim to the perfect idea that Carlisle worships on the Solstice. However, the original idea is not mine-it comes from blondieAKARobin's *Dark Side of The Moon*, chapter 12, "Adeste Fideles." Blondie was quite kind to give me permission to give her idea a full life in *Ithaca*.



2. The prayer which Esme asks Carlisle to pray is known as the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. It can be traced back to an anonymous author from Normandy around 1912 and became popular during WWI. It was used most famously in morning prayer by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who requested it be recited at the ceremony when she received the Nobel Peace Prize. Looking at its stanzas, I often feel that Carlisle would have written a similar prayer himself. (The chapter title is from the line "For it is in giving that we receive.")

3. A PICC line is a catheter that is installed into the upper arm of a patient to ease the administration of intravenous medication. A sphygmomanometer is the device that measures blood pressure.

4. Bluing is a household product used to improve the appearance of white fabric. Essentially a very light blue dye, it would be added to the wash water so that white fabric that would otherwise appear yellowish or gray would appear blue-white, which we perceive as looking "cleaner." It was commonly in use in the late nineteenth century-which might well have been the last time Jasper actually had to think about laundry!

## **Chapter 10: Spitfire**

1. The California Perfume Company was the original name of the company that would become Avon Products. They began selling door-to-door in the 1910s, and by the early twenties had sales forces all over the United States. They became known as Avon in 1939.

2. The New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration typically draws half to a quarter of a million people to the city for several weeks of crazy revelry. The events in *Ithaca* take place in 2005-2006, which means that Edward would have been in New Orleans for the first Mardi Gras after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. While attendance was lower that year (around 400,000), the party was a little crazier as everyone was celebrating the city's recovery from the hurricane. The neighborhood where Edward finds Maria is the Lower Ninth Ward, a low-income neighborhood that was immediately adjacent to one of the major levee breaks. Water levels in parts of the neighborhood reached over ten feet, and many residents had to be airlifted from their rooftops. Many others lost their lives. As Edward "predicted," many of the homes in this neighborhood were eventually razed, and many others still sit empty and in serious disrepair. To this day, only about 11% of the former residents have been able to return.

## Chapter 14: Fathers and Brothers

1. The language the Volturi were speaking, which Edward did not understand, was the Etruscan language. It's a dead language, and all its relative languages in its language family, Tyrsenian, have died as well, which is why it sounded so unfamiliar to someone born in 1901. Although there are certainly several historical inaccuracies about the age of the Volturi and their being Etruscan in the first place, I'm running with what SM gave us, even when it's a little strange. Many thanks to **minisinoo** for providing the information on this one and inspiring that little scene.

2. I hope I made this apparent from context, but just in case anyone is confused as to why Aro didn't call Bella *la tua cantante*—"La tua" is "your" (literally "the your.") He's referring to Edward in the third person, so he calls Bella *la sua cantante*—"his." Thanks to **NadiaCullen** for the help with the Italian!