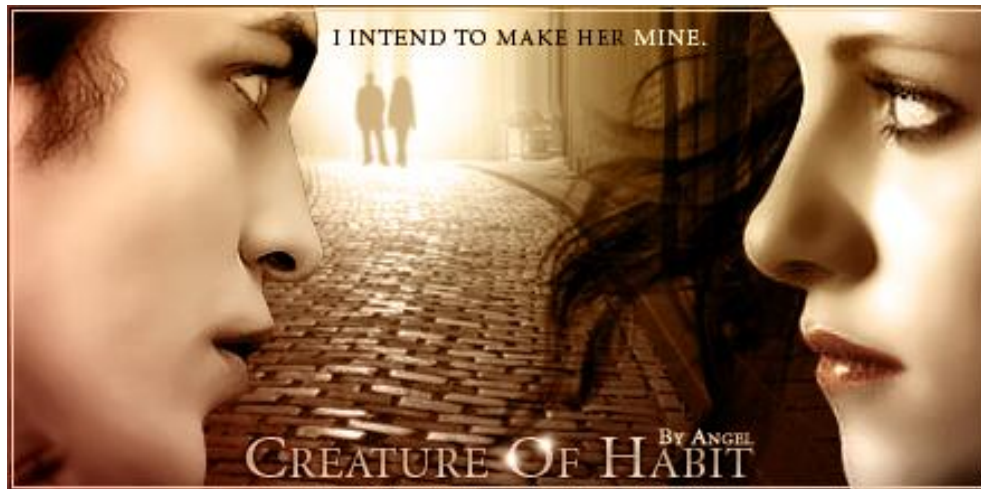


Fanfiction Based On Stephanie Meyer's Twilight Series  
Rated MA For Mature Adult. Language, Violence & Sexual Situations

# Creature Of Habit

By EZRocksAngel



**Summary:** *Bella begins working for the elusive and distant Edward Cullen who she discovers is hiding behind an elaborate charade to maintain his secret lifestyle. Bella is determined to find out the mysteries of Edward Cullen but with what results? AU, OOC. Bella & Edward.*



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## Chapter One

BPOV

I took one last look in the mirror, quickly adjusting my thick sweater and jeans, before I picked up my keys and bag by the door. I ran down the stairs towards the parking lot, managing to avoid the puddles scattered across the uneven pavement and only tripped once.

I didn't even fall.

Things may just be looking up.

Four years ago I had been awarded one of the coveted positions on campus in the library. It was an easy job yet not too boring. It allowed me time to complete my homework and my co-workers were all nice and pleasant enough. I didn't know many of them well but I preferred to work alone and only had a small group of close friends.

Unfortunately, once I graduated I no longer could work on campus and I was desperately trying to find a full time job in the area. I really had no interest in moving back home to Phoenix at this point.

I had just finished helping a student with reference material and was about to start combing the Want Ads when Mr. Hudson, my boss, came up and asked me to come to his office.

I followed him behind the rows of shelves to a private area that housed the offices of the library administration, wondering what he wanted to meet with me about.

He gestured for me to take the empty seat across from his desk before asking, "Bella, you haven't found a job following graduation have you?"

I shook my head at him, and grimaced, "No, I have sent my application out to dozens of places, and have had a couple of interviews but so far I haven't had much luck."

I'd been completely frustrated at the lack of job opportunities offered me. I was bright and hard working. I had experience and good references but I couldn't seem to catch a break. And I needed one fast, as this job was going to be over in two weeks and I would have rent and bills to pay with no job.

Mr. Hudson had been my boss the entire time I'd worked in the library and he was really more like a mentor than a supervisor to me at this point, so I wasn't completely surprised he had noticed my plight. He smiled and said, "Well, I think I may have found something for you."

"Really?" I said as my mouth broke out into a grin, "That would be great! Tell me about it!"

He sat back in his seat, relaxed and said, "I don't know if you are aware but Pacific Northwest Trust is a large contributor to the library and its programs. They have always been very generous and in return I have assisted them in finding a personal assistant for their CEO every year or so."

I thought about what he was saying. I had never considered being a personal assistant and wasn't sure what that involved, but I was desperate and willing to consider anything at this point.

"I've heard of them, aren't they are involved in a lot of philanthropic work around the city?" I asked, trying to place the name of the company with the programs it funded.

"Yes," He replied, "Mr. Cullen is very involved in supporting the arts and other non-profit organizations. I think you're a perfect candidate for the job. You're very organized and pay close attention to detail, plus you're the most professional employee I've had in years. Mr. Cullen has very high standards and requests only our best. I think this year that person is you."

I felt the heat run up my cheeks, "Wow. Thank you. What do I need to do? Send in my resume or fill out some type of application?" I was a seriously flattered.

Mr. Hudson leaned forward and picked up the phone, "Let me call and make the arrangements. Bella, I think this could be a great first job and PNT will be an excellent referral for future positions."

I couldn't help but think that my luck was running high as Mr. Hudson called Mr. Cullen's office and secured me an interview for a couple of days later.

That night when I returned home I did what every new employee would do before going in for a new job.

I Googled my boss.

I was entering the information when my roommate Angela entered the apartment, dropping her school bags on the couch and plopping down in the thick cushions.

"Hey! I've got great news..." I started smiling at her over the monitor.

"What kind of news?" She asked sitting up a little, intrigued.

"Mr. Hudson has found me a job after graduation!" I squealed a little, because I honestly couldn't help it.

"Wow! That is really great! Tell me all about it," she said excitedly.

Angela was a great friend. A true friend. We both lived in the same dorm freshman year but in different rooms. She had a roommate with a serious boyfriend and things became uncomfortable fast. I had a roommate who set her alarm for 6am regardless of what time she had to get up and had a habit of pressing the snooze button for hours. After two months of this our living situation deteriorated when I threw her alarm clock down the hallway in a fit of sleep deprived rage. Angela and I found refuge in one another and had been together ever since.

"Well it's with Pacific Northwest Trust, and apparently their CEO, Mr. Cullen needs a personal assistant for about a year. Mr. Hudson thinks it could be a great stepping stone for me," I explained.

I saw a flash of curiosity in Angela's eyes, "Mr. Cullen...I went to high school in Forks with some kids named Cullen. They were...how do I describe them....different."

I squinted at her for being vague, "What exactly does that mean?"

"I don't know how to explain it. There was a girl and guy in my grade, Alice Cullen and Jasper Hale. Their siblings were in the grade above. A boy and a girl." She said, walking across the room and getting a Coke out of the refrigerator before coming back over and saying, "They were all very smart and very, very attractive. I doubt I will ever see guys as hot as those two in real life. Or two women as beautiful, but..." she trailed off.

"But what?" I responded a little irritated. Angela was a very nice person and didn't like to say rude or bad things about people. I felt the same but this was important to me and I needed as much information as I could get.

Angela rolled her eyes at my impatience before answering, "*But* they were very standoffish. They made no friends the entire time they were there. They kept together and from what I could tell they were split into couples, Alice and Jasper and Emmett and Rosalie. Which sounds odd but they weren't related and were foster children of the local doctor and his wife. It sounds rude but there was just something about them that made me feel uneasy."

"Hmmm...I don't know if it is the same family or not. All he told me was Mr. Cullen but I can't imagine this being the same group of people, can you?" I said turning back to the computer. "But, I was on my way to finding out what I could when you came in."

I entered in Pacific Northwest Trust, and countless links showed up on the screen. I clicked on the first option and I felt my eyes grow wide.

Mr. Cullen apparently was Edward Cullen and he was gorgeous. I mean, really, really gorgeous.

"Does he look familiar?" I pointed to the screen.

Angela leaned in and said, "Wow. Ummm...no, not really, but he does kind of resemble them. I can't explain how other than, maybe something about his coloring. Wow, he's hot too."

I looked at the picture. I noted he was dressed in formal clothing at some kind of charity event. The most noticeable thing other than his looks was he looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes. And he looked young. Very young. I scoured the information and found mention of his age to be in his early 20's. He must be some kind of prodigy or something.

While reading the information about Mr. Cullen and PNT I found that most of it was very general and not specific at all. It all sounded the same, page after page of press releases, the same two or three photos and general description of PNT and the wonderful work they did in the community.

I was intrigued by my potential new boss and was definitely getting excited about the idea of working for him. This was the attitude I held when I showed up for my interview a couple days later. I had been feeling a bit rejected after so many interviews and no solid job offers. I was encouraged about this one though and tried to keep my spirits up.

As I arrived at the address I had been given I was surprised to find I was at a townhouse located in the historic part of town. Mr. Cullen's current assistant Kim, welcomed me when I rang the bell. As she ushered me inside I assessed that I would be working from his home and not his offices.

Kim took me to a formal parlor off of the foyer and offered me a seat. I was astonished at all of the beautiful antiques in the room. I had never been in a home with such expensive and tasteful décor. But then again, I had never known anyone who had a personal assistant or that was a CEO of a large company.

She was pretty, a tall blonde woman in her mid 20's. She sat down in the seat across from me and smiled. "Isabella, thank you for coming today to meet with me. I've heard wonderful things about you from Mr. Hudson. I used to work for him as well but in another department of the library. I'm surprised our paths never crossed." She mused. I realized how young she was, only a year or two older than myself.

I smiled back, feeling relieved that she seemed so nice and casual, and said, "Thank you for seeing me. It is nice to meet you as well. I also appreciate you taking the time to interview me."

"Let me start by saying, this is not really an interview, Mr. Cullen thinks you will be a wonderful assistant and would like for you to start after graduation. I will be leaving in two weeks and it would be best if you could spend some time with me next week training. It is not a difficult job but Mr. Cullen is very particular about what he needs done around the house."

I nodded enthusiastically as I realized I had a job and I would be starting pretty much right away.

Kim continued, "Honestly, since Mr. Cullen is not here right now I feel free to tell you exactly what is expected of you. If you think you are in over your head at any point tell me so we can make other arrangements.

This revelation stunned me a little but I appreciated her being candid with me. Working for someone in their home was a different from any kind of job I'd held before. Back in Phoenix I'd worked in retail and as a waitress during the summer breaks but nothing like this.

"First, let me explain that he is really a wonderful man but very quiet and keeps to himself. Some weeks I don't see him at all." She paused for a minute and watched my expression. I had no problem with this at all as I preferred to be alone myself. I gave her an encouraging smile and asked her to continue, "He leaves me lists of my duties each morning on my desk before I come in. They're not difficult jobs but he is rather particular about how he wants things done. I will show you more about this later on."

"Kim, I promise you that you can not scare me off. I am pretty meticulous about my work as well, so this sounds like it will be a good fit. Mr. Hudson wouldn't have suggested this job to me if he didn't think I could handle it." I assured her.

"I agree and am glad you feel that way. Now, another thing about Mr. Cullen is that he is an extremely private person. If you want to keep this job you must use discretion about him at all times. He holds a position of prominence in the community and his reputation is very important. Do not go out on a Friday night and talk about him in the middle of a bar. I'm not sure how, but he will find out, and you will lose your job. Furthermore, you will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement before you start, which is

completely standard for a personal assistant." Her voice was serious when she said this and again all I could do was nod my head in agreement and express that I understood.

After this Kim took me on a tour of the house. The downstairs held the parlor, a kitchen, a small office for me and a library. I peeked in the library and was overwhelmed by the amount of books and music he had in there. The shelves were lined floor to ceiling and there was a complicated looking stereo on one end of the room. Kim noted my interest and said, "You are welcome to look at or listen to any of his music. He has encouraged me to do so before. Just make sure you put it back where it goes. One time I put a CD back on the wrong shelf and he spotted it immediately. I swear he has eyes like a hawk."

We made our way to the kitchen and Kim opened some cabinets and the refrigerator which both held minimal amounts of food. She laughed when she saw the questioning look on my face and said, "Mr. Cullen has a specific diet he maintains. I'm not sure what he eats but it is very little and it is never in the house. You are welcome to keep coffee or tea here for yourself and to keep your lunch in the refrigerator if you'd like. Grocery shopping is not one of your duties."

We moved on to the laundry room, storage areas and garage which housed what looked like several expensive cars. I was completely clueless about cars and anything to do with them. I wondered allowed if I was responsible for them in any way. Kim laughed again and said, "The cars are something you have to earn his trust with. But yes, you may have to take them in for service or something now and again."

We went back inside and she explained that the house has a front and back staircase. We took the back staircase to the second floor and she quickly pointed out the areas I was allowed to enter.

Kim waved her hand down the hall to two closed doors, "Those are Mr. Cullen's private rooms. Do not enter them at all. Ever. During my entire time here I have never had to go into his rooms. There is a guest room and bath down the hall if he has a visitor which does happen time to time and well...follow me," she said. Before she opened the door she gave me a look and said, "If you can handle this room you can handle this job," and she gestured for me to follow her to a room to our left. She pushed open the door and I felt my jaw drop.

It was a full sized room that had been converted into a closet or a dressing room. All four walls were filled with shelves, drawers, or rows of hanging racks. I walked over and ran my fingers down a section of suits arranged by color or possibly season. I looked over at Kim and said, "This is unbelievable."

There were lines of shoes and shirts and coats, each with its own special drawer or shelf. It would take several lifetimes to accumulate this amount of clothing and accessories. I couldn't imagine the amount of time or money it would take to shop for a wardrobe like this.

As I inspected the items closer I noticed a trend. Many of the items looked vintage. All were in good condition but clearly from another time or era. I pointed to a row of hats on an upper shelf and wondered aloud if he was a collector.

Kim agreed, "I've wondered this myself. You will find that he is something of a hoarder. I don't think he has ever thrown anything away. And I don't think I have ever seen him wear the same thing twice."

She showed me a couple more areas of interest and then we walked back downstairs. We worked out a part time schedule for the next week since I had to complete my exams.

Kim escorted me to the door and I walked out to my car feeling a little overwhelmed from all the information that had just been given to me. And I was not completely sure what I had gotten myself into. From what I could gather I had apparently just agreed to work for the next year for a reclusive, obsessive compulsive, vintage clothes wearing and special diet eating, boss.

I sighed as I started the ignition on my car. I quiet possibly had made a huge mistake or at least I may have lost my mind. But desperate times call for desperate measures and I needed a job and who was I to turn my nose up at a perfectly good one just because my boss had some strange habits.

Xxx

EPOV

I drove down the back alley and clicked the button on the garage door opener. The door slid upwards and I eased the car into its parking space.

It was after five but it was raining so the streets were already getting dark.

I pushed open the door, to the kitchen and listened, noting the quiet.

Kim was gone for the day.

There was an odd scent lingering in the air, like flowers, and I wondered if Kim had brought some in or was wearing a different perfume.

I walked down the hall to the library and chose a couple of CDs for the night. I had work to do from home tonight since I'd been cooped up in a never ending board meeting all day.

My head was pounding from the constant hum. I looked forward to some peace and quiet.

Walking past Kim's desk I picked up the report sheet she left me each day, updating me on messages and paperwork or any tasks not completed.

I scanned her report and noted the new PA had come in and was set to return next week. This was good as I didn't want a disruption in my schedule or routine.

Pushing the door open to my dressing room to change I noticed the scent of flowers was prevalent here as well and I concluded it must be a new perfume.

I liked it, but well, it made me kind of hungry.

I quickly changed, dropping my soiled clothes into the hamper and grabbed the stack of newspapers Kim left for me on the changing room table. I popped in the CDs and searched for the remote on the table by the couch.

Pressing play I settled into the soft leather and began thumbing my way though the huge stack of papers.

I sniffed.

Nothing.

Intrigued, I got up and walked into the dressing room again. I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs.

Flowers.

I considered for a moment before I walked out the door and down to my car.

My research could wait, but the sudden, ravenous hunger inside could not.



## Chapter Two

BPOV

Graduation came and went with the usual caps and gowns, tassels and photos. My mom and dad came up from Arizona for the ceremony which was nice because I imagined it would be a while before I saw them again.

I was sad to see them go but at the same time excited about officially starting my new job. I'd spent the last week training with Kim and felt pretty confident in managing what was expected from me when I was on my own.

I still hadn't encountered Mr. Cullen during my training since he was never home during the times I was there. Kim said he had many meetings at his office and he traveled some during the day to check on the projects supported by PNT.

It was raining, of course, as I drove up to the Cullen house. Unfortunately I could not find a spot out front and had to drive to a side street for a space.

I grumbled under my breath as I took out my umbrella and slung my messenger bag over my shoulder. I managed to make it to the house fairly dry and I trotted up the stairs, letting myself in with the key that I'd been given by Kim. I shook out my umbrella and took off my raincoat, pausing to hang it on the rack in the foyer before I walked towards my desk.

*My desk.*

Kim had removed all of her personal items and the desk was clean and free of any clutter.

I took a moment to sit in the chair and relish the moment. My first real job and my first real desk. It was kind of daunting to be a grown up.

I picked up the list written by Mr. Cullen, who had the most elaborate, distinct script I'd ever seen. It was very old fashioned looking and had a touch of femininity to it. I was jealous of the smooth lines and curves of his letters. I hoped I never had to write something for him in my own loopy girl handwriting.

I shook my head at the thought and continued to read my instructions that included gathering his laundry, running some basic errands to the home improvement store and drug store. He also needed a certain type of pen from a specialty shop north of town. I was instructed to go to his PO Box where he had his mail and newspapers delivered. Apparently Mr. Cullen subscribed to over 15 newspapers a day which he reviewed each night. I had no idea how he consumed all that information after a full day of work but I guess it was not my business to wonder.

I reviewed the list and the instructions, taking time to call for directions for one of the shops. I also noticed there was a shiny silver credit card attached to the note pad with Pacific Northwest Trust embossed on the front. A separate note said I was to use this for approved purchases.

I went to the foyer and put my raincoat and bag on again, popping out my umbrella under the small awning over the top step.

I sighed before I dashed to my car, hopping over the puddles.

Six hours, eight stores, one stop for gas, another for lunch, one stumble into a puddle and an argument with the Laundromat later, I was back at the office. I was exhausted and drenched from being out in the rain and all I wanted was to go home and get in bed. But I had two hours to go and need to put up my purchases and do the small list of things I was instructed to do here at the house.

I spent some time changing the light bulbs out in the library and parlor. Apparently Mr. Cullen had decided to switch over to environmentally conserving halogens. I felt wasteful throwing out the old, perfectly fine bulbs but that was not my choice.

In the library I was distracted by the books filling the rows that wrapped around the room. As with many other things in the house it was a mixture of old and new, and there were even a large amount of books in foreign languages including German, French and Italian. I paused to pick up a series of leather bound editions of Shakespeare. They were worn and soft. There were copies of Homer and Steinbeck. I also noticed a tidy row of thick medical journals. I know he was supposed to be a prodigy but I found it hard to believe he could read all of these. I snorted to myself as I imagined the pretention and ego of my boss.

After I finished saving the world one light bulb at a time, I made my way upstairs carrying the laundry and other personal items to his dressing room. After laying the clothing over the back of a chair I placed the newspapers on the dressing counter as instructed, stacking them up with a small gap at the top revealing the title of the particular copy. Then I arranged his mail in the slotted organizer, large envelopes in the back with the smaller in front.

Walking back to the clean laundry I tore the plastic wrappers off and pulled out the hangers I'd picked them up in. I laughed at the extravagance of using special hangers, thick wooden ones, identical, lined up, sterile and uniform. I slid in the appropriate hangers and placed the clothing in the right spot. I knew it was the right spot because I had a chart, a cheat sheet or rather a cheat binder, given to me by Kim. Each item was photographed and documented in its proper location.

I walked around the room, adjusting and making sure everything was in its place. For some reason I liked being up here. I had to admit it was a little lonely being in the house without company and being in this dressing room was the closest to human contact while at work. The rest of the house felt kind of impersonal and up here I was able to learn a little more about the elusive Mr. Cullen.

I noticed for the first time a collection of vintage tees hanging on one of the racks. I flipped through them, reading the names and scanning the logos; The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Who, The Grateful Dead, The Doors, Janis Joplin, Pink Floyd, Led Zepplin, David Bowie, Queen, and KISS. I stopped at the KISS one and ran my fingers over the slick surface of Gene Simmons painted face and ridiculously long tongue. There were too many to go though but they seemed in chronological order and towards the end I saw one for Cher, Elton John, Nirvana, and the latest one for Madonna's Hard Candy Tour.

It was an impressive collection, very eclectic. He must have found a specialty shop that worked off original designs. I mused whether or not Kim was in charge of finding and purchasing these.

Ah, the life of the rich.

I left the room, switched off the light and closed the door behind me. I wandered down the stairs to my desk and filled out my daily report. I typed it up, not wanting to reveal my hideous handwriting, and left it on the edge of the desk as instructed.

As I gathered my things I noted that it had been a good day but I was happy to head home to order a pizza and go over the day's events with Angela. I wondered if I would see Mr. Cullen anytime soon since my interest was getting more and more piqued as the days went by.

*Surely* I had to come face to face with him at some point.

Xxx

EPOV

Flowers.



The scent still assaulted my nostrils and I could only assume it was the new PA. I was one of those fragrances that at first it smells really good. Then it becomes overwhelming and obnoxious.

I was teetering between the two which was incredibly annoying.

Regardless, I would leave her a note tomorrow asking her to stop wearing the perfume, claiming it was giving me migraines.

This may be a stretch but it was messing with my head one way or the other and migraine sounded as plausible as anything else I could come up with.

I was in my dressing room and removing a shirt from my vintage collection off the hanger. I was going out tonight. I needed to. I had the tendency to shut myself off in the house at night, decompressing from the long days at work. Normally, I didn't go into the office so much but as it was the end of the fiscal year there were many meetings with accountants and committee chairs, reviewing the budgets and organizations we funded. I had no choice but to show up and fulfill my role as CEO.

I pulled the light blue shirt over my head and tugged my jeans up, buttoning them at the top. I selected a pair of brown boots and a jacket before walking over to the desk to peruse the mail from today. I held an envelope under my nose and winced as I felt a sharp pain.

Damn flowers.

Sniffing the envelope one more time before leaving left the room, I tucked several of the papers under my arm and left by the front door instead of the back. It was still slightly misting when heading I set off in the direction of the more populated and trendy section of town by foot. I noted that the fresh air made my head feel better but I still felt a tinge of pain. I reasoned it was the lingering effect of the perfume and shook it off.

Crossing the street I walked towards my destination, taking time to observe passing groups and listen to their chatter. It was a Monday so the crowds were thin and thoughts seemed to be on work or other regular life stressors.

Trivial.

I walked to the corner café, one with a patio out front, and greeted the counter worker with a smile. She knew my face and my order, as I was a regular here. Businesses come and go in this area and this particular shop had been here for about six months, which was perfect for me. Long enough to been seen but not long enough to make a long term impression.

I went back out to the covered patio and placed my papers and drink on the table, pulling out a seat and settled in. I scanned the first paper, tagging the items of interest. There were several small mentions of the type of incident I was looking for surprisingly close to town, which was concerning. I would take the tagged articles and do further research at home.

As I read I was aware of the nagging pain that would not leave me. I wondered if someone else was wearing the cursed fragrance as well. This could be a problem for me if it suddenly became popular.

Irritated I sniffed the air and found nothing of interest and finally realized, with astonishment, the offending odor was coming from me.

I pulled up the front of my shirt to my nose and inhaled.

Shit.

A burst of fragrance came from Gene Simmons' upside down, makeup-covered face and my head began to spin.

I dropped the shirt for a moment and took a gulp of fresh air.

Okay, better. A master of discipline, I was intrigued by my reaction and reasoned I should attempt to get used to it since it was bothering me so much.

Edward Cullen loved a challenge.

So I sat and read, ignoring the throbbing pain. Occasionally though, I found myself pulling my shirt up quickly and breathing in, under the guise of checking to see if it was any less offensive.

It wasn't.

But I didn't stop either.

Like a junkie craving a hit of heroin, each time I sucked in the odor I felt a rush, followed by pain, and then disgust.

After an hour of repeating this ridiculous pattern, I threw away my untouched coffee and collected my papers. I was more than a little disturbed at my behavior and irritated at the power this was having over me.

I stood on the street corner, torn, unsure as to what to do. I had two choices. Go home as intended or go out and satiate my cravings.

For the second time my cravings won and I turned away from the direction of my home, shoved the papers in the trash and walked with determination towards the only thing that could ease my hunger.



## Chapter Three

BPOV

I watched the computer churn out the sheet of paper documenting my accomplishments for the day.

Leaving the paper in the assigned location I let out a deep sigh. I had survived my first week of work and now was meeting Angela out for dinner to celebrate.

I picked up my bag and slipped my arms into my coat, thankful for once that it was not raining. My phone rang as I turned the lock on the door and I scrambled to find it in my purse. In the process I dropped the keys and barely flipped open the phone before it went to voice mail.

"Hello," I answered, distracted, looking around for the keys.

"Isabella?"

"Yeah, this is Bella," I grunted. Ah! My fingers connected with the keys.

"Oh yes, Bella. This is Edward Cullen." I froze.

Crap.

I fought to gain some professionalism before saying, "Yes sir, how are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. I know it is late but I need you to do one more thing before you leave." He informed me.

"Oh, of course," I replied groaning internally. Yes, *of course*. He would pick tonight, Friday night, the only night I had plans, to keep me late.

Pushing the key into the lock, I let myself back into the house.

"I'm having my office send you some paperwork via fax. Once it all comes in, please copy it in triplicate, and have them spiral bound." His words came out in a rush and I ran down the hallway to get a piece of paper to write on, "The cover should be clear, but the backing needs to be opaque. You may choose the color. Black usually works. Each set of documents needs to be numbered, notarized and logged in the file. When you're finished just leave it on your desk by the daily report."

I was still scribbling down the information when I realized it was my turn to talk, so I blurted out, "No problem. I would be happy to do that."

"Thank you, Isabella." And the line went dead.

I dropped my head to the desk and moaned. I guess I knew he had my number, but I hadn't expected him to use it since I'd never actually met him. This was the first direct task he had asked me to do. Well, other than the note he left asking me to change perfume since it was giving him migraines. I didn't wear perfume so I had no idea how to fulfill that request.

I picked up the phone again and texted Angela apologizing for ditching her and cursing the life of my elusive boss. I asked her to meet me at our favorite bar at 9:00 with margaritas on the table.

I refused to let this ruin my whole night so I sucked it up and prepared to finish my task quickly. So I did the best thing you can do when in a hurry, I waited. My eyes flicked to the fax machine and waited for the information to start rolling in.

Five minutes passed and nothing had come so I checked the power switch and confirmed it was on. Then I checked the paper supply. Then I checked the connection to the wall, and the power switch again. Forty-five minutes later the machine began humming with life.

I snatched the papers as they came out, making sure they stayed in order, and quickly ran out the door to my car to the copy store. Luckily there was a 24-hour shop a couple miles away. I glanced at the clock on the dash as I darted out of the car.

6:30. Plenty of time to finish, go home and change and get to the bar.

Since it was Friday night the store was not very crowded and my hopes soared. I took a place in line behind an older man with a small stack of papers.

My hope was short lived as I watched the 16 year old behind the counter approach the customer in front of me. He had ear buds hanging over his shoulders, a dirty t-shirt peeking out from behind his crumpled vest and clearly did not have a date later that night so he was in no rush.

Their exchange lasted a full 38 minutes, according to my watch, when the man in front of me, who had explained for the thirteenth time that he needed the paperwork enlarged, but not too large and not too small. They had to make countless copies before the perfect size was agreed upon. And I almost clapped when he finally walked out of the store.

I skipped up to the counter, smiling brightly at the surly teenager in front of me.

"Hi." I said, hoping he would put some pep in his step if I was nice.

He barely glanced at me as he said, "Hey. What do you need?" Hmmm, I may need to up the charm.

"Oh, I need some copies made and then bound. Here," and I shoved the paperwork in front of him with the directions I had written down. "Sorry, I know, but my boss really needs it. Ugh, working on Friday night sucks, right?"

He picked up the directions and grunted, turning to the copiers behind him.

I sighed and stole a glance at my watch. It was 7:15. There was no way I could make it home to change but I looked okay, well I thought I did, even if Copy Boy didn't think so.

He could do this and I would get it notarized and then leave it on the desk and race to meet Angela. No problem.

I spent the next 25 minutes pacing the store. I made a bracelet out of paper clips, and wrote my name in White Out on scrap paper I found in the trash. Just when I thought I was going to completely lose my shit Copy Boy walked back over and I skeptically looked at his hands which were annoyingly empty.

"Finished?" I asked.

He shrugged, "The binder is kind of messing up so I had to make new copies for the one that got jammed up."

Twenty minutes later I had my binders and had paid with my shiny black credit card. I sat in the car and realized I had no idea where to get something notarized at this time of night. I ran back in and asked Copy Boy if someone there could do it.

He thought for a minute and said, "Yeah, Sarah my boss can do it."

I almost leaped over the counter and gave him a kiss. Probably his first one, but I was willing to make the sacrifice.

"Great! Can you give them to her for me?" I asked.

"Well no. She doesn't come back in until ten. Sorry."

Stupid Copy Boy. He would die a virgin, I was sure.

Pissed, I walked back to my car. I had no idea what to do. I was banging my head on the steering wheel when my phone rang.

I answered with little enthusiasm, "Hello."

"Bella, are you finished?"

It was Angela. I could hear the music behind her thumping signaling that she was already at the bar.

"No, I have everything but the paperwork must be notarized. I have no idea what to do. It's Friday at 8:15 pm. Not only am I not going to be able to meet you I will probably get fired since I failed at my first assignment given to me directly by my boss." I whined.

"Okay, calm down. We can totally figure this out." Angela assured me and I took a deep breath, trying to make myself focus.

Clutching the phone I said, "The notary at the copy place won't be back until 10 pm. The bank is closed and any other official place would be too by now."

There was a long pause on the phone and finally Angela said, "Well, what would his old PA have done?"

"Angela! Yes! Let me call Kim and find out what she suggests to do." I snapped my phone shut, hanging up on her.

I scrolled through my number and found Kim's where I had entered it in case of an emergency. I sighed in relief when she picked up in the third ring, "Kim. It's Bella. I need your help."

Xxx

EPOV

I realized it was almost ten o'clock when I gathered my things from the back seat of the car. I had spent part of the day in Forks taking care of some family business.

Well, they called it family business. I called it an intervention.

For the twentieth time in as many years.

This of course put me behind on my work here and my nerves were shot from all the talking and guilt and the non-stop chatter I'd spent all these years avoiding.

My fingers paused on the door knob.

*thump thump*

It was a vibration that I could feel in the hollow of my chest.

*thump thump*

I looked around and even leaned out the door of the garage towards the alley.

Nothing. Silence. Not even a car in sight.

I walked back to the door and pressed the button to the garage door before walking in the kitchen.

As I closed the door I was assaulted by a wave of perfume.

Damn. I swelled with irritation. Earlier in the week I left her a note about the perfume and unbelievably it actually seemed worse today. Was she bathing in it?

*thump thump*

The smell must be making my head pound which was the least of my problems as I felt my hunger growing even though I was well fed.

*thump, thump thump, thump*

Holding my breath I walked though the kitchen towards her desk, planning on grabbing the binders I had asked her to complete, before heading to my room to escape the obnoxious odor.

I was approaching the desk when it happened.

In the mental silence of the room, there was a person standing five feet away.

*thump thump*

Five feet.

I had no idea.

I heard nothing. Not a whisper.

Well, that wasn't entirely true.

Shocked I reacted defensively and a low growl rumbled in my chest.

I had broken a fundamental principal. Never let down your guard.

*thump, thump, thump, thump*

Louder and faster the thumps came.

I took a deep breath.

Flowers.

*thump, thump, thump, thump, thump*

I could taste her fear.

She had long dark hair and a fair complexion. She turned and looked at me, surprised, her eyes widening and her small hand covering her pink lips.

I cocked my head at the silence. I searched but found nothing other than the pounding of her heart.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You scared me! You must be Mr. Cullen. I'm Bella," and she extended her hand towards me.

*thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump*

Her heart beat faster and faster even though her face had calmed once she realized it was me.

I stared at her face and then down at her hand.

She held it there for a moment, floundering in the air, until she finally withdrew it, surely remembering the rules Kim had told her about touching me. Or never touching me.

I had mere seconds to pull it together, to maintain composure for the woman in front of me.

I squinted, focusing on her face and not her heartbeat, not her scent, but her face and looked her in the eye. As calmly and softly as possible I told her, "Ms. Swan, I think you need to leave."

Her eyes were filled with confusion and definitely fear. She gaped for a moment and then took a step back before dashing towards the front door where I heard her pull something off the hook on the wall and slam the door.

Her motion caused a waft of flowers to hit my mouth and I literally ran towards the door, crashing into it with my body. Palms pressed to the flat, wooden surface, I braced myself from actually opening it and rushing into the night.

I leaned my back against the door and slid to my knees, clutching my hair in my hands and groaned loudly.

What. The. Fuck. Was. That?

BPOV

"Blow," Angela commanded as she handed me a tissue.

I took it from her and wiped my nose. After I'd been told to leave by Mr. Cullen I ran to my car and cried all the way home. Angela found me a short while later curled up, in my pajamas, eating peanut butter out of the jar.

She was sitting next to me, feet tucked under her body, with her own spoon. She said, "Tell me *exactly* what happened after we hung up."

I sniffed, "well, I called Kim and thank goodness she has a friend who works in an attorney's office who is happy to help out when in need. Needless to say I have him on speed dial now."

I dipped my spoon into the jar and came up with a hulking scoop of peanut butter. Before putting it in my mouth I continued, "So I drove over there and booked it back to the office trying to salvage part of the night. I was standing at the desk when I heard something behind me."

I ate a chunk of peanut butter off the spoon and Angela did the same. I took a huge gulp of milk to wash it down.

"Angela, you know when you get that feeling, like the hairs on the back of your neck stand up?" I asked.

Angela nodded and said, "Intuition, your sense of self-preservation."

"Exactly. That's what I felt except it was weird. It was just Mr. Cullen, so I was relieved, but at the same time he was *not* happy to see me. In fact, he seemed downright furious for some reason. It was almost like I could feel his anger rolling off his body before I even knew he was there." I said.

Angela furrowed her brows and asked, "What did he have to be angry with you about? You were only doing the job he had asked you to do, right?"

"Of course. That's what makes this even more infuriating, he is the one who called me so late, he is the reason I was still at work four hours after I should have left, if he didn't want me there when he got home he should have thought this through better!" I shouted.

My tears were gone and now I was just pissed. So not only was my boss obsessive compulsive and pretentious, he was a jerk too. I shouldn't be surprised.

Angela licked the back of her spoon and said cautiously, "maybe he was having a bad day?"

I rolled my eyes at her and she stuck her tongue out in return. "I don't care Angela. It is not okay to treat people so rudely."

She paused for a moment and I could see a glint in her eye when she said, "Well, tell me this. Was he as hot in person as he was in those photos?"

Leaning back into the side of the couch I groaned before answering, "Hotter. Definitely hotter."

Angela groaned with me and we began laughing at the situation. I'd finally gotten a job with a really hot, young boss and he was a total ass. My luck had run out.

Xxx

EPOV

Time moves differently at different phases of your life. When I was a school boy the day would go on endlessly. Each minute felt like an eternity. Summer vacation would pass in the blink of an eye. As I've changed hours go by like seconds, days like hours, and weeks, like days. In the blink of an eye I would realize a month had passed and while I could recall every instance, the actual time had slipped away with little notice.

Not this weekend. From the moment Isabella Swan ran out the front door on Friday evening, my life had come to a screeching halt.

It took me several hours to pick myself up off the floor.

Well, this wasn't entirely true. I had one slip where I actually made it out the door. I stopped myself but not before ripping the intercom system out of the wall in utter frustration and disappointment. I forced myself back inside and lay on the floor until I calmed down.

Physically I was fine, for the most part. The lingering scent was still bothering me but that was the least of my concerns at the moment. The girl had changed things for me. I realized I was living recklessly and relying on my gift far too much.

In my line of work there was no room for error. An intruder in my home was unacceptable. And although Ms. Swan was not actually an intruder, the fact she surprised me, that I was unaware of her existence in my own home, was more than concerning. It was alarming and quite frankly suicidal.

After I managed to contain myself, and was convinced I wouldn't do anything rash, I moved quietly through the house.

First I went to her desk. I lowered myself in her chair, looking for something. Anything.

Unlike Kim or the PA before her, there were no personal photos or trinkets on the desk. I opened the center drawer and pushed aside the pens and pencils. I found a receipt in the corner of the drawer. I picked it up and began reading.

### **Ted's Tofu Hut**

1-Falafel Wrap....5.99

No Onions

1-Large Herbal Tea (decaffeinated)...\$1.99

1-Slice Carrot Cake....3.99

I felt my eyes narrow in concentration. She was a vegetarian. Who didn't eat onions or drink caffeine. But she wasn't totally healthy.

I shut the drawer and reached for the tablet near the phone with curled girlish writing on it. I felt a wave of humor looking at her handwriting. It reminded me of the pathetic love notes sent to me by various girls when I was a student at school.

Apples

TV Guide

Apple Sauce

Socks

Snapple

Q-Tips

What was a Snapple? And why did she love apples so much? And what kind of store sold apple sauce and socks?

I shoved the list back to its place feeling more confused than before about my assistant. I thought about what I did know. I had read her recommendation from Mr. Hudson and her resume. She was highly recommended and although she was not at the top of her class she was smart and hardworking which was really more appropriate for this job. Kim was impressed and thought she would do well here.

This was all fine and good but had nothing to do with my current situation.

I spent the rest of the day wandering the house, retracing her footsteps. In the kitchen she had used a glass and a mug from the cabinet. There was a tea bag in the trashcan.

In the refrigerator I found soy milk and yogurt.

In the storage closet the light bulbs were stacked perfectly and slightly angled to fit on the shelf in even numbers.

In the parlor I found her footprints near my Cezanne.

In the library the oil from her fingers marked the covers of my Shakespeare.

In the bathroom I could smell flowers on the hand towels.

She had marked my home yet I couldn't penetrate her.

This information meant nothing, I knew, but it was all I could do for the moment. I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to go find her and listen. Make her sit down in front of me and listen to the silence echoing though the room.



Was it real? It was possible I'd imagined it. No. Not possible.

So I spent the weekend locked in my home. I pretended I didn't care to know more about the mysterious woman I'd encountered earlier by studiously researching or cataloging information. Yet I continued my habit of desperately escaping to my closet to press my nose to any article of clothing she may have touched.

I ignored the vibrations of my phone and the outside world.

I stifled the desire building to search her out.

By the end of Sunday I was thoroughly exhausted but had made some decisions.

I stretched out on the couch in my room, away from the flowers and worked out a plan.

Isabella Swan was an enigma, I was willing to admit. But she wouldn't defeat me or my mission. I would use this as a challenge, as a test to further my discipline and focus.

And if it didn't work I would let her go and find a new assistant.

But for now I would immerse myself in her smell and her lack of thoughts and struggle to become stronger from the outcome.



## Chapter Four

BPOV

I was standing on the curb talking to myself.

To a passerby I'm sure I looked unbalanced and I probably was. I didn't know many other people who were willing to go back to a job environment as hostile as this one. I wasn't even sure if I still had a job but really all he did was ask me to leave in the calmest, smoothest, creepiest voice I had ever heard. I wasn't someone who quit for trivial reasons and Mr. Cullen being a jerk, as far as I was concerned, was trivial.

It was a beautiful day, the first in weeks. In this area when it is nice we take advantage of the sun and stay outside as much as possible. I was hoping Mr. Cullen would take this opportunity to be out of the house all day and to stay away from me in general.

So, with one last, "Edward Cullen can fuck himself," mumbled under my breath, I stepped off the sidewalk and onto the path leading to the front steps of his home.

With my chin up and shoulders back I strode down the walkway and up the steps. Well, except when I saw what was at the platform at the top. I eyed a newly formed, gaping hole in the wall outside the front door and an ugly tangle of wires and metal on the brick steps. I pushed aside what was once the intercom box with my foot and managed to put my key in the lock. I had no idea how this could have happened. It honestly looked like someone had ripped the entire system out of the wall.

Crap. He may not know this had happened since it was the front of the house and he tended to use the back door. I really didn't want to have to discuss this with him in person or on the phone.

I took a final deep breath before I turned the knob and walked though the front door quickly, shutting it behind me and listening for a moment.

Silence.

Thank God. Mr. Cullen seemed to be out of the house or at least upstairs. I'd decided to treat this day like any other, like Friday evening hadn't occurred.

I walked through the house and placed my lunch inside the refrigerator, noting I had some yogurt and milk left from last week. I'd planned on taking it with me on Friday but obviously that was not possible. I made my way back over to my desk and sat down, sighing with relief when I saw the tidy list of instructions waiting for me.

Well, this at least confirmed I hadn't been fired. Not yet at least.

I noted that the first thing to do was to call the electrician about fixing the intercom system. Good, he knew already. The list instructed me to stay in the home with the electrician at all times and there was some work to do on the computer while waiting for them to complete the job.

I turned on the computer and found the address book with all the contact information for Mr. Cullen's needs. I called the electrician who almost squealed with delight when I said who my employer was and she immediately informed me someone would be here within the hour. I rolled my eyes as I heard the eager secretary make arrangements for the workmen to be here as soon as possible. It was infuriating how the rich were doted on and treated differently. I imagined calling for my own needs or home and having to wait several days. Of course he probably paid more for this type of service as well.

I busied myself with updating names and addresses into a new program recently installed on the computer. Mr. Cullen wanted this to be coordinated with his hand held device and his lap top. I stared at the daunting list in front of me but finally just bit the bullet and began working. I had made it though one and a half pages when the front door rang. Expecting the workmen, I rushed over to open the door, and was surprised to see it was a postal delivery man carrying a huge box instead.

I greeted him and signed for the box addressed to Mr. Cullen. Pointing to the parlor, I directed the delivery man to place the box there until I was told further directions.

As he was leaving I saw a van pull up with the logo for the electrician on the side and I waited for them at the front door.

Two men close to my age walk up the front steps in jeans and matching work shirts. Stopping near the top I watched as their jaws dropped as they assessed the hole in the wall and the intercom box.

"So, I guess I don't have to tell you what's wrong," I laughed and gestured to the mess at my feet.

They laughed with me and shook their heads. One of them spoke up and said, "No, I think we can figure it out. But how did this happen?" I noted his name embroidered on his pocket. Tyler.

"I have no idea. Mr. Cullen just left me instructions to call you and have it repaired," I admitted.

The other man, whose name was Eric, was holding the box with wires spilling out the side and shaking his head. He said, "Doesn't matter how it happened, I guess, but I hate to tell you this is going to take more than us to get this fixed."

I frowned and asked, "Really? Why?"

"I'm pretty sure the brick needs to be repaired as well and I suspect we may have to come inside and replace the interior of this which means that wall will have to get touched up also." Eric answered, giving me a slight smile.

I groaned, which made them both a laugh a little, and said, "Great. Well, you guys need to get started and I will go call the handy man. How long do you think this will take you, before I ask him to come over?" Knowing whoever he had on that list would rush over in two seconds to please the wonderful Mr. Cullen.

Tyler said, "It's gonna take us at least until late afternoon to make sure it's all working correctly, so you can tell them to come after that."

I nodded and turned to walk back to my desk. I heard one of them call out, "Hey, by the way, I'm Tyler and that's Eric, what's your name? You know, in case we need you for something."

I turned back towards him and noticed he had nice brown eyes and a friendly smile, which made me smile back, "I'm Bella. Bella Swan." I reached my hand out towards him.

He gripped it in his own and softly shook it saying, "Nice to meet you Bella."

I nodded and started towards my desk. I could hear them go outside to talk about the work they had ahead of them.

I opened the address book, this time searching for the handy man. Whoever had destroyed that intercom system probably had no idea what a mess he had made and the work it was going to do to repair it.

Xxx

EPOV

I watched dawn break through my bedroom window with chirping birds and a glaring sun. This solidified my plans for the day. I didn't want to admit to myself I was happy to have an excuse to hang around the house all day, but I knew it was true.

Ms. Swan would be here in several hours and I needed that time to figure out what to do since leaving was not much of an option. After walking downstairs, I wrote up a detailed list of her assignments and placed them on her desk. I also took the time to immerse myself in her scent for the final time before she came back in the house. I was fairly confident I could be in the same room with her at this time. It would be painful but I didn't think I would hurt her. The fact I wasn't a hundred percent certain made the decision for me.

Since I couldn't easily leave the house for the day I decided to spend it in my study, which was in an adjoining room to my bedroom. It was a special room for me since it was where I kept my collections and my extremely sophisticated computer system. This room was also where I maintained my security system and the documents most damning to the carefully crafted career and persona of Edward Cullen.

It was my Bat Cave. My Fortress of Solitude. Take your pick.

It was a large room, the size of two bedrooms I had converted and customized to my instructions. The walls were sound and fire proof, although I was able to still faintly hear noises through the walls if I focused. There were manual and electronic locks on the doors and windows, which included sensors and alarms that were directly sent to me regardless of my location.

As frustrated as I was that I would be unable to hear Ms. Swan's thoughts I did have other methods of observing her. I flicked the switch on the monitors and they sprung to life, filling the screens with images. One was a normal monitor that opened directly to a password prompting page, to which I was the only one who had access. I watched the other larger monitor come in focus and I was able to see multiple locations throughout the house. The entire house was constantly being filmed by high tech hidden security cameras, excluding this room and my bedroom. Normally I do allow outside help to come in and do much of the work around the house but not this. Jasper and I rigged this whole set up together and no one but the two of us knew it was here. Well, other than Alice of course.

There were cameras filming the front door and walkway, the foyer, parlor, kitchen, garage, back alley, the front and back stairways to the second floor, the common area upstairs, and my closet. These cameras were state of the art, military grade although not necessarily from *our* military. I could see with perfect clarity small movements or the writing on a piece of paper. It was excessive but I had a desire for the best and this

was it. I didn't use this system everyday but after attempt of retaliation by a business acquaintance I realized I couldn't rely on my senses alone. Friday night Bella Swan confirmed this for me.

I spent the early morning hours cross referencing dates, locations and victim's names from the previous week's papers. Although there were moments of randomness I could tell there was a spiraling pattern emerging and it looked like it was coming closer and closer this way. I had a large map on my desk and Google Earth up on my computer. Using these and the data I'd collected I was able to plot out the prior moves of my target.

At approximately nine am I watched as Ms. Swan walked to the front of the house and paused. I felt my brow narrow as she appeared to be speaking to someone even though she clearly was alone. I focused and saw the words, "Edward Cullen" and "Fuck Himself" roll off her thick lips. This seemed to resolve her and she marched towards the door.

I continued to watch her but leaned back in my seat, running my hand through my hair, confused at her words. I know I probably scared her on Friday night but the hostility was unnecessary. I had asked her as calmly as possible to leave the house which was for her own safety, although she couldn't know the other options would have been far more unpleasant for her.

Intrigued, I observed her get to the top of the steps and warily eye the intercom box on the ground. I grimaced. This was definitely not one of my better moments but she would have it repaired never knowing any different. The best part of having a personal assistant was the knowledge they would take care of your demands with no questions asked.

*thump thump thump*

I could hear the pulsing beats behind my fortress of insulation. I shook it off and directed my attention back to the video. Her movements were still determined as I watched her travel through the frames, down the hall to the kitchen, pausing at the refrigerator, walking back to her desk where she picked up my directions and a look of relief passed over her face.

Her facial expressions perplexed me but I knew I shouldn't be surprised. I had relied on my gift far too long and hadn't really focused on people and their body language in many years. It was quite fascinating to hear her speak on the phone and watch her movements and wonder if what she was saying was the same thing she was thinking. Often she frowned or rolled her eyes or even curved the edges of her lips to smile and I had no idea why.

I noticed the postal truck pull up and the delivery man haul a huge box to the door. Ms. Swan answered and allowed him to bring it inside. I could read the handwriting and sighed to myself as I realized what was in the box.

Another vehicle drove up and the two young men from the electrician company walked up to the door and began conversing with my assistant. I noticed I had lifted somewhat out of my seat as I strained to listen to their conversation. They were looking at the mess I had made and discussing the repairs. I could hear the lilt in her voice as she laughed and the deep tones of theirs in return. I could hear the men's thoughts as they appraised her, considering her looks and her features. The one called Eric was less interested and immediately began assessing the damage to the wall, the other, Tyler couldn't keep his eyes or mind off Ms. Swan.

As they went to do their respective jobs, the men at the door and Ms. Swan at her desk, I got up from my seat and paced the room for a while, processing the information I had gathered this morning.

My assistant was brave, as she returned to work even though I had been potentially dangerous to her at our last meeting. This of course could also be interpreted as stupid, risky behavior as well. I also noted she was diligent, hardworking and surprisingly professional.

And apparently to the men downstairs, she was quite appealing.

Which I guess I could relate to, but in an entirely different way.

I closed my eyes for a moment and looked into the mind of the man called Tyler. I tried to understand his view of her. He found her dark eyes interesting and desperately wanted to touch her brown hair. He felt the pull of her body and his thoughts kept returning to her pink lips.

These were not the things that drew me to her. I thought of her pale skin, so fair it was almost translucent. I could see the bluish veins spreading across her wrists and neck. I could see, feel, and hear the pulsing beat of her blood as it circulated through her body.

And then there was her scent.

I shook off the urges I was having for my assistant and went back to my monitor, scanning the video. Ms. Swan was in the kitchen with two glasses filled with ice and water. I observed her take these down the hallway to the front door and kindly ask if the two men were thirsty. They smiled happily and took it from her. They spoke politely about the weather, how warm and beautiful it was today with the sun finally out, how they were lucky to work outside on occasion.

Fascinated by their simple, polite conversation I watched how these people talked and laughed and communicated. I tried my best to fit in but I doubted I was ever quite this smooth.

The girl collected the glasses and I noticed Tyler's finger lingered for a fraction of a second on her hand. His face was collected and unassuming but as I leaned into the monitor, watching his every move, I saw it.

Ms. Swan turned, walking back inside, and her hair flipped just slightly, and Tyler moved towards her and sniffed the air.

Trying to capture her scent.

Mine.

Like an animal marking his territory I leapt from my seat and reached the door in an instant.

I closed my mouth before entering the hallway and although I was not assaulted with her scent I could feel her in my bones.

*thump thump thump thump thump*

mine mine mine mine mine

The words echoed, over and over in my head. Again, I had lost all sense of control and discipline. My resolve to stay behind closed doors for the day didn't even last a morning as I rushed down the stairs, too fast, and appeared at her side, startling her.

She shrieked when she noticed me suddenly by her side. Aware of my mistake and in an attempt to maintain a semblance of control I forced myself not to move too quickly and I watched helplessly as the glasses tumbled to the ground and shattered.

"Mr. Cullen! Not again! Stop doing that!" she shouted, clearly frustrated. She was taking huge breaths, gulping in air to calm herself down.

The two men came running in, their minds shouting out their concerns but stopped in their tracks when they saw me. I glared at them for a moment, positioning my body between them and the girl and waved them off.

As Ms. Swan regained composure, I ran my hands up my face and clenched them in my hair. In seconds I had completely unraveled. I hadn't planned ahead and now I was faced with an enormous dilemma. Here I was, standing in front of her after seeming to appear out of thin air.

What could I say? The truth? That I rushed down here, like a fool, to mark my territory? That I was ready to fight these other men over her like a dog would fight for his dinner?

Even I knew this wasn't acceptable.

I was stuck here facing the girl and I knew the minute I opened my mouth I would be overwhelmed by her scent. I was convinced I could ultimately resist her but it still was dangerous. The other option of turning away, like I should, no longer seemed possible.

I stared at the girl in front of me as she calmed herself. She ignored me and leaned over to begin cleaning up the shards of broken glass scattered across the floor.

A third, horrific option opened up to me as I watched her fingers near the sharp edges of the glass and the sudden desperate shrilling of my phone ringing cut the silence, causing her to pause and allowing me the opportunity to open my mouth and say in the most charming voice I could muster, "Please. Let me do that."



## Chapter Five

### **BPOV**

"Please. Let me do that."

I froze in my position. His voice was so soft and smooth, almost mesmerizing. My fingers paused in the air from picking up the shards of glass I had broken moments before.

Not that it was my fault, I thought, as I pulled myself up and looked towards him, surprised to hear his voice lacking any hostility. My first instinct had been to think he would be upset or angry at me for making such a mess.

I found my voice, which sounded high pitched and squeaky next to his and said, "Oh. Thank you. Let me get the broom."

He nodded curtly and as I walked towards the storage closet in the kitchen. I could hear his phone shrill again.

I waited in the hallway, giving him privacy for his phone call. Leaning against the wall I couldn't help but overhear his side of the conversation.

"No. It's fine."

"It's under control"

"No."

"I know, but no."

"Please... Thank you."

His voice was still calm and collected yet I could feel the hint of tension underneath, having experienced that side of his personality before. I tentatively walked back in after I knew he was finished and he gave me a small smile while reaching his hand out for the broom.

I hesitated and said, "I really should do this."

"Ms. Swan, please hand me the broom. I really don't want you to cut yourself. And, it was my fault. I'm the one that startled you." he explained, again using the most soothing voice.

I relinquished the broom and he began sweeping up the mess scattered across the hallway. I watched him now, for the first time really, and noticed how elegantly he maneuvered across the floor.

Each movement was quick and precise. His long fingers wrapped around the handle of the broom and noticed how smooth they were. His hands were clearly not accustomed to manual labor. Yet, he seemed comfortable in this moment.

He wore khaki colored pants and a summer button down, dressed up but not in a suit. His hair was dark, but streaks of red glinted through it from the sunlight streaming in from the open front door. It was messy, but it looked intentional. Everything about him looked intentional. He was perfect from his messy bed head to his expensive leather shoes. I couldn't see his eyes, as he was looking down, looking for glass. I wondered what color they were. Blue? Green?

He looked so young but his movements and gestures were that of a much older man. He was tall but he wasn't very big. No. It was more like he was long and lanky without the awkwardness. I wondered again how old he really was.

I watched as he searched the floor for any remaining pieces of stray glass. He spotted one hidden in the corner, invisible to my eye, and quickly swept it into the pile. He turned and asked, "May I have the dustpan please?"

Our eyes locked briefly and I saw them.

Gold.

Not blue.

Not green.

Gold.

"Ummm...huh?" I asked, immediately embarrassed by my words but unable to speak coherently. I was transfixed by the rich amber color of his eyes.

Amusement twitched at the edges of his mouth, "The dustpan, may I have it?"

I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. "Yes, sorry. I think I'm just a little flustered still." I explained and he gave me a quick nod of understanding.

He swept up the pile of debris and gave me a full smile this time before saying, "Ms. Swan, I also need to apologize to you for the other night. My behavior was unacceptable." He lifted his hands in the air, one occupied by the broom and one with the full dustpan and said, "I'd introduce myself properly with a handshake but unfortunately..."

His voice was still soft yet there was something missing. He sounded so formal and stiff for someone so young. His apology rang with sincerity yet it came across as somewhat forced, like words from a script.

"Here, let me take those," and I reached out for them. "I'm Bella. It's nice to meet you Mr. Cullen, and I accept your apology".

He handed them over to me and I put them away. I returned to find him standing in the same place, unmoved, with a concentrated look on his face.

"Was there something you needed?" I asked which caused him to look at me with a confused expression. I pressed, "When you came down here? Did you need something from me?"

Recognition flittered across his face, "Yes. I saw the delivery man come in and I came to take the box upstairs and ask you to unpack it for me."

I nodded and followed him to the parlor. He leaned over and picked up the large box with ease. I noted that it must not have been as heavy as I suspected and I gave him space to take the box to the upper level of his home.

As I walked behind him to the steps I heard my name being called from behind, "Bella," and I turned to find Tyler in the hallway. Mr. Cullen was already at the top of the stairs so I quickly ran over to Tyler to see what he needed. "Can I help you? I need to help Mr. Cullen upstairs," I explained quietly.

Tyler frowned at the mention of my boss's name but he recovered, saying back in a low voice, "I wanted to ask you if I could have your number? Maybe I could call you sometime?"

I smiled and went to my desk, retrieving a card from the holder on the top. "Here is my cell," I told him and wrote it in with a pencil.

From the top of the stairs I heard a loud noise, I waved to Tyler and quickly ran up to find Mr. Cullen. I stumbled on the top step and caught myself on the banister before I actually fell flat on my face. He was on the landing waiting for me with a look of irritation on his face.

Flushed and out of breath I explained, "I was just helping Tyler with something, sorry."

Abruptly he turned away and went into his dressing room. I hesitated for a moment but followed him, unsure of my next step. I wasn't sure why he was irritated with me, it had only taken a second to speak with Tyler and it's not like he knew we were talking about non-work related activities.

Sighing I entered the dressing room and he was looking at the package from downstairs. I could tell all the progress we had made downstairs was gone as he brusquely told me what to do with the items in the box.

"This package is filled with clothing and accessories. Please place them in the appropriate areas of the closet. Then take the camera, the one in the bottom drawer over there," my eyes followed his fingers they pointed in the direction of a row of drawers against the wall, "and photograph each outfit. In the box you will find an envelope with an itemized list which will provide information about what article of clothing goes in which section of the closet and binder." When he finished he turned, without a word, and walked in his private room and shut the door.

I stood for a moment, stunned by the sudden change in behavior. Admittedly he hadn't been overly friendly downstairs but he did at least appear sincere. My eyes stung a little as I tried to process what had just happened. I felt like a child that had been caught with my hand in the cookie jar by a mother with eyes in the back of her head. Other than speaking to Tyler, and leaving him waiting for a moment, I had done nothing wrong. But that didn't make any sense since it had only been a moment and he was upstairs the whole time.

I sucked back the tears and found a pair of scissors and began opening the package. Inside were tightly packed stacks of dress and casual shirts, four or five pairs of nice pants and two pairs of jeans. There were also shoes, belts, and other accessories. I looked at the labels and rolled my eyes at the designer names. Ralph Lauren, Gucci, Prada. I was sure the button down shirt I was holding cost more than my entire summer wardrobe. The items in this box alone would be enough to dress a normal man for a year, not just the summer, and honestly he was going to run out of room soon to store it all.

It took me several hours to coordinate and photograph all the new items. As the minutes ticked by I found myself glancing towards his door wondering if he would open it and come back in. I had visions of standing up to him, asking him what his problem was and why he thought he could treat me so badly.

Leaning on the dresser I daydreamed of walking up to him and poking his chest with my finger, which of course would be difficult since he was so tall. And then I would force him to look me in the eye and admit he



was being a jerk and that his first apology meant nothing. I wanted to tell him that he was a spoiled little boy who needed to treat people with respect.

This is what I *wanted* to do.

But he never emerged so it didn't matter.

I sighed and stood up straight and began placing belts on the rack hanging from the wall. If I knew I was going to be hanging up clothes all summer I would've gotten a job at the GAP.

I finished and ate lunch at my desk while working on the rest of the data entry I'd started that morning. Tyler and Eric left while I was upstairs thankfully, and when the handy man came that afternoon I simply showed him what needed fixing. Mr. Cullen never reappeared from his rooms even when the worker began banging and making an enormous amount of noise.

At six I packed my bags and left my daily report on the desk. I walked towards the front door. I paused for a moment at the bottom of the steps, positive I could hear the faint strains of music from above.

I was annoyed with the fact he could relax in his hidey-hole upstairs while I managed his household. I made my way to the door, closing it with force and locking it behind me.

I walked into the warm night thinking about how this quiet little assistant job was turning into a roller coaster due to the behavior of my boss. I was worried I wouldn't be able to make it if things continued this way. But I wasn't a quitter, even when I probably should be, so I resolved to make this work regardless of his attitude.

Xxx

EPOV

From my bedroom I heard the front door close a little louder than necessary.

I was stretched out on the couch with my eyes closed. If only sleep would come and make this nightmare go away. Or even better, if I could wake up and it only had been a nightmare.

I had no idea what I was doing. The entire day had been a fiasco as far as the relationship with my employee went. I'd broken my own rule of staying upstairs and away from her. I had no clue as to what came over me when I ran downstairs.

Mine?

Her? What was I thinking? Was I really so overwhelmed by her scent and pulsing heartbeat that I actually tried to claim her from another? From a harmless man who wanted nothing more than to get to know her because he thought she was attractive.

I had watched the mating rituals of humans a million times before, never taking much of an interest. There was nothing about this that made sense.

I was being ridiculous. Impulsive. Downright animalistic.

Mine.

All these things I had struggled to overcome for decades and had been overwhelmingly successful in doing so. I was the CEO of a large foundation. I mingled in society with grace and ease. I laughed at the right place when a joke was told and frowned when I heard news that caused heartache. I ordered five dollar coffees and listened to current music. I had box seats for the Mariners and the Seahawks.

But one small girl had brought out the demon in me and I wasn't sure if I could push it back inside.

Sure I was holding on to the threads of my sanity. I had watched her lean over to pick up the shards of glass on the floor and in one brief moment I could see her slice her finger on the jagged edge, piercing the skin and allowing the blood to flow down her hand. I saw it as though it had already happened and in that split second I wanted it.

The opportunity. I could let it all go. The discipline. The sacrifice. I could let it go and just be me.

Greater forces were at work though and my phone rang, breaking the insanity of the moment. I swallowed back the desire and did the only thing I could do. I unleashed my charm on her.

And I could tell it worked. I could feel her eyes on me. She was assessing me. Humans do this. They judge you on your appearance or demeanor. Trivial, but it is what their senses allow. I smiled at her, I apologized and I looked her in the eye, attempting to calm her and bring her ease.

I knew what I was doing before I did it. I made her come upstairs to do some work away from the electrician. His thoughts were still on her and didn't want him near her. So I instructed her to follow me but she didn't. She stopped to talk to him and gave him her number. I tried to be amused at the mating ritual of these two, the dance they held for one another but I couldn't. My mind was filled with irritation and annoyance not unlike the feelings I have when Emmett beats me in the hunt. We often compete, seeing who can capture the animal first. My competitive nature leaves a bitter taste in my mouth when Emmett gets the better of me.

The bitterness filled my mouth as I stood at the top of the stairs and listened to Tyler ask Ms. Swan for her phone number.

Mine.

I maintained my composure this time, though, and remained upstairs. I was better than this and I had to get it together. I dropped the package with a loud thump, hoping to alert her to me waiting upstairs. I waited for her to come up and watched as she stumbled at the top step.

She was so weak and fragile.

Again, I swallowed back the desire running through my body.

I left her with instructions for the package that had arrived today. I knew what it was of course. It was the latest in clothing and seasonal accessories from my sister, Alice. She hated the distance between us, so this was one way she made up for it. I haven't been in a clothing store in years. Alice picks them out for me and has them sent to me. My assistant then incorporates the new items into my absurdly large closet, made to Alice's specifications, and I always look like I stepped out of the pages of one of her fashion magazines.

It's the very least I could do for her.

I left Ms. Swan to her work and I escaped to my isolation, determined to stay away for real this time. I admit I went to the other room to watch her on the monitors several times but mostly I focused on my work and keeping my mind off of her. Now, hours later, I was relieved she had left for the day.

It was dusk and I now stood, in my dressing room, inhaling her scent and to my distress, missing the echoing beat of her heart.

"Damn it," I groaned and pinched my nose between my thumb and index finger as the need built back up.

Why? Why was this happening to me?

I had business to take care of. I didn't want or need distractions.

Frustrated I changed into jeans, a black button down, and boots. I was headed out for the night, first to the woods to replenish my strength and then to follow up on some of the leads I'd made today.

xxx

I emerged from the park satisfied. Rejuvenated and feeling a little high I set off towards the last pinpoint on my map. As I reached the location I could still smell the faint tinge of copper in the air. I traced it to a smudge on the sidewalk.

There were conflicting scents here, but I was able to recognize a couple besides the blood of the victim. I decided to head east, following the pattern I had formulated, and see if I was able to make any progress.

As I traveled I opened my mind to the noises of the night. Passing homes, I could hear the sounds of families having dinner and children playing outside enjoying the warm weather. I overheard an argument by two lovers, one bitter over the betrayal of the other.

Most of it was mundane, people worried about bills or work or relationships. After all this time I'd become numb to the day-to-day worries of humans. I attempted to respect their privacy when possible but tonight I was listening for something else.

Him.

I'd heard him before. Several times in fact, but I was always too late. He seemed to have a sense of when to move on, of when I was coming. I'm not sure if he knew I was onto him yet but I felt like it. He was elusive, always one step ahead.

There were others with him, I was sure, but their voices changed and were mingled with the victims. I was having a hard time identifying who was who and I had found it impossible so far to get there in time.

So, tonight as I walked, I listened for their voices, the clues I needed to find them before another unsuspecting victim stumbled onto their path. I was confident I would find him tonight. The pattern fit and my research was flawless.

*Oh shoot, I burned the bread....mommy, Jane hit me on purpose...I'm sorry, I really am....Oh. My. God. You will not believe what I just heard...*

My thoughts turned to Ms. Swan and I wondered where she was at this moment. Had the electrician called her? Had she made plans to see him? Again, I was irritated by my fascination with her and determined I had to move past this.

*Did you watch Oprah today...I'm going to the store, do you need anything...please, please, whatever you want....*

My mind perked up at the last one and tried to zero in. The voice was distressed, trembling. She was terrified.

*Do you want my money? Or my car? Here, take my keys.....just please....*

I watched it unfold in my head, pictures of a wooded area....kind of like a park but not traditional. I couldn't place it. I could see him through her eyes. He was blonde and scruffy, but his face was not clear in the darkness. Behind him was a sign, I needed her to focus on it, show it to me. But she didn't, her eyes were darting around, looking for an escape. He was not alone, she knew this but she couldn't see them, they stayed behind her in the darkness.

His thoughts were muted, less emotional and easily overshadowed by her hysteria. I could feel his hunger though, the need to take her life and feed from her energy. He wasn't interested in playing, which was lucky for his victim, but it didn't give me much time.

*I'm gonna die.....crap, crap, crap, crap...oh my god....*

Her thoughts rang through the night, flashing images of a dark haired man smiling and a dog, and then she focused back on her predator. He was standing in front of her, grinning, explaining it was too bad she

crossed his path on this warm summer evening. He moved, too quickly for her to adjust, and her eyes landed on the sign.

Lullwater Park.

Jogging Trails

Hours 6:00 AM-Dark

With a destination in hand, I tore through the darkness in the direction of the park. This was the closest I had come to him, the closest I had been to stopping him from continuing his terrorization of this community. She was begging for her life, no longer speaking to him, just rambling on in what she knew were her final moments.

I was running towards them now, I could physically hear her voice bouncing off the trees, leading me towards her. They couldn't be more than a mile or two away. I heard him speak tell her not to worry, that it would all be over soon, once he and his friends were satisfied.

My mind was filled with dueling visions. Ricocheting from one mind to the other, I received flashes of the scene unfolding behind my eyes.

I focused on him, noting that his voice was deep and rough. His accent was indistinct but the tone of his voice spoke with authority. He was the leader of this group. I watched as his companions, one with flaming red hair and the other with long dark strands, grabbed an arm each and pulled her to her feet. They held her before him like a sacrifice, arms stretched wide. He came towards her and touched her face gently before snapping her neck in one fluid movement while the others tore at the flesh on her exposed wrists.

I was fast but in this moment they were faster. I broke through the brush to find her lying in a heap by the side of the trail, blood trailed down her arms and pooled in the dirt. I tried to catch their scent but they had scattered, running in different directions, crossing one another until all traces of them faded into the night.

Returning to the body I pulled out my cell and dialed 911 before retreating back to the thick woods.



## Chapter Six

BPOV

After I hung up my raincoat, I placed the mail and newspapers on my desk, and sat for a moment in my chair. I rested my head on the desk wishing it was time to go home. I had spent the morning running the typical daily errands for Mr. Cullen and dreaded facing the tedious, ridiculous job he had for me that afternoon.

I hadn't seen him since Monday, and it was now Thursday. He was lucky I hadn't seen him because I was one confrontation away from quitting this nightmare of a job.

I came in on Tuesday prepared once again to move past our bumps and enjoy my job. I watch E! and I knew rich, attractive people were eccentric in their desires and wants. I knew Anna Nicole demanded her entire bedroom be a fairy land of pink feathers and P Diddy insisted on only having Crystal in his refrigerator. At least I wasn't cleaning up after little dogs on the Osbourne's or sanitizing the hot tub for Brett Michaels.

Things actually *could* get worse.

Orgies aside, Mr. Cullen was definitely difficult. I was learning his obsessive compulsive habits were passing eccentric and moving towards mentally unstable. On Monday he left me directions to reorganize his enormous CD collection in alphabetical order, then subgroup each artist by date of release. I also had to write down and catalogue each CD and enter it into a data base. This took me the entire day and my brain was a puddle of mush by the time I'd finished.

On Wednesday he left me with various chores around the house. My instructions were to straighten and dust all the paintings on the walls. Of course for this I had to wear cloth gloves and to never, ever touch the actual painting itself. I had a special dusting cloth to use for the artwork as well as the other antiques in the home. After I completed the paintings I had to dust the common rooms, taking time to hand clean each curio or knickknack he had apparently collected or inherited from around the world.

Being the notoriously clumsy person I am touching or cleaning any of these objects stressed me out. I was sure at any moment I would drop and shatter a priceless heirloom.

As I carefully cleaned the panes on a gorgeous Tiffany lamp, I began to wonder if Mr. Cullen wanted me to quit. Some of the tasks he had given me were so outrageous that I felt he was watching me and waiting to see if I was fool enough follow his instructions or if I would actually refuse. If I refused he would have justification to fire me.

Bella Swan was not getting fired.

With this in mind I spent Wednesday afternoon on my hands and knees with a comb, straightening out the fringe on the antique rugs and carpets throughout the house. Which, by the way, was utterly ridiculous and a complete waste of my time.

So there I sat, with my head on my desk, plotting my escape from this madhouse. I groaned and forced myself into the kitchen, to the large supply closet which would normally act as a pantry but of course, Mr. "special diet" Cullen doesn't keep food in the house so the pantry is now a supply closet.

I had purchased new bins and containers for the closet earlier in the day. Apparently Mr. Cullen needed his office supplies separated and into specific containers. The paperclips from the push pins, the masking tape from the scotch tape, and so forth. I was also armed with a state of the art computerized label maker since he couldn't just look in the clear container and figure out which one was which.

I was mumbling under my breath something about spending eight six thousand dollars on college tuition when I saw, or rather felt, something behind me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and I said a silent prayer that I was imagining it. I was a little on edge since hearing about the recent murder in the park.

I slowly turned and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw a short, dark haired girl with a huge grin on her face standing in the middle of the kitchen.

"Hi!" she greeted, bouncing a little in front of me.

I took a step back from her and felt my brow narrow and asked, "Hi, ummm, who are you and how did you get in here?"

Still smiling she took a tentative step forward and said, "I'm Alice. Edward's sister. I let myself in."

I muttered, "Of course, someone needs to tie a bell around your necks," and looked her over. She had dark hair spiking across her head, pale skin and golden eyes. She was impeccably dressed and held herself with the same confident air Mr. Cullen possessed. "Oh yes. I'm sorry. Was he expecting you? Because he didn't tell me you were coming..." I rambled.

"No, he's not expecting me. I thought I would surprise him." She answered, smiling at the thought of surprising him. She seemed to think this would be a good idea.

I placed the boxes on the shelves and said, "By the way, I'm Bella, the new assistant."

"Of course. Bella." My name rolled off her lips and she nodded approvingly. I could feel her eyes boring into the back of my head as I continued with the mindless task of sorting post-it-notes by color and size. I was resisting the urge to take all of the notes, write 'I Quit' in color coordinated Sharpies and stick them all over the house in a fit of rage.

I turned to face her again, and asked, "Can I get you something? Tea or coffee? Mr. Cullen doesn't have any food in the house, but I could go get you something if you want." I was rambling again. Alice was making me nervous with her watchful eyes and ever present grin.

Alice shook her head and said, "No thank you. I'm just going to wait in the other room. Will you sit with me? Please?" For a moment I lost my train of thought. Her eyes were so appealing, like her brother's.

I wasn't sure what to do. I had a feeling Mr. Cullen was not going to like this unannounced visit. He didn't seem the type to like surprises or anything well, fun. Then I also was not sure how much I was supposed to be entertaining his guests. I would hate to offend his family by being rude. This was uncharted territory.

Alice must have noticed my unease and said, "Please. Don't worry about Edward. He can blame me if he wants." She laughed and added, "He will anyway! He always does."

I hesitantly nodded and followed Alice as she skipped into the parlor, taking a seat in one of the large over stuffed chairs. Her feet barely grazed the floor and the chair almost swallowed her dainty body whole.

Alice reached over and placed her hand on the arm of my chair. "Really Bella, don't take my brother too seriously. I know he can be a bit of a grump but he has a good heart. He just forgets how to act around people sometimes." She said, rolling her eyes.

I smiled back but said nothing, not wanting to fall into the trap of speaking about him. There was a moment of awkward silence as she realized this and thankfully she changed the subject, asking me about my schooling and future plans.

I told her I was from Arizona and had gone to the local university. Alice listened intently as I explained my hopes to go to graduate school in the future and how I was currently exploring my options. It was way too easy to talk to her about my life and it made me wonder if she was really this good or was I just this desperate for someone to talk to. I remembered my conversation with Angela, and asked, "I was wondering, are you from Forks?"

Alice nodded, but a moment of confusion passed across her face and she tilted her head in question.

"My roommate, Angela Weber, grew up in Forks. And she mentioned that she had classmates named Cullen at her school. I wondered if that as you." I explained.

"Oh! Of course, I know Angela. Not well, but yes, we were classmates." She answered me, her grin back in place.

Just then I heard the back door open and close. I stood up quickly while Alice remained seated. Mr. Cullen came directly into the parlor. He gave Alice a pointed look, like he knew she was there before he walked in the room. Alice smiled at him and he rolled his eyes before turning to me.

Nervously, I waited for his reaction and was relieved when he turned to me said in a pleasant voice, "I see you've met my sister." He smiled warmly in her direction, "as you can see, she has a way of making herself at home."

"Yes, I did. But now that you're here I'm going to go back to work. Nice to meet you Ms. Cullen," I told her as I began to back out of the room, trying to make a fast escape.

Alice jumped up and ran over to me and said, "It's Alice. And it was great meeting you too Bella. I hope to see you again soon." And she gave me a brief hug.

I walked back to the kitchen and began my work in the closet. As I listened to them quietly go up the front stairs I thought about how different they seemed. Alice was so open and warm compared to Mr. Cullen and his stiff nature. It made me wonder how two people who grew up in the same home could turn out so unlike. Although it was interesting to have a new perspective on him it would take more than nice words from his sister to change my mind about him.

Xxx

EPOV

"Edward, you didn't tell me Bella was so *attractive*," Alice taunted as we walked upstairs.

I didn't acknowledge her comment and walked into my dressing room to put my coat up and change out of my work clothes.

*I have to admit she does smell really good.*

"What are you doing here Alice?" I asked pulling a clean shirt over my head and running my hands through my hair.

*No 'how are you Alice' or 'I'm so glad you came to visit?'*

I brushed past her and walked into my study and sat behind the desk looking for something to do other than talk to my sister.

*You can't ignore this Edward.*

I ignored her.

"Stop it Edward. We need to talk about this." She spoke aloud, the frustration evident in her voice.

She flopped on a chair in front of me, arms crossed, determined to have this discussion.

I sighed and looked at her, "Fine Alice. What do you want me to say? Do I find her appealing? Yes. Am I going to do anything about it? No. There is nothing more to discuss."

*Are you sure you can handle it?*

I glared at her and said, "Yes. You know I can. I have."

Alice glared back at me with identical deep gold eyes and challenged, "You almost slipped. With the glass. And the other night, she barely made it out of here alive."

"But she did. I told you on the phone it was fine. You know I'm disciplined. I'm under control." I told her hoping my tone would end this conversation.

*She's going to quit.*

I sighed and slumped into my seat, "I know."

It was what I was hoping for. After my reaction to her and the electrician on Monday and then the fact I'd failed in my attempt to save the woman in the park, I'd resolved to push Bella Swan out of my life for good. I spent the rest of the week ignoring her and leaving her with hours of monotonous tasks. I figured after several days she would grow tired and frustrated with the menial projects and resign.

*It's what you want? Right now the decision is clear, but it doesn't have to be.*

"It's for the best. I *am* under control but it is a distraction I really don't need. I just want her to leave on her own terms. I don't want to fire her."

Alice broke out into laughter. I quirked an eyebrow at her, waiting to understand what was so funny.

"She's quite determined at the moment to stay. To prove to you that you can't break her. But a couple of dirty jobs will seal her fate." Alice explained and showed me exactly what would be the final straw for poor Isabella Swan.

This caused me to chuckle and shake my head, "All the qualities I desired for hiring her will end of making this so much harder on her in the end."

We fell into a moment of silence now that the main reason for her visit had been discussed. Alice was blocking her mind from me which was fine, a relief in many ways. But I knew her well enough to anticipate her thoughts.

*The boys were sad you wouldn't go with them.*

I nodded slightly. Part of me wished I could have gone hunting with them as well but it wasn't possible.

*It's not the same. It's never the same.*

"Alice," I warned.

She sighed unhappily.

I hated disappointing her but the decision had been made.

I tried to change the subject and asked, "When is Jasper coming home?"

She pursed her lips together clearly not convinced we were finished with the prior topic.

I begged her silently to let it drop.

Her face relaxed and she said, "Tonight. They're in Montana now."

"I really need to for him to come see me. Will you tell him?" I asked relieved we had moved on for the moment.

*Yes. Of course.*

I got up and walked to her and pulled her out of the seat. She quickly rose and wrapped her arms around me, embracing me tightly. I reciprocated leaning down and inhaling in the smell of her hair and clothes. As much as I resisted, there were moments when I regretted the choices I had made in the past. This was one of those times.

Later, after Alice had gone home, I realized that the last time I'd touched someone was during my last trip home. Common touches from humans or others of my kind were a sacrifice I'd been forced to make. And for the most part it was a decision I'd been content with for some time. But for the first time in many years, I realized that when Alice left I was missing something.

Xxx

BPOV

"Hey Ang, I'm home." I called out as I walked in the front door our apartment.

I dropped my keys in the dish by the door and went directly to my room to change out of my work clothes and into something more comfortable.

I was pulling my hair back into a pony tail when Angela came around the corner with a glass of wine and thrust it into my hand.

"Thanks, you have no idea how much I needed this." I told her and took a gulp as I sat on the couch in the living room.



Angela laughed and said, "I had an idea when you called on the way home and left me a message chanting the words, do *not* let me quit my job over and over."

I put my glass down on the end table and pushed my face into my hands groaning. "Ugh. I know. This job is such a nightmare. Do you want to know what I had to do today?" I asked her.

She nodded eagerly, and settled back in her chair, taking her own sip from her wine glass.

"After I arranged all the office supplies in the *pantry*," I rolled my eyes, "I had to go into his garage and sort through all the nails and screws on his work table and separate them into matching sizes. Then of course I had to place them into labeled containers. *Everything* in that house is labeled."

Angela started laughing even harder, "Ha! You've never seen his bedroom, what do you bet he labels the outside of his bedside table, with things like, Porn or Condoms, or Weed." She snorted which made us both burst into giggles

"No way. That guy is way too uptight to read or watch porn and no girls are coming to his place. He would have to sanitize them before and after they left his room. This may be why he *is* so cranky all the time." I mused. "And I wish he's smoke a little weed. I'd chill him out."

Suddenly I remembered something else, "Oh and guess what?"

Angela cocked an eyebrow at me waiting for the news.

"I met Mr. Cullen's sister today. *Alice* Cullen, from Forks."

She sat up in her chair and exclaimed, "I knew it! Was she as pretty as I said? Did you say anything?"

"I mentioned you and she said she remembered you. She really was very nice, and beautiful. She seemed to know her brother was a bit of an ass, which was cool, but she had a little of that 'I'm A Perfect Cullen' vibe going on herself."

We talked a little more about Alice but our conversation was halted when my cell rang. I jumped up and pulled it out of my purse and answered. When I heard the voice on the other line I couldn't help but smile into the phone.

"Oh, Hi Tyler. How are you?"

"Tomorrow Night? Yeah, I think tomorrow night would be great."

"A Friend? Sure, she would love to!"

"We'll meet you there at 8:00."

I said goodbye and snapped my phone shut. Angela was looking at me with curiosity and I said, "Well, the good news is that I have a date tomorrow night. The better news is that you do too!" I smile a huge, fake, grin hoping she would play along.

Angela's jaw dropped, "Bella! No! You know how I feel about blind dates."

I put on my best pouting face and whimpered, "Angela, please. I really want to go but I'm not comfortable going alone. Especially not right now."

Angela nodded in understanding, her long dark hair bobbing up and down. "Okay, but only because there is a maniac on the loose and I want you to be safe. Plus, what else am I going to do while you are out?"

I ran over and gave her a hug before sitting back down and picking back up my glass. "Speaking of did you hear any more news about that poor girl's murder?" I asked.

"Well, I head the police are totally confused. They can't decide if it was a murder or an attack by a wild animal. Apparently, the wounds appear to be from an animal of some kind. The problem is that animals don't attack in patterns or leave six bodies in the same exact way." She shuddered a little.

I wrapped my arms around myself too, suddenly feeling vulnerable. These murders were pretty horrifying. All were women, alone at night. Several were outdoors like the one at the park but two of them were in neighborhoods, walking to their cars and at least two others were in their own homes. Angela and I had begun double locking our doors and made sure our windows were secure all the time.

I thought about how I worked alone so much and how Alice had sneaked up on me today. If she was able to walk in with out my notice I'm sure anyone could. I made a mental note to make sure the doors were bolted from now on and to let Mr. Cullen know.

Xxx

It was Friday and all thoughts I'd had about staying at this job disappeared the minute I walked in the front door of Mr. Cullen's home.

Due to this I was looking at the row of t-shirts, trying to decide which one to pick.

Bruce Springsteen?

Nah. No need to desecrate an American flag.

Coldplay?

Too whiney. I needed somebody with balls.

Jimi Hendrix?

Even I couldn't bear to do it to Jimi.

I flipped through the shirts one by one, before I made my decision and removed it from the rack.

It was soft and worn. But still pristine. Loved and truly unique. Clearly one of his favorites. I held it up to my face and inhaled the soothing smell of his laundry detergent. Mr. Cullen's laundromat used the best smelling soap.

It was perfect.

Entering the bathroom downstairs I changed out of my blouse and into the t-shirt. I assessed my self in the mirror and noted how his shirt was too big, which wasn't a surprise since he was so tall. It was actually better that the shirt was so big since I needed as much coverage as possible.

I pulled my hair on top of my head, pissed I had spent 20 minutes blowing it out this morning for it to get frizzy in the humidity outside. I left my blouse and shoes in the bathroom and walked to the kitchen for my supplies.

Bucket, bleach and a scrub brush.

The fucker had me cleaning his patio furniture.

I was scrubbing the dirt and grime from the winter away with a little brush and a bottle of bleach with no advance notice, so I had come to work in my usual clothes. As I read the instructions he left for me I was stunned. And super pissed. And, I hated to admit it, close to tears because I had never had someone treat me like this before.

It was just so degrading and defeating. I didn't mind the manual labor or tedious shit he was asking me to do but it was the way he asked me. His stupid, beautifully handwritten lists left on the desk for me each day. Like he can't bear to be near me or lower himself to speaking to me directly. I was educated. And smart.

And attractive. Frankly, he looked at me sometimes like I smelled bad or was repulsive. Then there was the fact he was so rude. Of course he acted nice to me when Alice was here, or the electricians, but other times he either ignored me or treated me like shit. Every day I completed his ridiculous, exhausting demands and never once have I heard a please or a thank you. How fucking hard was it to leave the words 'Thank You' at the end of a note? How hard was it to come down from his private rooms and actually greet me once in a while?

I was at my wits end and refused to be his lackey any longer, so I resolved to finish the day, scrub his damn furniture and quit. But first, I was going to make him pay.

Armed with my supplies, and dressed in Edward Cullen's t-shirt, I opened the back door and walked out to his overly manicured patio. Potted plants, ferns, and ornamental trees surrounded the tiled floor. It was sunny today and the tiles were warm under my bare feet. A huge fireplace sat in the corner while wrought iron furniture was placed around strategically, designed for socializing.

I tried to imagine Mr. Cullen out here socializing with friends or his family on a cool fall night, fireplace lit and candles all around. I honestly couldn't see it. I *could* see Alice out here holding court, glass in hand, while he lurked inside, hiding from people.

I sat the bucket down and poured in the bleach and pulled out the hose from beside the house. I mixed the two up and began working. With every minute I was going more and more furious at my boss. I was more convinced than ever that he was actually trying to make me quit and I had reached the point where I was happy to grant him his wish.

EPOV

I heard Jasper the moment he pulled into the garage. Alice had called to say he was coming to see me today despite the weather so I left the garage open for him so he could park under cover.

Ms. Swan was outside, scrubbing the never used patio furniture, unaware of Jasper's presence inside. I hoped Alice was right and this dirty task would be the final straw and she would leave work today and never return. I even had a reference letter prepared to send her next week if she needed it, although her time here was so short I'm sure it would be better never to mention it again.

I'd spent the morning going over my maps and the recent news about the murder from Monday night. None of it was very useful, which was why I'd asked Jasper to come see me.

He reached the top steps and knocked softly on my study door.

*Edward?*

I walked over and opened it for him and gave him a huge smile.

"Jasper. Come in please. How was your trip?" I asked genuinely interested.

He walked in the room and sat in the same seat Alice had occupied the day before. He was thinking about her now, and how much he wanted to be back at home with her. I felt a twinge of guilt as I realized again that the whole family always sacrificed for me and put my needs above their own.

Always the prodigal son.

Jasper stretched his long legs out and crossed them at the ankle and pushed a thick piece of blonde hair behind his ear. His eyes lit up thinking about the hunting trip. "It was amazing Edward. You should have been there. Emmett got into a tussle with two mother bears. They completely shredded his outfit and he ended up soaked in the river. He ruined his new phone in the water and Rose was pissed. It's the third one this month. I doubt I've ever laughed so hard."

I watched the scene unfold in his mind as he told the story and found myself laughing with him. Emmett could be such a fool sometime, but he was a total competitor, he wouldn't stop until he was successful.

*You should have come. You know making fun of Emmett is better when you're there.*

The smile slowly slid from my face and said, "I know. I wish I could have, but Jasper, something is going on around here and I need your help. Have you been following the news?"

He nodded and said, "Yes. Carlisle and I were watching it this morning. The national press has picked up on it. What are you thinking?"

I waved him over to look at the map spread across my desk. I pointed out the pattern, which he was able to see as well. I showed him the descriptions of the bodies found and I told him what I'd heard and seen the other night.

Jasper stopped my explanation and clarified, "So you think there were three of them, one leader and two others?"

I nodded, "Yes, that was all I could hear, but the scents were not the same as they were from the other sites. The blonde, the leader, his scent has been at each location, but the others seem to change."

Jasper sat back in his seat and was quiet for a moment. I caught fleeting images passing through his mind, most of them from his life before he joined our family. I'd seen these scenes before but was confused as to why he was thinking about them now.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"I'm not sure but it feels familiar yet still off somewhat. There is a sense of planning and organization but there were some random killings not within the pattern." He said.

I walked over to the window and looked out thinking about the information we had AND how to piece it all together. "I don't think the police have caught on to the fact the random killings are being done by the same predator. They are claiming there are six murders when it is more like 10 from what I can tell."

I heard Jasper emit a deep sigh, "And you're positive the bite marks on the arms were from vampires?"

"I'm sure. I could see them rip the flesh with their teeth. And I could hear the leader's thoughts, the hunger for her blood, but what I don't understand is why does he let the others eat while he simply breaks their necks?" I questioned.

Jasper shook his head, still caught up in thoughts of his past, "I have no idea Edward. But it begs the question, if he isn't feeding on them then who *is* he feeding on?"

We spent some time discussing strategy, how I should step up my patrols and ways to get to my target faster. Jasper agreed that he must have a sixth sense, some kind of ability to escape me since I was incredibly fast.

Jasper was getting ready to leave when I remembered to ask him a question about the computer system.

Stopping him from leaving I asked, "Can you look at this for me? I want to be able to access my assistant's computer downstairs from this one, but I do not want her to have access to mine. Can you help me set this up?"

"Sure, let me see what we have up now." And he walked around the desk and sat in my chair.

As he worked his mind began swirling with questions.

"You've been talking to Alice I see." I grimaced.

Jasper continued working on the computer his fingers moving swiftly across the keys, never looking up.

*So you want her to quit huh?*

I grunted low in my throat.

*She really smells that good?*

He glanced up at me then to see my expression. His eyes were curious but his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking of his own past, of the men and women he had taken, whether any of them had blood that called to him like Isabella Swan's did to me.

I rolled my eyes but nodded.

Jasper reached over and flipped on the monitors, enlarging the one for the back patio.

We watched as Ms. Swan crouched in front of a chaise lounge and scrubbed the arms and legs of the chair with a thick brush. Her hair was plastered around her face and I could see sweat dripping down the sides of her neck. Her skin was flushed. Pink and inviting. I watched as she stood up and rubbed her brow with the back of her hand.

I swallowed back the first hint of desire.

I heard Jasper choke and stifle a laugh and I shot him a questioning look.

*Man. Your shirt.*

I looked closer and saw Bella was wearing my classic 1969 Let It Bleed Rolling Stones t-shirt. It was wet and you could see spots of bleach on it.

"What the fuck?" I growled.

Jasper leaned back in my chair and began laughing uncontrollably at the rage he felt rolling off my body.

"Stop. It's too funny and you're making me angry and I want to laugh at you instead." He said, gasping for words. "Please don't make her quit. I like her already."

I turned back to the monitor and watched her as she lifted the hem of *my* shirt and wiped her chin with it. The tiniest sliver of pale white skin popped out from underneath and at the sight of it my mouth rushed with venom, thicker than before.

Mine.

Jasper's laughter faded in the background and I heard him, faintly in the background.

"Edward?"

I was transfixed by her in my shirt.

*Edward.*

The hollow pit of my stomach clenched.

*Edward!*

I looked up at him questioningly, irritated at the interruption.

"What are you doing?" he said barely above a whisper. His eyes narrowed, trying to read my emotions.

I immediately was flooded with guilt and began apologizing, "I'm sorry. It must be overwhelming for you to be around. I've never experienced hunger like this before."

His eyes were filled with confusion still and I searched his mind. I shot back from the computer and desk, pacing furiously around the room as I settled in on his thoughts.

I locked eyes with Jasper for a moment trying to understand him. His eyebrow was arched, waiting for me to confirm his suspicions.

"What?" I asked incredulously. I didn't understand.

"That's not hunger. Well, a little bit of hunger, but that is not the main emotion you are feeling..." he trailed off, skirting around the word. His fingers drummed the arms of the chair and he struggled to keep his eyes on mine.

"Are you serious?"

*Yes.*

I paused in the middle of the room and ran my hands through my hair. I looked directly at Jasper to make sure he wasn't playing a joke on me or trying to piss me off. His yellow eyes were filled with sincerity and a touch of shock. The shock was probably a reflection of my own.

"Lust?"

*Lust.*



## Chapter Seven

EPOV

The word hung thickly in the air.

*Lust.*

Now mingled with confusion, repulsion, and fear.

I could see the words floating around his head as he picked them up from me. I was sure irritation would be on that list in a second.

Jasper and I were sitting across the room from one another. He was behind the desk, glancing down occasionally at the monitors, updating the system like I'd asked him to. I was across the room, as far away as possible, as though that made it less likely for him to read me.

The minutes ticked by and Jasper finally spoke. "Edward, it's not a big deal. Well, it *is* a big deal but not the way you're thinking. I mean you like her. She's cute and well, obviously not afraid of you," he said, breaking out into a huge grin, "which frankly makes her either the coolest girl you've ever met or the dumbest. I'm not sure yet." He glanced down again at the monitors and I could see her through his eyes, spraying down the furniture and cleaning up the mess she had made on the patio.

My shirt hung over her shoulders and her jaw was set. There was a look of something, determination, possibly, in her eyes. I wasn't sure. Again, the fact I couldn't hear her thoughts was distressing. I mean, really disturbing. This situation opened up a whole other equation I'd never considered. Lust? I began rubbing my hands back and forth across the top of my legs trying to squelch the feelings bubbling from inside.

Although I was confused, I was utterly intrigued. In all my years I truly had never experienced pure lust. Not like this.

Every emotion I had felt, in this second life, was tainted by the thoughts around me. There was no such thing as privacy or true intimacy. Being in a relationship with a woman was difficult, although not impossible, and I'd tried in the past unsuccessfully.

The parts I desired, the wonders of sharing with another person, opening yourself up, spilling your secrets one by one, were elusive. The part of a relationship when two people grow and change together in their journey to become one was destroyed the minute I read their minds.

My gift annihilated the give and take, the mystery of first love. For me this was not possible. There was no mystery. So even when I had desired another, that desire or need was mingled with her thoughts, which inevitably complicated the situation. It was impossible to tune her mind out yet cave to my base emotions. Sex, while physically pleasurable, was mentally torturous.

But *she* was different. *She* was silent. Isabella Swan was a mystery.

Again, through Jasper's eyes I watched her come in the house and put up the cleaning supplies. She meticulously placed them in the cabinet before she fell out of range in the bathroom.

Staring down at my knees I finally broke. "What is she feeling?" I asked, barely above a whisper. He heard me of course.

He paused and I looked over at him. There was a tinge of a smirk on his face and he was blocking his thoughts.

"What?" I asked growing irritated quickly.

This dependency on others was becoming more and more obnoxious.

Jasper lifted his brow, and stretched back in his seat, placing his hands behind his head. He was clearly enjoying my discomfort.

"So you really can't hear her?" he asked me.

"No. Nothing. Tell me what she's feeling." I demanded.

"Interesting because, I can feel her and Alice can see her. Yet, you can't hear her." he mused, running his hand across his jaw.

I glared at him. "Yes. It's fascinating. Tell me."

He ignored me and continued, "Then to complicate matters her blood sings to you. And you desire her physically. So on one hand you want her. And on the other hand you *want* her."

His lips were tugging at the corners.

"So what's really going on here...is you like a girl." He taunted. "Edward *likes* a girl..."

In an instant I was up and over the desk, pinning him and the chair to the wall.

"Tell me you idiot. What. Is. She. Feeling?" I was going to kill him.

He pushed me off, his foot firmly placed against my chest, and I flew across the room, back over the desk and landed on the chair, shattering it under my weight.

I leapt to my feet but he was in front of me already, hands on his hips and a huge grin on his face.

"Man, I'm impressed. You cleared the desk. I was sure you were going to take out the computer." He said as he picked up the leg of the chair and flipped it in his hands.

I laughed and walked across the room to get a trash can. We bent down to clean up the pieces of smashed leather and wood scattered across the floor. "I know. I wasn't sure if I could make it either. At the last minute I twisted a little."

Together we cleaned up the mess and put all of the debris in the bin. Jasper, apparently done tormenting me for the day, opened his mind and gave me what I'd asked for.

*She's pissed Edward. Like really, really, pissed. Her feelings range from bitterness to rage. Oh, and I'm picking up on a little bit of smugness since she ruined your shirt and she knew it would make you mad. But she's definitely going to quit.*

I nodded. I knew this was for the best even though I wasn't sure it was what I wanted anymore. But I never got what I wanted anyway, this was nothing new. My life had been about sacrifice and discipline, especially the last 15 years. Isabella Swan was just another sacrifice I had to make.

BPOV

I looked in the mirror and took in my flushed face and grimy hands. I took a finger and rubbed at a swipe of dirt that was smudged across my face. All that did was make a red mark on my already red skin.

I sighed. I was disgusting. My hands and feet were black with dirt from being outside and I was still sweating.

Nice.

And I definitely ruined his shirt. It was splotchy with bleach and smeared with grime.

Good.

I didn't feel bad. He deserved it.

I had two hours left before the end of the day, but I was done. I was going to leave Mr. Cullen my pre-written letter of resignation on my desk where he could find it when he came by for my daily report.

Here's your daily report: I quit.

The thought of leaving that note and the look of confusion on his perfectly featured face made me smile for the first time that day. Part of me wanted to go out in flames but the other needed to salvage a scrap of dignity so my regular notice would have to do.

I gathered my things, still barefoot, and walked to my desk, placing the letter on the corner where he would see it.

I had my bag and my shoes and I needed to stop in the kitchen to remove my food and other items. I wanted to leave Mr. Cullen's home the way I found it and remove every trace of my presence.

It would be like I never existed. A blip on the screen. Two weeks of disturbance in his routine and stagnant existence.

To my absolute horror just as I walked in the room he came down the back stairs.

There went my scrap of dignity.

Mr. Cullen was standing at the bottom of the steps and I noticed his hands were full of trash and behind him I could see an tall, lanky man carrying an arm load of what appeared to be parts of a chair. Mr. Cullen wore the normal, pained grimace on his face that I'd come to expect when he saw me.

We stood for a moment in silence while his eyes traveled down my body, taking in his t-shirt. I held my breath for a moment waiting to see what he would say. The absurdity of my behavior was dawning on me.

My boss was completely neurotic and anal retentive and I was standing in front of him in his shirt.

His shirt that I had all but destroyed.

And I was currently wearing it in an act of defiance.



The fact that he was overwhelmingly gorgeous when he was mad only made the situation worse.

Or better? I had no idea. I lost all sense of rationality when he looked at me.

I felt the heat rush to my face as I realized he could call the police and have me escorted off the property and press charges against me.

Hmmm...maybe I hadn't thought this all the way through.

I heard a stifled cough from behind Mr. Cullen and looked up at the other man who was staring at me with the slightest hint of amusement in his amber eyes.

And who could blame him? I was standing in the middle of the kitchen, my arms piled with my belongings, barefoot, wearing my boss's enormous shirt, covered in dirt, and smelling like a sweaty pig in front of the two most gorgeous men I have ever laid eyes on.

Best day ever.

Apparently deciding to take the high road, Mr. Cullen walked past me out the garage door without a word. The other man followed but gave me a wide smile and nod of encouragement, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I silently watched the tall blonde man amble pass me and close the back door with a sharp click. I let out a deep breath...realizing at that moment, I'd been holding it for some time.

That, I decided, as I cleared out the refrigerator and gathered my belongings for the final time, was my signal to leave.

Xxx

My shoes kept slipping off the foot rest on barstool I was perched on.

I hated wearing heels.

The music thumped around us and the lights were low, I'm assuming for ambiance or something. But it was all lost on me as I swallowed the last of my drink. I peered into the bottom of the glass hoping a refill would magically appear.

Where was that waitress?

I slumped back in my seat, dreaming of my couch and comfy clothes. I'd had to scrub myself clean when I came home from work to rid myself of the filth that covered my entire body. I was hoping it would remove some of the horror and humiliation I'd experienced as well but sadly soap didn't take care of that.

My bad mood was lingering as I sat between Angela and Tyler and pretended to be interested in their conversation. I'd never quit a job before and left on bad terms. I also felt terrible ruining Mr. Cullen's shirt. Sure he was an ass but it was immature and I was embarrassed by my behavior.

Fucking hindsight.

I fingered the paper coasters on the table and pretended to listen to Tyler and his friend Ben argue who was the better martial artist, Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee.

I groaned internally and looked around the table for a sharp object to gouge my eye out with, but came up empty.

What I did see was Angela making sex eyes at Ben and pretending this was the most fascinating conversation ever, which I knew for a fact, it wasn't. She caught my eye and raised an eyebrow at me, motioning with her own mouth for me to smile. I rolled my eyes at her but plastered a smile on my face and returned my attention to Tyler.

I knew I wasn't being fair. It wasn't his fault my boss was a douche. I appraised Tyler, noticing how he looked nice in a blue shirt that matched his dark eyes. He really was cute and nice. The problem was he was a bit boring. At the moment he was animatedly informing Ben the reasons Bruce Lee was superior to Jackie Chan. "Jackie exaggerates often by adding wild stunts and a lot of wire work. If you watch Jackie fight, you will be entertained but when you watch Bruce, you might learn something. The end. And the win goes to ....Bruce Lee!"

I watched with mild interest as Ben took a deep breath and said, "Since you wish to point out past history, let's get a more complete view. In *Fist of Fury*, Bruce Lee kicked Jackie Chan off a twenty foot ledge onto an unforgiving cement floor. Yet Jackie Chan survived. Then in *Enter the Dragon*, he not only suffered the indignity you so much relish, but also was conked on the head with an errant nunchucka swing from Mr. Lee. Yet Jackie Chan survived. Then in their third encounter... well, there wasn't any third encounter. And there is a good reason for that - Bruce Lee was DEAD before there was a third encounter. Jackie Chan went on to become the next big Asian action movie star. Coincidence? I don't think so."

Ben leaned back in his seat and took a long, smug, pull from his beer. He and Tyler eyed one another trying to determine where to take this next. I had to admit I was impressed. Not so much from this conversation but from the fact people actually knew this much random information about something I cared so little about.

The waitress came over and took our order for another round of beer and when Tyler introduced the next topic of who would win a death match, Webster vs. Gary Coleman. At this, I excused myself to the restroom.

At the sink I pulled out my hair brush and was attempting to tame my thick mop of hair when a woman next to me washing her hands said, "Wow, your perfume is amazing, what kind is it?"

I laughed and said, "Oh, I don't wear perfume. It gives me a headache. It must be someone else."

In the mirror I watched as she smiled and ran her fingers down her long, curly, red hair. Her skin was pale. Flawless. Completely smooth. She had on large, rose tinted glasses and was wearing a tight black dress.

Unscrewing the cap to my lip gloss I said, "I love your glasses, I could never pull off something so dramatic."

She flashed me an ultra white smile, that kind of gave me the creeps. "Thanks. I have sensitive eyes so I wear them all the time. So I saw you out there with that guy...are you here on a date?"

I sat back against the sink. "Ugh yes. I mean, he's cute and all, but boring. You would not believe the argument he and his friend have been having all night. And what is worse, my friend has hit it off with his friend so I'm doomed for the evening."

She threw her head back and laughed, her red curls bouncing behind her head. She was really beautiful; interesting looking, like a model. "Yeah doomed. Well, you come find me if you need an escape. My boyfriend is supposed to meet me later but he can be unreliable."

I put my brush and make up away and followed her to the door. Stopping just before she pushed the door open to the thumping beat of the outside music she turned and said, "By the way, my name is Victoria."

EPOV

With my props in place I was able to successfully stake out the corner of the business district on this busy Friday night.

I'd been here for about an hour, my coffee now cold and my newspaper thoroughly read, color coded Post-its in place. Everything was as it should be.

Except the lingering scent on my clothes.

And the memory of the sight of her skin, creamy and white.

And the fact I apparently wasn't just hungry but behaving like a typical, horny seventeen year old.

Other than that it was a regular day in the life of a 111 year old vampire.

I couldn't believe it when I came down the stairs to find Bella in the kitchen. I'd held my breath when I left my rooms and attempted to ignore her thumping heart. With Jasper there I was doing fine until I stepped into the room and saw her standing there flushed and red. She was so small, draped in my decimated shirt. I stood still and fought the urge to reach out and rub my finger over smudge of dirt on her face.

Jasper felt the atmospheric change and nudged me in the back, bringing me back to the moment where I took my leave.

Annoyed with these thoughts I picked up my trash and threw it in the receptacle by the curb. I made a stop at my car to put the newspapers in since I'd decided to patrol a bit before returning home. I didn't expect to find the vampire tonight. I was sure of my pattern and we were not in the right location or timing for one of his attacks.

As I walked, I cleared my head and listened to the crowds. It was a typical Friday night and most people were having a good time. Humans act foolish, though, in their quest for fun. The excessive drinking, suggestive behavior, or questionable acts always caused more pain than they expected. It all begins as fun in the minds of young people but tends to spiral out of control quickly.

There was section of this area was full of popular bars and restaurants. I wandered around for a while, waiting and listening.

*Wow, I wonder if Amanda saw Robert, he looks really hot tonight...Finally, Friday night! TGIF!...Why did I wear these shoes they are killing me...Now, where did I put my car keys...or my car...*

I found him after a moment of searching and followed the voice, the one looking for his keys. Even his thoughts were blurry, intoxicated and incoherent. I found him stumbling in a parking lot across the street when I approached him.

"Hey, let me call you a cab." I said, and watched him struggle to find his keys in his pocket. I stood by and watched as he fished them out and promptly dropped them on the ground. It was easy to help intoxicated people since they were not clear enough to notice the speed or strength you possess or the coolness of your touch.

I quickly picked them up and held onto them. "Who the fuck are you? Gimmie my keys." He stuttered, swiping a meaty hand towards me. I stepped back, grimacing. This guy was getting on my nerves and I really didn't want his dirty hands on me.

I left him for a moment, struggling to maintain his balance and walked to the curb, waving down one of the many cabs trolling the area. "Come here. Get in the cab." I directed, rolling my eyes at his asinine behavior. Assisting him to the vehicle I shoved him inside and gave the driver more than enough cash to cover the fare.

The driver nodded and pulled away from the sidewalk. I watched the tail lights as they trailed down the dark road. I took a deep breath and continued my patrolling of the bar district.

*I can't believe he was looking at the waitress that way...asshole....spilling his drink on my new dress...I wonder if she'll give me her number...those murders are freaking me out...stupid manager making us park in the back of the lot...*

I honed in on the last one and watched a girl, dressed in a uniform from a local restaurant, dart to her car in the shadowy corner of the parking lot. She was safe from vampires tonight but I kept an eye on her to make sure there were no drunken frat boys around.

As usual I wondered why she chose to go alone. Why she didn't bring a co-worker into the dark night. The danger people put themselves in was usually their own fault. Avoidable.

My mind flashed to Ms. Swan and I wondered if she took risks like this. All humans do, but some were worse than others. My stomach recoiled at the thought of her alone in the dark, unprotected.

The waitress drove away and I turned behind the businesses, to the edge of the dark alley clustered between the old buildings. It smelled like garbage and the constant wetness gave the whole area a funky, bad odor. I held my breath to keep the disgusting scents at bay.

The night was fairly quiet, as I'd expected, and I realized for the millionth time the absurdity of my policing this area. Why was I, a monster, a murderer, wandering the dark streets helping people to their cars and shoving them into cabs?

Why did I leave the comforts of my home and my family to comb the beer-soaked alleys of the inner city? I knew why, and tracking the blonde vampire steeled my resolve.

For countless years I'd lived in my own world, focused on myself and my needs.

Mastering our alternative lifestyle. Quenching my thirst through the hunt. Gaining knowledge through books and countless degrees. Collecting bits of history to prove I was there. Living with my family, and coping with their thoughts and love.

Those were the things I consumed myself with. They were trivial. Self absorbed. I spent more than 50 years striving to be...nothing.

But when I decided to go on my own I focused on what I could do with my abilities and as I roamed the dark nights of the city, alone for the first time in many years, I found a person in need. And I helped them. Finally, I had a sense of purpose.

Then I noticed the trends of rogue vampires that hovered on the edge of cities. Their kills were less noticeable to the authorities but fairly easy for me to identify. The deaths appeared random, products of living in an urban area. I determined to claim this city as my own, keeping the citizens safe. So every night I walked the streets of the city, helping those I stumbled on and tracked the far more dangerous members of my kind.

As the years passed I honed my gift and vampire abilities. I finally listened to people instead of tuning out their voices. I learned how to pick up on the subtle differences in their tone, determining what was fear and what was not. At first I was terrible at tracking and was unable to follow the scent or clues left by those I hunted. Eventually I developed a system of physical skills and research that was unparalleled to others of my kind. I used the money I'd earned over the years to fund my mission and with the help of my family I was able to help more people and save more lives. I was faster and better prepared than those I sought out.

The one compromise I made to my family when I left was to continue the tradition of immersing myself into human culture by acting as the CEO of The Pacific Northwest Trust. It was the only thing that kept me in regular contact with people, which allowed me to hold on to a thread of my humanity as well.

So I stood now, on this warm Friday night in a dank back alley waiting to help the next poor soul that crossed my path when in need.



## Chapter Eight

### BPOV

"Bella, would you like to dance?" Tyler asked, and held his hand out expectantly.

My eyes went to his hand and stared at it for a moment while I tried to come up with an excuse to say no. Too tired? Drunk? Would prefer not to encourage my boring date from hell any further? As I considered my options I realized a fair amount of time had passed and his hand was still out there, waiting for me to take it.

"Tyler, if there is one thing you should know, it's that Bella doesn't dance," Angela said from behind his back. "Greater men than you have succumbed to injuries from her feet in the middle of the dance floor."

I shot Angela a look of annoyance and she gave me a wicked grin back while giving me double thumbs up. I narrowed my eyes at her trying to decide if I should thank her or tell everyone she once left a party with her dress tucked into her underwear. She saved me true, but not before spilling the dirt on my traumatic dance history. I mulled it over and decided to save that bit of dish for another time.

I shrugged. "It's true Tyler. These babies," I lifted a spiked heel off the ground, "are lethal. But please, dance without me, I'm happy to sit on the sidelines and watch."

Angela took my permission and ran with it, grabbing Ben's hand and dragging him into the crowd of sweaty, pulsing bodies.

Tyler cocked his head to the side and said, "Are you sure? I don't mind sitting with you. We could talk some more."

And listen to him talk about his costume for DragonCon next year? Too quickly I responded, "No really, go! I'm totally fine." And I gave him a reassuring smile and waved him off.

He nodded and I watched him as he gave me one final smile and disappeared into the sea of people.

I let out a deep sigh of relief.

Ten minutes later I felt a tap on my shoulder and braced myself for Tyler. I prepped myself for an exaggerated yawn and arm stretch to signal my need to go home, but to my surprise it wasn't Tyler but the red head, Victoria, from the restroom.

"Hey! I saw you sitting here all alone and came over to keep you company." She told me as she slid into the bar stool next to me, her bracelets clanking as she rested her arm on the table.

"Oh! Victoria, right?" I pushed the empty glasses out of her way and smiled. "I'm Bella."

Victoria flashed me an ultra white smile and asked me how my date was going. I pointed through the dancers to Tyler who was attempting to grind on a small blonde in the middle of the floor.

"My date is occupied, which is honestly more than I could ask for." I laughed. "He really is nice, just not my type."

We watched the dancers for a minute. I could see Angela's huge grin all the way over here at the table. She was really hitting it off with Ben which I was truly happy about. They had identical looks of infatuation on their faces so I felt the night was a success for both of them.

I turned to Victoria and said loudly, over the music, "I think I'm going to head home. It's been a really long day."

She nodded and said, "I'll walk you out. I'm supposed to meet my friend outside."

I darted over to Angela, telling her my plans to leave and asking her to let Tyler know that I had to go. She waved me off motioning for me to leave, too involved in Ben to really notice. We both knew she owed me for setting her up with Ben and in return she would do a little damage control for me with my less than spark-inducing date.

I met Victoria by the door and we walked out of the air conditioned bar and into the warm damp night. It wasn't raining at the moment but it was typically so wet that everything carried moisture.

In the bright lights in front of the bar I could see Victoria better than before and again was struck by her beauty. She was tall and graceful. I noted that she reminded me a little of Alice, poised and confident. Standing next to her made me feel awkward and out of place. She was the kind of girl I could see Mr. Cullen with. Long legs, perfect face, super model hair, cat like manicured nails. I wondered for a moment if she liked obsessive compulsive men.

We began walking towards the parking lot, past the restaurants and other businesses.

"So you're waiting for your boyfriend?" I asked.

"No, he called while you were saying goodbye to your friend and said he couldn't come. But I told him about you and he really wants to meet you." She said with an excited giggle.

I heard my own nervous giggle escape my lips before I stopped myself. "What did you say? He wants to meet me?"

She stopped and looked at me, her perfect pink lips twitched. "Yes. He really does."

Suddenly I realized how unnerving it was to be unable to see her eyes fully. Her tinted glasses were not fully opaque but I couldn't identify the expression on her face. Was she kidding? Or serious? I had no clue.

What I did know is the internal alarm system we all have inside was beginning to clang. I took a small step back and said, in the steadiest voice I could muster, "You know, I really shouldn't leave without Angela. I have her keys and I wouldn't want her to get locked out..." My words trailed off into an uncomfortable silence between us.

Well, I was uncomfortable. Incredibly so. Victoria seemed...calm. Controlled.

Bored?

I took another step back while keeping a fake smile plastered across my face. She reached out and touched my arm.

I jerked at her touch and my eyes widened.

Her hands were freezing.

Not cold. Freezing.

"Bella," Victoria said as she took off her glasses and pushed them to the top of her head. "I need you to come with me."

I realized too late that we were alone, near the corner of two buildings that were separated by a small, dark alley. I was looking for my escape when I noticed her eyes in the head lights of a passing car.

Rubies.

They were the color of rubies.

I choked back my fear and began to run but she cut me off, stepping in front of me, far too quick for a normal person. She pushed me once, hard in the shoulders into the shadow of the buildings. Her long red nails pressed sharply into my flesh.

"Oh!" I gasped, startled by her strength but not enough to lose my head. I turned and ran again, this time down the alley, since she was blocking the exit. The cliché of the moment was not lost on me even in my desperation. I was alone in the dark, cornered by a deranged, sick woman who wore red contacts, who preyed on ridiculous young women.

I stumbled in my heels and scraped my knee on the ground. Stupid fucking shoes. Picking myself up, I could hear her behind me, slowly following me in the darkness.

"Bella. Please don't do this. It's no use. Once I told James about you, he insisted on experiencing you himself." She called, her heels clicking loudly on the pavement.

I saw some light in front of me and spotted the back doors for several of the bars. Dashing towards them I could hear the loud music thumping behind the closed doors, signaling people nearby. I reached my hand out and turned the knob, music and light filtering through the crack when suddenly a thin, pale arm shot out and slammed the door shut.

I was breathing heavily from running and from the fear that gripped my heart and I let out a slight cry as Victoria leaned in front of me.

"Victoria, what are you doing?" I whispered between quick, short breaths.

She grabbed my wrist and pulled me towards her. She bared her teeth and to my horror she ran her tongue across the front of them before laughing exuberantly.

I shuddered under her touch and twisted my arm away. Victoria held firm, tightening her grip, and causing me to buckle under the pressure.

She ran her finger from her free hand across my cheek. "He is going to *love* you. All yummy and full of spunk. He likes his girls spunky, you know. You will make a wonderful addition." I had no idea what she was talking about. They were quite possibly the ramblings of a mad woman.

At that moment the back door opened roughly and knocked Victoria and I apart and I heard a sharp hiss leave her lips. I scrambled away and pressed my back to the wall. I distractedly began rubbing the swollen skin on my wrist.

My heart was racing in my ears and I tried to regain my senses.

A man stepped out and filled the space Victoria and I had occupied a moment before. He turned my way and I was shocked to find Edward Cullen standing between us, tall and composed.

"Isabella, go." His voice was tight but soft.

Wide-eyed I looked from him to Victoria. Her eyes were angry, narrowed with frustration. His back was to me now and I heard him speak again, with more force, "now."

I nodded absently and skirted behind him, quickly making it to the door. My hands were shaking as I turned the knob and slipped inside, away from the dark and my hunter.

Xxx

EPOV

I felt the vibration in my pocket and pulled out my phone.

Alice.

I slipped it back in and concentrated on the night.

High traffic areas like this were hard to read. There were so many people and when you combined their thoughts with alcohol or drugs it made things incredibly fuzzy.

My phone shifted again.

"Hi. I'm working. What do you need?" I asked in a low voice, not wanting to draw attention to myself.

Alice's voice came out in a rush. "Edward, you must find Bella now."

I was confused, "Isabella Swan?"

"She's in trouble. Real trouble."

I flashed to this afternoon when Ms. Swan stood in front of me, flushed and determined.

"Well, where is she? I need something to go on Alice." I barked and ran my hand through my hair, agitated.

Alice spoke faster. "I'm seeing a flash of red hair and tinted glasses. She and Bella are laughing now, sitting in a restaurant or bar, but the vision shifts and then she is running from her in the dark."

My mind churned and I asked, "Red hair?"

"Yes. Flaming red. Too red. Unnatural."

I was still listening but I began walking towards the front of the buildings looking inside for Bella. I had no idea if she was inside but it was the best I could do.

A red head. The same from the other night? The vampire?

I pushed down the panic building in my throat.

Since I couldn't focus on the silent mind of Ms. Swan I was forced to search for the mind of the red head. Pausing outside a bar, I focused past the chatter and drinks clinking on the tables. Beyond the sounds of the bar, rushing water and gurgling liquid as it filled glasses.

I inhaled deeply. I couldn't hear Ms. Swan but I could taste her. As the air hit, a slight rushing of venom filled my mouth.

Mine.

She'd been here.

I flung the door open, pushing past the complaints of the bouncers and walked into the middle of the bar.

Swallowed by the loud and pulsing music and writhing bodies I sucked in more air and

choked as her scent was stronger and fire poured down my throat. I scanned the room, unable to pinpoint Ms. Swan or the red head. I closed my eyes and tried to hear the vampire through the noise.

"Mr. Cullen?" I heard, and whipped around to find myself looking down at a dark haired girl who eyeing me from behind a pair of Tina Fey glasses.

"Yes?" Who was this? No one ever recognized me in public.

*Fucking bastard... Crushed my best friend...Do not get distracted by his eyes...*

The girl set her jaw and squinted her eyes at me. "I'm Angela. Bella's roommate."

Bella's roommate. Oh.

I leaned in slightly and noticed she carried the smell of flowers on her person.

I pulled together a smile and looked her in the eye, hoping to use my abilities to encourage her to be forthcoming. "Nice to meet you. In fact, I was looking for Ms. Swan. Is she here?"

Angela rolled her eyes at me. *Prick.*

Ouch.



"No. She left. She had a really hard day. You know. AT WORK. Her boss treated her like crap so she finally got up the nerve to quit and let him sort his own underwear." I could hear the anger in her voice and the words floating through her mind told me quite a rant was building. And while I wasn't going to deny I deserved it, there wasn't time.

I jumped in before she could get started, "Angela, you're right. I treated Ms. Swan poorly. I came to apologize. You said she left?" Angela nodded and replayed their conversation on the dance floor in her head.

Tyler? She had been here with the electrician.

But didn't leave with him. My eyes roamed the room and found him huddled up with a blonde on the dance floor. Part of me swelled with happiness that she left without him. The other was enraged he could let someone as fragile as Ms Swan leave unescorted.

"Angela, when did she leave?"

"About five minutes ago. You just missed her." She said and her thoughts were slightly kinder towards me, under the assumption I was here to apologize.

I ran towards the door but caught a snatch of the red head's thoughts. I could see bits of dark, wet pavement, and walls of brick. She was moving, with determination, down the long passage towards something.

Ms. Swan.

I knew there was an alley behind the building and I turned and ran back through the crowd towards the rear of the bar. I easily passed through the throngs of people and pushed the kitchen doors open. Moving through the workers, I ignored their shouts and questions on my intrusion. The back door was in front of me and I could hear them clearly now through the thick metal.

The vampire spoke of 'him' and then Ms. Swan called her Victoria, fear dripping in her voice.

Images flooded my mind of Victoria's hands touching the skin on her arm.

Twisting and tearing the smooth, white, flesh.

Damaging what was mine.

I was consumed with rage as I attempted to open the door but was met with resistance. Stepping back I used my foot to burst into the darkness and felt the two of them tumble away.

My senses were flooded immediately with her excruciating scent, which was amplified by her perspiration and fear. I paused for a millisecond to brace myself but noted, oddly, the desire I expected was trumped by the overwhelming need to protect.

I stood between them assessing the injuries to Ms. Swan and maintaining a position of offense on Victoria. I clenched my jaw as I smelled the blood from her scraped knee and watched her rub her tender wrist.

She needed to leave.

"Isabella. Go." I directed, and turned towards the vampire.

She paused behind me, processing my words. There was no time. I could see the plans of escape flitting through Victoria's mind. She was three steps ahead of me and I had to stop her.

Without looking back I spoke again, "Now." And this time I felt her pass by me, a wave of her scent assaulting my nostrils as she slammed the door behind her.

Xxx

Victoria and I were alone now.

She was plotting, running through scenarios, quickly rejecting one after the other.

I could kill her. It would take but a moment, but I needed some information from her first.

"Where is he?" I asked.

Confusion flitted across her face. She wasn't expecting that.

"Who?" she returned, now in the role of protector.

I stared at her for a moment watching the images of her blond leader pass through her mind. She was in awe of him, her thoughts filled with respect and allegiance.

"Do you think he feels the same for you?" I taunted.

She cocked her head to the side trying to follow my questions, her red eyes questioning.

"This doesn't concern you, vampire." She hissed.

I arched an eyebrow and explained, "Yes it does. You are in my territory, drawing attention to yourselves and me by association."

She laughed, her hair shaking down her shoulders, "I think this is about more than your territory. You knew that girl, you spoke her name and," she inhaled deeply, "you reek of human contact."

I ignored her comments and began to figure out how to destroy her in this populated area.

Her confidence grew in my silence and she stepped closer, "You'd better get used to us. We are not leaving. We have plans and your little girlfriend is part of them. Once he makes up his mind there is no turning back. You better say goodbye to your pet now because it's only a matter of time."

I charged her and pushed her to the wall, my hands clamped around her neck. Her eyes bulged but the smirk on her face remained, daring me to make her a martyr for her cause.

I leaned into her ear and growled, "You will stay away from her and you will stay away from the city. Go," I pulled her off the wall and shoved her in the direction of the street. "Take that message back to *him* and pray you never cross my path again."

She looked ready to pounce and but I stood firm and seconds later the back door opened and two bartenders began carrying out bags of trash and recyclables.

Victoria used the opportunity to disappear into the darkness and I opened the door to begin the tedious process of damage control.

Xxx

BPOV

I was standing outside the kitchen door, next to the bar, waiting for him to come back in. I wasn't sure if he would but I had no where else to go. I was too scared to walk to my car alone and I was too freaked out to go into the bar and look for my friends.

So I waited by the kitchen door, pressed against the wall, hoping Mr. Cullen would come back inside and tell me what was going on.

My hands were clenched into fists at my side in order to stop them from shaking, but it didn't really help since my whole body was shuddering as I attempted to process the situation from the alley. I could feel the accelerated thumping of my heart keeping time with the dance music in the next room.

What had happened out there?

Who is Victoria and what was she rambling about? She said something about me being good 'addition' and several things about 'him'. She looked so crazy with her red eyes and scary teeth.

The kitchen door bumped open and I jumped to see if it was him but instead it was a short girl carrying out a large tray of drinks and food. I slumped to the wall again and thought about how Mr. Cullen found me.

He wasn't the type to go out or party as far as I could tell. And why would Edward Cullen, esteemed CEO of PNT, be in the kitchen of a mid-scale bar? He probably has smashed up food in the soles of his fancy shoes and will want me to clean them out on Monday.

Monday.

I slapped my hand over my face and groaned. I'd forgotten for a moment I'd quit. Well, I'm sure he can find someone else to do the job. There is probably a temp agency for rich guys who need grunts to do all their dirty work he can contact until he hires a replacement.

The door swung open again and I saw Mr. Cullen's tall frame walk by. I pushed off the wall to follow him but he suddenly turned and faced me.

The expression on his face was one of relief and he said, "I'm glad you waited. Are you okay?"

I nodded slowly, not really sure what to say.

He looked down at my knee and grimaced. "Why don't you go clean that up. I'll wait right outside the door." He said, and directed me towards the restrooms.

I went in the women's room feeling totally overwhelmed. I'd just been threatened by a woman outside the bar, and my former boss, who was rude to me all week, actually saved me and is now concerned about my scraped knees. Nothing was making sense.

Sure enough, when I walked out he was standing stiffly across from the bathroom door. A girl with a low neckline passed him on her way into the restroom and gave him a flirty smile. I observed with fascination that he completely ignored her.

His eyes were fixed on me.

I thought they were on me but I nervously glanced over my shoulder looking to see if something more interesting was behind me.

No. Just me.

He gestured for me to walk ahead of him and we made our way out the front door.

On the sidewalk I turned to him and watched him for a moment. He was attempting to act casual but something was off. His hands were shoved in his pockets and he rocked slowly back on his heels. His actions appeared forced and deliberate.

The neon lights from the bar signs cast a hazy glow over us and Mr. Cullen's skin almost seemed to reflect it. Watching the shadows play in the tendrils of his ever messy hair, I felt my own in an effort to straighten it.

We stared at one another in an uncomfortable silence.

I let out a deep breath and said, "I have some questions."

His eyes tightened but he nodded as though he expected this.

I opened my mouth to begin but my feet swayed under me. Mr. Cullen reached out and caught me by the arms and held me upright.

Neither of us moved for a moment. He was frozen, hands clamped around the thin fabric of my shirt. Again, we briefly locked eyes until we both turned away embarrassed by the situation.

I wiggled from under his grasp and he quickly withdrew his hands, stashing them behind his back.

My face flushed and I said, "I'm okay. Thanks."

The slightest trace of discomfort passed over his face before he said, "I think I should drive you home."

Ugh. This was incredibly uncomfortable in so many ways. He clearly was not happy about the situation either, but I really didn't have any choice so I nodded and followed him down the street to his car.

When we reached his car he pressed the remote to unlock it and I lowered myself into the passenger seat.

Mr. Cullen was already in the seat next to me with the car started. He was looking straight ahead, busying himself with driving. He deftly flicked switches and pushed the levers in his expensive car. I inhaled the rich leather scent as I slid into the soft, buttery seat. Though half-lidded eyes I observed that his car was typically spotless, no trash or CDs. No books or coffee cups. Nothing to provide a glimpse of the real Edward Cullen.

I nervously ran my fingers across the dashboard and fingered the lever on the glove compartment door. I twisted my neck and saw him watching me and I pulled my hand back quickly and placed both my hands on my lap.

"I live on Third and Main." I directed, breaking the quiet of the car.

He nodded again, still not speaking.

The quiet hum of the vehicle was making me sleepy but I had questions and very little time to get them answered. Breaking the stillness of the car I cleared my throat.

"Will you answer my questions now?"

This time he looked over at me and replied, "Yes. If I can."

"Who was that woman?"

"I don't know."

"Where did she go?"

"She ran away." He must have seen the panic in my eyes because he quickly added, "But I don't think she'll bother you again."

I let that sink in for a minute and watched his hands manipulate the steering wheel. His fingers were long and slender, arched over the curve of the leather. We rounded a curve and he gracefully moved his hand to the gear shift.

I decided to go with another line of questioning.

"How did you find me?"

Silence.

"*How* did you find me?"

Silence.

I shifted my body so I was looking at him even though he continued to keep his eyes straight ahead.

"Are you going to answer me?" Answer me.

He pulled the car into the parking lot of my apartment and stopped. He angled his body towards mine slightly, hands still gripping the wheel, his knuckles tense and straining. They creaked against the leather.

"No." He sighed.

I felt my jaw drop. "What do you mean 'no'?"

He looked me in the eye and said, "Why are you quitting?"

Nice deflection.

"I...umm..." I stuttered, trying to come up with a response.

He held up one perfect hand and motioned for me to stop.

He took a deep breath and said in his thick soothing voice, "I'm sorry I was rude to you. I treated you unfairly and I was completely unprofessional. Sometimes I don't realize what is and is not appropriate to ask my employees to do."

He laughed lightly and said, "I tend to get a little self absorbed sometimes."

I chuckled quietly at his revelation and said, "Thank you. And well, if anyone should apologize it is me. I totally ruined your shirt. Like, really ruined it."

Even in the shadows I could see the flash of anger pass across his face at the mention of his shirt. It was brief, only a there for a moment.

"Well, yes, you did massacre my shirt. But I guess that makes us even?" he said this as a question and his jaw arranged in a slight grin.

The grin softened his features and I noticed his eyes looked darker with purplish rings marring the skin under them. I wondered if he was as tired as I felt. I leaned my head back and rubbed my inflamed wrist, suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion.

"Does it hurt badly?" he asked and gestured to my arm, his voice soft with concern.

I closed my eyes for a moment and soaked up the richness of his voice. My mind wandered for a moment and I wondered if he could sing.

"Isabella..." his voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

"No, it's okay." I said, and held it up for him to see. "I bruise easily, I'm sure it appears worse than it actually is."

He stared for a moment at the splotchy skin. Suddenly he blurted, "Will you come back to work? I'm afraid in the two weeks you've worked for me I've become quite dependent."

I checked his expression to see if he was serious and to my astonishment his face was sincere.

He noticed my hesitation and continued, "I promise to back off some. And no more scrubbing the furniture." and he his lips curved into the most dangerous smile I've ever seen.

"I'll think about it." I said, not sure, but afraid if he kept smiling at me like that I would agree to just about anything he asked.

He nodded and wrapped his fingers around the door handle, pushing it open. I followed his lead and got out of my side of the car.

"I'm fine from here," I told him and gave him a short wave.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm walking you in." he said, annoyance filling his voice.

"Fine." I replied, once again trying to determine if I wanted to stay on the emotional roller coaster of Edward Cullen.

We walked together up the stairs to my second floor apartment. I fished for my keys in my purse, pulled them and he offered a courteous, "Let me," and he quickly took the keys from my grasp and unlocked the door.

We stood for an awkward moment, unsure of our boss/employee status, and I almost sighed with relief when he dangled the keys in front of me to take.

"Goodnight Isabella." He said, my name rolling out of his lips with ease. I was disturbed at the slight chill that ran up my spine when I heard him speak my name.

"Goodnight," I replied, "And thank you."

I watched as he stepped around the corner. Exhausted and spent, I closed the door and stumbled into bed.

Xxx

EPOV

Hours later I stood in the shadows listening to the sounds of the night as a slight breeze whispered across my face.

Fingering the key in my pocket, I rubbed the grooves over and over, memorizing the pattern.

It was late. And the apartment was quiet except for the sounds of sleep. Angela was tucked in her bed and was dreaming of the young man she met earlier tonight. She was content, unaware of the horrors her roommate had suffered hours earlier.

I couldn't hear Isabella's mind of course, but I could hear her steady breaths and evenly paced heartbeat.

Once again I was at a loss. I was standing outside her apartment, key in hand, desperate to see her. To check on her and make sure she was okay.

But I knew she was okay. I could hear her breaths. Her home was locked and safe. I'd delivered her there myself hours before.

I needed to see her.

I slipped the key into the lock and silently twisted the knob until I felt the click of the chambers as they released.

I moved inside, shut the door and quietly replaced the key on Isabella's key ring by the door.

Standing in the middle of the room, I inhaled deeply and relished the fire that scorched my throat. The burning fire was harsh and painful but it signaled the one thing I wanted.

Isabella.

I choked back the venom and continued to inhale deep, rhythmic breaths of delicious, mouthwatering flowers.

Crossing the living room, I walked directly to her room, pausing for a moment to assess my resolve.

I was sure I wouldn't hurt her. I couldn't. It was now my job to keep her safe.

A thin sliver of light traveled across her face as I opened the door to her room. She was in her bed, lying on her side, tangled in a mass of sheets. Her hair was tangled and snarled, splayed across the pillow, and her hands were clenched under her chin, balled into tiny fists. Her bruised wrist was glowing with heat in the dark.

I picked up the blouse she had worn that evening and pushed it to my nose, burying myself in her exquisite aroma.

I found another shirt on her dresser and inhaled.

Intoxicating.

Isabella shifted in the bed, rolling to the opposite side, moaning slightly. I dropped the shirt and froze.

I watched her lips and waited, the pink tint visible to my eyes in the dark. I was holding my breath now, unnecessarily straining to hear that sound escape her lips again. It only took a moment before another low whimper left her mouth.

I was instantly flooded with desire.

My body, not my mouth.

Aware now of the true nature of my feelings, I forced myself to retreat though the apartment, leaving the object of my desire to her unsettling dreams.



## Chapter Nine

BPOV

"Bella, you look terrible." Angela informed me as I felt the bed give under her weight.

I had my head back on the pillow and my eyes closed tightly. Groaning, I pulled the blanket over my face and snuggled into the bed further. I had been awake for some time but rationalized that if I stayed in bed it could all just be a nightmare.

Angela lightly reached under the blanket and picked up my hand. I could feel her fingertips gently touch the swelling on my wrist.

It definitely wasn't a nightmare.

"What happened?" she asked softly, concern growing with every word. "Are you okay?"

I pulled the blanket off my face and looking into her worried eyes I felt my own start to burn.

I sat up, leaning back into the headboard. I wiped my eyes and nose with the hem of my shirt. "I'm okay. Really I am. I don't really know what happened. It was all so strange."

Angela and I sat on the bed for over an hour as I told her about my encounter with Victoria and Edward Cullen. Her eyes were big as saucers the entire time and I got to the point where I was convinced I must be exaggerating. The whole thing made no sense at all.

"Do you think she was kidding? Or playing a joke?" Angela asked trying to understand what I was telling her.

"I don't know. I mean. Part of me thinks she was because who says that kind of stuff? But Angela, you see my wrist," I kicked off the blanket to reveal my scraped knee, "and I fell here while she was chasing me, and then," I pulled the neck of my shirt to show the finger shaped bruises and small scrapes from Victoria's

nails on my shoulders, "I have these. This is not a joke." I said, and felt the mixture of fear and anger over taking me as I looked at the clotting blood on my leg.

"And Mr. Cullen, how did he find you?" she asked putting the pieces together.

"I have no idea. And he wouldn't tell me. One minute I'm at the mercy of a deranged woman and the next, my boss, well, my ex-boss, is saving me." I said snorting at the irony.

We both sat quietly for a moment until Angela cleared her throat and with a glint in her eye said, "So he just swooped in like some kind of Superman and saved you."

I grunted, "Yeah, if Superman had OCD and was a pain in my ass."

We looked at each other for a moment and burst into laughter, collapsing on the bed. Angela sat up, shoulders heaving, and said, "I wonder if Superman had separate drawers for his socks like how Mr. Cullen separates his."

I had told Angela how Mr. Cullen had a whole dresser full of socks. There were athletic socks, and works socks. Thick wool socks for hiking or backpacking. Colorful stripes, argyles and plaids. Each style had its own small drawer in his dressing room.

I rolled my eyes and said between giggles, "Angela, Superman wears tights, not socks. I guess Clark Kent wears socks though to the Daily Planet. I'm not sure but I suspect Clark Kent is a little OCD. He seems kind of uptight."

Angela nodded, "I don't know if Superman is a good fit though. I'm thinking he is a little more like The Boy Wonder. You should have seen his face when I yelled at him last night!"

I sat up straight in horror and gasped, "Angela, you didn't."

She smiled smugly, "I did and I don't care. He had it coming. Of course I had to force myself to look away from his gorgeous eyes. You're right. He is better looking in person." Her eyes glazed over for a moment and I could tell she was thinking about him. I couldn't blame her. He had the exact same effect on me. She shook it off and continued, "He apologized right? And offered you your job back? Are you going to take it?"

I shoved the pillow under my chin, using it to prop my body up while I sat cross legged and thought about her barrage of questions. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back and work for Mr. Cullen. He was such a pig before, but at the same time there were some nice moments where I felt like I saw the kind person who came to my rescue last night. He had promised to behave better and didn't I owe him the opportunity to prove this?

Of course, I considered, I had some bad moments as well and I glanced sideways to the Rolling Stones t-shirt in my hamper. It probably wouldn't hurt my reputation to go back and prove myself as well.

Then there was this part of me that just felt a sense of gratitude for last night. How do you turn away from the man who saved you from a psychopath? I wasn't sure I could. And even though I was putting on a brave face for Angela, I was scared of Victoria and her threats and Mr. Cullen made me feel safe.

I looked at Angela who was watching me expectantly, "I have to think about it, but I may. I feel the need to do this the right way. If I have to leave again it will be on better terms."

She nodded at me in agreement and stood up, "Let's go get some lunch. I have to tell you all about my night with Ben and then tell you about the silly girl Tyler left with! I think you dodged a bullet with that one!" she said before walking out the door and closing it behind her.

I got off the bed and straightened up the blankets and pillows. I put my dirty laundry away, shoving it on top of the ruined shirt, and began gathering my things for the shower.

I heard a tap on my door and Angela cracked it open with a thoughtful expression on her face.



"You know, I couldn't help but think about what The Boy Wonder would look like in a cape?" she asked.

I smiled back at her mischievously, "I already have. And he's fuckhot."

Angela nodded her approval and shut the door behind her once more.

I turned back to my dresser and began rummaging through my clothes, looking for something to wear that would cover all my wounds. The injuries were a horrible reminder that Victoria was still on the loose and I shuddered at the thought of her finding me. I really was lucky Mr. Cullen had located me before Victoria had an opportunity to continue her game because the alternative was too disturbing to think about. Superman or Boy Wonder, I wasn't sure. But last night, in the dark alley, he was definitely my guardian angel.

Xxx

I walked up the steps, standing under the protective covering of the awning, nervously deciding if I should do this. 'This' was me going back to work, sucking up my pride, ignoring my instincts to turn around and walk away forever. I had returned my key with my resignation letter so someone had to let me in. I pressed my finger to the door bell and to my surprise Edward Cullen opened it before I had a chance to remove it.

He stood in the doorway, hair in disarray, wearing a gray v-neck shirt and his typical crisp black pants. His golden eyes looked brighter than before and the purple-hued skin underneath was lighter. He had the appearance of a man who had a refreshing, well rested weekend.

At least one of us had.

I knew my mouth was gaping, partially from the shock of seeing him in the doorway, partly from his overwhelming beauty. I tried, discretely, to close my mouth and appear nonchalant, like my appearance at his home was expected.

Mr. Cullen widened the door and gestured me inside. "Good morning. Please come in."

"Thank you." I responded, relieved that he was welcoming and hadn't changed his mind about asking me back to work.

I shrugged out of my raincoat and hung it on the rack in the foyer. Mr. Cullen had disappeared around the corner so I walked back to my desk as though everything was normal, as though I hadn't walked out of here in his dirty, ruined shirt, leaving my resignation letter on the desk in a fit of self justification.

The desk was clear, the letter gone, yet my key was sitting on top, next to the credit card I'd returned and the list of daily instructions.

I felt rather than heard him standing in the doorway. Without looking up I assessed him. He awkwardly leaned against the door frame, legs crossed at the ankle, hands shoved in his pockets. He appeared causal, informal, yet his posture was stiff and forced. Mr. Cullen looked like the type of person who dined at the Ritz but at this moment was staying at the Days Inn, like he was uncomfortable in his own skin, and he would rather be anywhere else than right here.

I didn't blame him. The situation over the weekend was probably disturbing to him and possibly made him question my ability to make good judgments. What kind of girl gets herself into that kind of trouble? He probably thought I was an idiot for wandering off with a strange person like Victoria anyway. The more I thought about it the more irritated with myself I became.

His eyes were still on me, waiting for me to turn and acknowledge him but I pretended I didn't notice and sat at the desk, reviewing my duties for the day.

"Isabella." He said quietly.

I turned slightly, acting surprised at his presence, "Oh, Mr. Cullen. Can I help you with something? I was just getting ready to tackle this list." I noted, when I turned his way, he was standing in the exact same pose as before. He hadn't moved a muscle.

"Yes. Well, I noticed you parked on the street. And after Friday evening, I wondered if you would prefer to park in my garage." He questioned, and I could see a hint of concern in his eyes.

I was taken back. This was a completely unexpected gesture. I thought for a moment of my dingy little car, mingling with the beautiful machines Mr. Cullen possessed. I wasn't comfortable with this idea at all.

I smiled appreciatively, "Thank you for the offer. It's really thoughtful, but that's okay. I don't think anyone will bother my car. It's a total hunk of junk."

His eyes clouded and he opened his mouth slightly. I waited expectantly for him to speak but the words appeared stuck in his throat.

Oh no. I'd offended him. He reached out to me and offered me something of his to make me more comfortable and I shot him down. I felt the heat rush up my face as I, once again, managed to screw things up with my boss.

I managed to keep the polite smile on my face the entire time and finally, he grunted, "It's not your car I'm worried about, Isabella," and turned abruptly on his heel. Astonished I listened to his feet rapidly ascend the stairs, and the sound of a door clicking sharply.

He was worried about me.

I was definitely surprised and admittedly more than a little flattered. I sat for a moment considering what to do. He was right. It was safer for me to park inside, away from the busy street. Away from unstable red heads and their morbid fantasies.

I decided to take him up on his offer and move my car but I wasn't sure how to go about approaching Mr. Cullen in his home. In the past he had always just appeared when I needed him.

I wasn't exactly sure of the protocol. Do I just go upstairs and knock? Should I call him on his cell phone? Do I leave him a note and run my errands and hope he sees it while I'm gone?

I groaned with irritation and dropped my head into my hands. I couldn't believe I was waffling over a simple matter for so long. Everything about this man was complicated. His work, his antiques, his closet, his socks, and now this. With a resigned sigh, I decided to take the bull by the horns and just go up there and knock on his door.

As I tentatively climbed the steps I reasoned that he was already annoyed with me so it would make no difference anyway. This would either be the right thing to do or just one more notch on my stellar career with Mr. Edward Cullen.

At the landing, I hesitated, deciding which door to use. The one from the wardrobe? Or the one from the hallway that entered his private rooms?

Again I chided myself for over thinking such a minor detail. It was utterly ridiculous.

I clenched my fists and walked with determination towards the closet and went directly to the door on the opposite side of the room. I lifted my hand up and rapped forcefully hoping he would hear me.

I waited a moment, holding my breath and counting the seconds, pondering what to if he didn't respond. Do I knock again or do I turn around and leave?

Ridiculous.

Fifteen...twenty...twenty five...my face was turning red due to lack of oxygen. I was going to have to make a decision.

I raised my arm again, knuckles clenched to knock, but without warning the door swung open and I was standing face to face, or rather, face to chest with Mr. Cullen.

I dropped my hand to my side and peered up to see the expression on his face. He didn't seem too annoyed or angry so I jumped in using my most convincing voice and said, "That was very thoughtful to offer me a spot in your garage and you're right, it is safer." I gave him the smile I use on the barista when I want extra whipped cream and asked, "Does the offer still stand?"

After a tense moment of scrutiny under his swirling amber eyes, he nodded and dipped his fingers into his pocket and extracted out a small black square.

"Let me show you how to work this." Again, faster than I could respond, he was gone, back down the stairs, leaving me to follow in his wake. Taking the stairs too quickly, in order to keep up, I stumbled again down several steps. I barely managed to keep upright, grasping the banister, and feeling a sharp pain travel up my injured arm.

"Ugh," I muttered, and rubbed my wrist. It was still sore and tender from Friday night. I had worn a long sleeved shirt hoping to hide it from view, and limit conversation about how it happened.

Mr. Cullen must have heard my graceful arrival at the landing and was back in front of me. He looked at my fingers rubbing the red flesh with distaste, his jaw locked and stiff.

In that moment, standing in the hallway, at the bottom of his steps, tired of his judgmental glances, and cold, gruff attitude, I snapped.

"Mr. Cullen," I said, pulling his attention away from my arm and back to my face. "If I'm going to continue working here, there are some things you need to know about me." I'd said it sharply, with venom, so I let the announcement hang in the air waiting for his response.

His brow furrowed in concentration as though I was speaking a foreign language but he quietly said, "Proceed."

I took a deep breath and sighed. "One thing you need to understand is that I'm clumsy, I fall, a lot. I mean, a lot. This," and I pulled my sleeve down and showed him the dark purple bruises on my arm, "is nothing. So, please appreciate that I'm going to fall and I do not need your looks of disgust or amusement when it happens."

I saw his eyes tighten but I continued before he could respond, "The tension between us? It has to stop. I am an educated, smart, hard working woman. I'm not sure how old you are Mr. Cullen but I highly doubt it is older than me. I will be respectful to you but I will not be treated as though I am less than you." I announced with conviction, my voice only shaking slightly.

He lifted an eyebrow this time and I watched incredulously as his posture relaxed, and he leaned lightly against the wall. I knew my face was red and my eyes were burning, tears betraying my anger. I sucked them back in and heard him say, "Please continue," in an encouraging tone.

Oh shit. I was starting to panic a little because he was going to fire me for sure now. Or tell me off, or laugh in my face. There was no way this was going to end well. Resolved in my self destruction, I figured I may as well put the final nail in my coffin.

"Finally," I heard my voice crack so I cleared my throat and began again, "If you want me to do something, I will. If you want me to clean your gutters or wash your windows, that's fine. If you want me to sort your ties alphabetically, by color, brand, and location of purchase" I rolled my eyes before continuing, "I will do it. But you give me the common courtesy of a days notice so I can be prepared. And from now on, I expect

you to say please and thank you when necessary. If there is one thing I'm not, it's your door mat. And if you can't handle these simple requests then will gladly pack my things, again, and go."

Finished with my tirade, I now just wanted to disappear, I glanced nervously for an escape and thought all I have to do is grab my purse and coat on the way out the door.

Or not.

Mr. Cullen was still watching me intently but now a slight smile played on his lips. I was entranced by their deep red tint, curving upward, taunting me with their perfection.

I was still mesmerized by his lips, watching them form words into a question, "And if I do these things you'll stay?"

I lifted my eyes from his mouth, and stuttered, "Wha..what?"

The amusement was now touching his eyes, "If I submit to your requests, you'll stay." He said it this time as a statement not a question.

I'd collected myself this time, looking somewhere left of his right eye and not directly at him, "Yes. I will stay."

"Good," he said taking a breath to steady himself. "Isabella, will you please come with me to the garage so I can show you how to work the garage opener? It is a bit different from your normal system, as it is linked to the security system."

I nodded and was shocked at the change in tone. It was still formal but he did say 'please' and he asked nicely. He gestured for me to walk ahead of him so I took the lead, adjusting my ponytail as I passed him and walked towards the back door.

Xxx

EPOV

I was upstairs in my office hiding from Isabella. The morning had been enlightening to say the least, plus fairly exhausting, so after she left to run some errands I retreated to my sanctuary.

I spent the remainder of the weekend hunting deep in the forests of Canada. In the woods, among the decaying earth, striding through the shafts of sunlight that trickled through the air, I was truly alone with my thoughts and baser instincts. I spent hours in wait, crouched low, allowing the scent of my prey overtake me. The gentle breezes filtering through the thick underbrush tickled my nose, guiding me towards the weaker, lesser animal, until we ended in a chase to the death.

Its death that is, mine was long past.

I gorged myself on the blood of huge animals, by-passing the smaller, easier to catch prey. I fed the desire that had built up over the last several days. I wasn't interested in a fast kill. I wanted a challenge. I wanted to feel my muscles as I leapt over river banks and climbed canyon walls. I wanted to feel the claws of the bear swipe across my impenetrable flesh, wishing it could actually cause me harm.

I wanted more, to push myself to the limit.

Once trapped and the animal drained, I could feel my teeth itch, craving more. I was like an alcoholic attempting to drown my pain, or an addict thinking the next hit would vanquish the emotions surging through my body.

It took me the better part of a day to reconcile the fact my hunger would never be quenched again.

Save for one thing.

The longing persevered and as I sank my teeth into the flesh of a particularly challenging bear, a vision floated past my eyes.

Isabella Swan.

Horried at even thinking her name as I feasted like a beast in the wilderness, I dropped the carcass in humiliation. Wiping the back of my hand across my mouth I looked around. The dirt was littered with bodies of the various animals I'd taken, strewn around the forest in a frenzy of thirst.

I looked down at the streaks of dirt across my shirt and the rips in my pants. My shoes were caked in mud, blood splattered across the toes. I was filthy. Tarnished. Covered in the evidence of my primal urges.

I realized in that moment I had to get my shit together for her.

I ran back to the city, through the forests, on the edges of highways, until I made it back to the twinkling lights of my city.

I crept through the shadows, aware of my appearance, knowing if I was caught this would be the end for me in this charade of life. I found the building, and taking one last look around, I scaled the side, pulling myself up on pipes, wires, anything I could grasp.

I hoisted myself to the second floor, to her window, and peeked in. I could make out the shape of her body, sprawled across the bed in the darkness of her room.

I spent nearly three hours there, clinging to the side of her home, guarding her and strengthening my resolve to protect her. But I also I knew I had to forbid myself from thinking the possessive thoughts that had been consuming me. She was a person, not a piece of meat. Not an object to be owned.

She was not mine.

So, now I sit, hiding in my office, the memory of her legs tangled with the sheets on her bed burned into my memory, and I knew this was going to be harder than I expected.

I mulled over the morning. I'd been waiting for her. Hoping she would come. When I heard her walking up the steps, fear gripped me as I thought of her alone, outside, with out any protection. I'd opened the door for her, too quickly for an appropriate response.

This was a constant problem. I was always letting my guard down with her. Moving too quickly, appearing out of nowhere. It was risky and stupid. Yet I did it time and time again.

She'd stood in front of me, soft and fragile, smelling like flowers and thumping like a drum. Her expression was odd. Was she confused, I wondered. Her mouth hung open slightly before she recovered and walked inside.

I watched her the entire time I was downstairs, listening to her footsteps, observing her tiny fingers pushing her hair behind her ear. I swallowed back mouthfuls of venom and steeled myself for constant exposure. She pretended not to notice me in the doorway, but her elevated heart rate gave her away. I made her nervous, as I should, and the rhythmic beats shouted their alarm.

I spoke and offered to allow her to park her car in the garage. I thought this was a nice gesture, one of welcoming and sharing my home. One I had certainly never offered to anyone before outside my family.

She turned to me, and gave me a gloriously warm smile, but the words she spoke were those of rejection. She justified this by rambling on about her old car and its lack of value. This was true, I mused, but the treasure I was protecting wasn't her car. It was her.

Overcome with disappointment, I told her as much and left, retreating to my lair, putting distance between us.

This of course was a lie I told myself. I only went to my office and adjusted my monitors to watch her from afar. She was still such a mystery to me. I watched as she cradled her hands in her face and I wondered exactly what this gesture meant. Was she frustrated? Tired? Sad?

Again, I was overwhelmed by the annoyance of how much I relied on the thoughts in people's minds to tell me about them. I could guess what this gesture meant but it was only that, a guess.

I observed her from above, as she sighed and emitted her fragrance into the room below. I found myself, yet again, leaning into the monitors, soaking up every detail as she took the steps towards the second floor. Her hands lingered on the railing, leaving her fingerprints and scent behind. I longed to be near her, soaking up her essence.

She entered my dressing room and I fought back the urge to race to the door and fling it open, just to inhale her perfume and check to make sure she was perfectly perfect.

This was irrational I knew. I had only been away from her for a moment, and I had watched her the whole time. I was watching her now, as she raised her hand timidly to knock on my door. Was she afraid? Did she know my desires? Had she succumbed to her instinctive fear? Was she aware that I could open that door, graze her neck with my teeth and suck the life out of her? That this was my strongest desire?

Well, maybe not my strongest.

I wanted her to think these thoughts, feel the fear, know all of these things and none of them all at once.

I tore my eyes from the screen, not wanting to lose her from my sight for a moment. I dashed to door, only to find her mid knock and standing precariously close to me. She looked up from my chest, and I tumbled into her rich, brown eyes.

The newly identified feelings raced through my body as she spoke in a deeper, almost seductive voice. The sound of her voice fueled the intense internal battle, a war waging over my desire for her and *her*. The concept of nourishment verses the person.

Isabella. She had a name and a face and a soul, I chided.

She wasn't mine.

Yet she stood in front of me, blowing her sweet breath on me, luring me in with her eyes. I could feel the heat of her body next to mine, pulsing and flowing with blood.

*thump*

What was she doing?

What was *I* doing?

I forced myself to listen to her words. Car. Garage. Safer. She was agreeing with me and I focused on the task at hand, walking past brusquely assuming she would follow me downstairs.

I knew I was being harsh, impolite. I was abrupt but it was the only way to manage this moment. I was squelching the animalistic desires coursing through my body and mind. I just couldn't move past this desire to consume her.

I was holding on for dear life. Her life that is.

Her stumbling cut through my thoughts and I found her clinging to the railing, supporting herself from yet another fall.

Isabella had her sleeve pushed up and I was entranced by her fingers delicately rubbing the sensitive bruises on her wrist. I braced myself from the surge of anger, grinding my teeth together in an effort not to run from the room and track Victoria down this very instant.

That would take place soon, but not today.

"Mr. Cullen," I heard her say and I reluctantly moved my gaze from her injury. Her eyes were blazing, and I listed intently to her declare my need to know some details about her if she was going to remain in my employ.

Indeed.

She was right. I did need to know more about her. I was almost sure her life depended on it.

I encouraged her to tell me and she did. She showed me her arm and announced her weaknesses. She knew she was frail and fragile yet she accepted it. She continued, voice trembling and voiced the strain between us. She demanded respect and challenged my authority and age.

She was so strong yet vulnerable. Powerful words left her mouth but her eyes filled with tears and her hands shook. I was enthralled by every movement and word that she allowed.

An enigma.

Again, I pressed for more, now wanting to know all the thoughts in her head, so I could match them to her expressions. It was almost a game. Quite possibly the most frustrating one I'd ever played.

Isabella took her final stand, waving her arms, puffing her cheeks, and told me her requirements for staying. The courtesy she required, the small things a woman such as Isabella would expect from her boss.

The concept triggered a metaphorical light bulb in my brain. She expected to be treated like a human would be by another human. I wasn't a human any longer, but I had been once. I knew there were traces of that life still inside me that I could draw on if I chose. Esme did it every day. And Carlisle, he too, brought humanity to every aspect of his life.

I had shut mine out and was living life from a script.

But as I watched Isabella stand in front of me, anxiously shifting her feet, gazing in my direction, I realized in order to protect this girl, to keep her in my sights, I would have to dredge up the smallest remnants of my soul to the surface.

The thought of the challenge ahead of me was as thrilling as was the vision of her standing in front of me at the moment, biting her lower lip in concentration.

Barely able to contain my glee I asked her, "And if I do these things you'll stay?"

She stammered in response, "Wha..what?"

This girl was a mess. Stubborn one second, distracted the next. I told her, "If I submit to your requests, you'll stay."

"Yes. I will stay."

Good.

I reached down deep into the well of a hundred years past and pulled out the manners my mother surely taught me, and asked her to follow me to the garage. I didn't tell her or force her, I asked her.

And she followed.

I was alone now, Isabella having left to follow the duties I'd left her this morning. I sat my office, going over the day's events, replaying the scene with explicit detail. The memory of her next to me in the garage, listening to my instructions with all traces of tension removed, was jarring. There had been a subtle shift in our relationship. I realized I had no idea what would happen with the path we had both chosen today but one thing was clear.

Isabella Swan wasn't mine.

But watching her stand her ground, alternating between tough and timid, clarified one thing.

I wanted her to be.



## Chapter Ten

BPOV

On my way back to Mr. Cullen's from the post office I stopped at the little coffee shop I had begun frequenting on my lunch breaks. I maneuvered my car through the crowded street looking for a place to park near the building. I'd become nervous since the incident with Victoria about being out alone and made extra efforts to stay safe. I typically preferred to walk to the business district, since it was so close to Mr. Cullen's home, but I wasn't comfortable now.

Things were better at work but still not perfect. Mr. Cullen had stayed true to his word and attitude. His treatment toward me was slowly improving. I was showered in 'pleases' and 'thank yous', offered compliments on my work and given nothing excessively outrageous to perform.

The problem was not his effort to treat me with more respect, the problem was just him.

He truly puzzled me. He was physically so beautiful and graceful. Yesterday I found myself mesmerized by his elegant hands as he pulled a record out of its sleeve, gently cradling the edges of the black disk, careful to never touch the grooves on the top. I watched as he pulled it lightly to his face and inhaled the distinct odor of vinyl, and a small smile of contentment crossed his lips.

Yet, when I asked him what song was playing or more about the musician his body stiffened for a moment and the natural grin on his face was replaced by a more superficial one. He answered politely but it sounded robotic and forced before he hastily retreated from the room.

After finding a parking space on the street I walked toward the coffee shop. I paused for a moment at the door, noticing a sign plastered in the window. It was a photo of a girl, maybe fifteen or sixteen, dark hair, happy blue eyes and a huge smile. She was wearing a silver heart pendant on her neck that hung in the middle of her chest. Over her picture were the words **MISSING-Have You Seen Me?** I felt my stomach turn and I saw a flash of Victoria flitter across my eyes. I was overwhelmed with fear for this little girl, praying she had not fallen victim to someone like that. I saw at the bottom it said her name was Bree and she had been missing since April.

I shook my head, pulled the door open and walked to the counter where the waitress was waiting.

"Hi," I smiled, "I would like some tea...preferably something calming?" A wave of nausea passed over me and I forced the image of the girl on the poster out of my head.

She considered for a moment and said, "We have a really nice Chamomile, would you like that?"

I nodded and waited while she prepared my order, drumming my fingers on the counter. I couldn't get Bree's face out of my mind. I called out, "What do you know about that sign in the window? The missing girl?"



She turned and I saw the concern in her eyes. "Her mother came by and put that in the window. Apparently she went missing one night when she was out with some friends at the movies. She left her seat to go get something from the concession stand and never returned. The police think she ran away but her mother is convinced something happened to her."

"Oh," I said lamely, "That's really sad. I hope they find her."

The girl nodded and pushed my cup of tea towards me. "Did you just move around here or something? I've noticed you coming in fairly often."

"No I don't live around here, but I took a job in the neighborhood a couple of weeks ago." I told her.

"Oh really? Where?" she asked as she rang up my purchase on the cash register.

"I'm working for Mr. Cullen as his personal assistant. I don't know if you know him. He doesn't go out much." I explained and took a sip of my drink.

"Edward Cullen? Sex hair? Jaw that could cut glass? Wickedly aloof? Man who makes my uterus ache at the sight of him?" she laughed and said, "That Edward Cullen?"

I joined in her laughter because in many ways she was exactly right, although I wasn't sure about the uterus part. "So you do know him I guess."

"He comes in a couple of times a week, orders the same thing, smiles at me, and heads to his favorite table outside. I've dropped hints a couple of times trying to let him know I was available but," she signed wistfully, "he doesn't seem interested."

I was shocked. I looked at the girl in front of me. She was pretty, with long black hair, smooth brown skin, and legs you could climb. If we were in LA or New York I would think she was an actress or model. "Really? He is a little socially awkward, maybe he just didn't notice you were flirting." I reasoned.

"No, I was more than obvious. Not to sound egotistical, but I've come up with another theory." She said, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

Fascinated by her thoughts, I said, "A theory-tell me more."

She laughed again and leaned towards me as if telling me a secret, "It's quite simple. Any man that good looking, that rich, and that single who can resist this," and she pointed to her chest, snugly wrapped in a tight black t-shirt with the name of the shop on it, "is playing for the other team."

"You think he's gay?" I asked incredulously.

She nodded confidently back, a smirk on her face.

I flashed for a moment to Mr. Cullen, holding a trash can full of broken furniture, with the tall gorgeous blond behind him on the stairs coming down from his private rooms. I could almost envision it, the two of them behind closed doors, standing close together, reveling in one another's tall, muscular beauty. I swallowed hard at the thought.

It made perfect sense.

All of his odd behaviors and quirks could be explained by this simple fact. He had a huge secret he was keeping and this could make anyone tense and stressed. Add a high profile life to the senario and it made things even more complicated.

I returned the smirk and we laughed for a moment about lack of available attractive men and the ageold wisdom that the good ones are taken or are gay. I paid for my tea and I gave her a final wave and headed out the door.

Xxx

EPOV

"Yes Alice. She's fine."

Alice. She had called me twice a day for the last week, harassing me about Isabella, but with no solid details.

"No, I can't see her at this very moment, but it is sunny outside so I thought it was a safe day to send her to the post office without fear of another attack." I slapped my hand over my face, trying to remain calm. This was the reason I didn't live at home any longer. I needed my space and people out of my head and my future.

I decided to be proactive. "Have you had another vision? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"No? Then let it go. Call me when you have something important to share." It was low, but necessary.

I sighed and said, "I miss you too. Yes, please tell them I miss them as well."

I snapped my phone shut and continued to look through the files I'd stored in the third floor attic. The only entrance to the attic was through my private study. I kept huge filing cabinets up here for old newspapers and other information on the 'cases' I worked. This was also where I kept my piano, which was currently shoved back against the wall and covered by a huge cloth. It was just another reminder of the life I gave up.

I went back six months and began looking for any weird incidents I may have overlooked the first time. Anything that sounded like the altercation between Isabella and Victoria. I'd only searched at that time for information concerning the ritualistic murders but nothing else. I laid the papers out on the floor and began the tedious process of tagging anything of interest.

With different colored post-its I marked each event I found even remotely suspicious including, but not limited to, vandalism, muggings, or abductions. Halfway through the March papers I realized I'd run out of stickers and went downstairs to the supply closet in the kitchen.

As I approached the second floor stairs I braced myself for the onslaught of Isabella's fragrant scent and presence. I'd heard the garage door open moments before and I knew she was home. I arranged my face into what others considered appropriate and I walked into the kitchen.

"Good afternoon Isabella," I said and I watched her reach up, attempting to get a coffee mug off the top shelf.

"Hi," she grunted, straining to reach on the tip of her toes.

I processed the moment, watching her struggle with the height and with a sudden flare of irritation at myself I said, "Let me get that for you," and easily plucked the cup off the shelf and placed it on the counter.

It was the small gestures that stumped me every time. Simple things like holding the door, allowing the person to walk ahead of me, or offering to carry in the boxes and bags from the car. Things I hadn't considered in many years. It made me question how other humans felt about my interactions.

I walked over to the storage closet and rummaged around, quickly finding the notes I needed, due to Isabella's excellent organizational skills. I was prepared to turn around and tell her this when I noticed out of the corner of my eye that she was intently watching me.

Her eyes were questioning, tightened at the corners, and I felt them linger. Her interest excited me because no one ever paid me much notice. When they did I knew what they were thinking, of course. Women were impressed by my appearance and men were in awe of my intimidating nature. Everything about me drew people in for a moment but then, just as quickly, those same qualities made them uncomfortable.

Isabella stood behind me, her heart rate even and breathing normal, inspecting me.

Again, I had no clue what she was thinking and the thought of that was thrilling.

I turned finally and faced her, noticing a light pink tint to rush up her neck.

"Thank you for organizing the closet so well. I found just what I needed." I held up the pad of hot pink notes.

"You're welcome," she said, the same quizzical look on her face as before.

"I'm going to be upstairs and would prefer not to be disturbed. If you need me call my cell, okay?" I said to her scrutinizing gaze. I shifted my feet, feeling slightly uncomfortable, unable to leave.

We stood in the kitchen, Isabella and I, in a sort of tense stand off until she turned her back to me and hunched her shoulders while she stirred her cup of tea. I took a step backwards, ready to leave the room whe she spoke suddenly and stated in a slightly shaky voice, "I know what you are."

My still heart dropped into my ancient stomach with absolute dread and horror. She knew? These were the words of my deepest fears. My mouth became dry and I had to force myself to breathe in order to appear normal.

I steadied my voice and asked, "What I am?"

The sound of her metal spoon, tracing the edge of her cup, was the only noise in the room before she said, "You're impossibly neat and tidy."

Okay. This was true but hardly an identifiable trait of being a vampire. I braced myself for more.

Her heart was beating like a hummingbird's wings and I could almost feel the heat rolling off her body, signaling her embarrassment. Only this silly woman would be embarrassed as she destroyed my life. I listened as she inhaled sharply and said, "You clearly work out. A lot. Your body is amazing."

She thought I looked amazing. A smug grin crept across my face before I shook it off, wondering for the millionth time what thoughts were running though her head. I was aware women found me attractive, and to hear Isabella say those words brought about a rush of feelings I wasn't used to, but was this really important to say right now?

"Your skin is flawless, unblemished. Do you have it man-scaped?" she asked, interrupting my thoughts and I watched her turn slightly, her deep brown eyes analyzed my face.

I shook my head silently, afraid to speak. I had no idea what this 'man-scaping' thing was but I knew I didn't have it.

"Huh," she considered and turned back to the counter, her long hair swaying a bit as she took a sip of her tea. "Your hair is perfect and you have more clothes than Paris Hilton."

The uneasy knot in my stomach was turning into one of confusion. Paris Hilton? Did Isabella think she was a vampire too?

She continued, rambling now, "Sometimes you speak like you've never been around a woman, and you never have company, and the only time you did it was a man. Who coincidentally was also unbelievably gorgeous."

What? I literally was unable to follow her train of thought. What man was she talking about? I searched my memory and came up with the only visitor we'd had.

Jasper.

She stilled, her palms flat on the counter. When she spoke it was low and with conviction, "Like I said, I know what you are."

Here it comes. Images of what would come flashed in my mind. Would she run screaming? Would I have to kill her? In eighty years I'd never had a moment that came down like this.

I forced myself to breath normally, like a human would, and mustered up the courage to lay it all on the table. I had to know if she knew. "Say it." I ordered, panic laced the words as they left my mouth.

She hesitated.

"Say it" I demanded, "Out loud."

Isabella spun around and looked me in the eye. The wrong emotion was written across her face. Instead of fear she looked...supportive? "You're gay," She said in a clear strong voice.

I was stuck in the moment, hands clenched, prepared for exposure but I heard her words echo in my ears.

Gay?

"I, um..., what?" I stumbled over my words. I never stumbled over my words. Everything about this woman completely bewildered me. She reduced me to a bumbling idiot.

Apparently a *gay* bumbling idiot.

She took a step forward, bringing a fresh wave of her scent towards me, the excruciating aroma of flowers filling my senses. Her normally pale cheeks were flushed with embarrassment. Her eyes were shining and her lips were puffed out with satisfaction, having 'outed' me.

I'd never found her more attractive.

"You're gay." She said again, saying the words slowly. "It's okay. I totally support you and your decisions. Well, not decisions since I feel we are all born one way or another, but regardless, I think it's great."

She thinks it great that I'm gay. I suppose this is a preferred alternative to me being a blood sucking monster.

She was still talking and I picked her up mid sentence, "...and you know, not to be stereotypical or anything but you really do have an enormous amount of clothing for a straight guy. Not to mention the fact the girl at the coffee shop, the really cute one? She told me she has never seen you with a woman either. And that she has slipped you her number more than once only to find it still on the table when she cleaned up. I mean, she is really pretty. Come on, you're young, single, incredibly gorgeous, rich, successful. You," she stepped closer and jabbed a finger in my chest, "are totally gay."

The minute her warm fingertip made contact with my chest, even through my clothing, I was overcome with emotions.

I was definitely perplexed. People thought I was gay? The girl at the coffee shop was telling Isabella theories about my sexual preferences? Once I pushed the confusion aside I realized I was more than a little bit amused, not to mention the fact the spot on my chest felt like I had been seared by a hot poker. The entire situation was so preposterous and her assumptions so off base I didn't even know how to feel about it.

She withdrew the tip of her finger and I instantly missed it. I absently rubbed the spot with my thumb trying to feel the sensation again.

She stepped back and picked up her tea and said, "don't worry though, I won't tell anyone. It is your decision when you want the world to know." She smiled and winked at me on the way back to her desk in the other room.

I stood for a moment, jaw ajar, fighting the urge to tell her otherwise. As ridiculous as it sounded this was possibly the best mistake she could make. My real secret, that I was a eternally frozen seventeen year old vampire who kept up a charade of normalcy by posing as the CEO of a multi-million dollar corporation, was beyond horrific. Add on the fact I had a side job of fighting crime and tracking bad guys during my long,

endless nights, and things became absurd. The only thing more absurd was that I was currently battling conflicting desires of hunger and lust over the most fragile girl I've ever encountered.

I ran my hands up my face and fisted them in my hair. I wasn't sure when my life had turned into an epically bad horror film, but clearly it had. Oh wait. I did know. It was the day Isabella Swan entered into my life. That was the cosmic fate that now added the term 'gay' in front of Vampire CEO Crime Fighter.

As much as it pained me, instead of denying her theory I quickly decided I was going to remain non-committal. If my being gay explained my odd behaviors or physical appearance then I could live with her not knowing the truth. It gave me a bit of freedom from her scrutiny and it also put up a barrier to keep me from her. To force me away from the feelings and emotions that had been building since the day she walked into my home. It was all just one more lie in my elaborate charade but I needed her to stay close to me while maintaining the image I had crafted. If this meant from now on, in my home, Edward Cullen was gay, then so be it.

I snuck one last look at Isabella at her desk, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger, reading emails on her computer before I climbed the stairs. Watching her sitting there feeling safe and content for that one moment made me realize I had bigger things to focus on and I went upstairs to get started.



## Chapter Eleven

BPOV

You said what?"

Angela was sitting across from me at a table at my favorite restaurant. It was the best place to get organic, vegan food in town and I could only talk Angela into coming when I had some really interesting gossip to tell her. I'd been a vegetarian since I was nine and my class took a field trip to the meat processing plant. Once I found out exactly what was in a hot dog my carnivore days were over.

"Shhhh...or you *will* get me fired. For real this time." I hissed. I knew I wasn't supposed to tell details of my job to Angela or to anyone else but I couldn't help myself. This was too much.

She looked around the nearly empty diner and whispered, "You actually accused him of being gay?"

I nodded, stuffing a hunk of falafel in my mouth. It was the same day as my confrontation with Mr. Cullen. I knew I had been some what inappropriate with my boss by questioning his sexuality, but I honestly hoped it would make us more comfortable around each other now that his secret was out in the open.

"What did he say?" she asked a little louder.

I swallowed and took a sip of my drink. "He didn't say anything. But he definitely didn't say no. And what guy wouldn't deny that he's gay if it wasn't true?" I responded knowingly.

Angela grimaced, "I guess. What a waste. He is a total piece of man candy and I so want to take a lick."

I rolled my eyes. "Angela, gross, he's my boss and gah...if you think he's hot you should see his boyfriend. The blonde from the other day? He is just as gorgeous and so tall...." I let my mind wander to the shaggy haired man who visited last week. "They are perfect for each other."

I sighed and decided to redirect the conversation, "Let's stop talking about unavailable men and you tell me about Ben."

The change in topic was just what Angela needed to stop focusing on Mr. Cullen. I listened as Angela went on about Ben and how they were meeting up later this evening to go see a movie. That piece of information sent an unwanted chill up my spine.

"Angela, promise me you will not wander around alone at the theater," I said. I was thinking of the poster from the coffee shop and the story about the girl named Bree who went missing from the theater with her friends. When Angela questioned my concern I explained to her what the girl at the coffee shop had told me earlier in the day.

"Gosh. Yeah, okay. We will definitely watch a movie at his house instead, even if that means we have to sit with Mike and Eric all night." She wrinkled her nose and I shook my head glad it was her and not me.

"Just promise me you'll be safe too." She commanded and I nodded back in agreement. I was completely paranoid now, after Victoria.

I'd taken to triple locking the door. The door, deadbolt and chain were locked every time I was home. I compulsively checked my windows and the balcony door. Plus, I practically ran from my car to the apartment every time I came home. I would have actually run if I hadn't been afraid of tripping in the middle of the parking lot. I really did appreciate Mr. Cullen allowing me to park in the garage. I felt much safer and I had the sense he was going out of his way to make me feel more comfortable.

I thought about Angela leaving me alone that night to spend time with Ben and the thought made me nervous, "Angela, how about you and Ben come to our place tonight? I was going to read anyway so you can have the TV to yourself. No need to hang out with the boys and play video games all night." I added and laughed hoping she would take the bait.

"Really? That would be great. Thanks Bella!" and I watched as she pulled out her phone to text Ben the change of plans.

I knew the possibility of running into Victoria was unlikely since she didn't know my last name or where I lived, but her threats and the other unsolved murders were just making me nervous. Having Angela and her boyfriend making goo-goo eyes at one another was a small price to pay for peace of mind.

Xxx

Several days had passed since I'd outed Mr. Cullen and things were, to my pleasant surprise, much better than before.

He seemed a little more relaxed and less tense when he was near me. My attempts at small talk were received better and I actually was able to get him to tell me a little more about his work at Pacific Northwest Trust, although he was locked up tight when it came to personal information.

This was understandable since he was my boss and we'd had such a rocky start, but at the same time it was awkward to work so closely with someone in their home and know so little about him. It became a personal challenge to get him to reveal any small tidbit of information about himself. I'd decided to use his art, music and antiques as a method to find out more.

It was Friday, the day for dusting and general house cleaning. I'd asked him to work a designated day into my schedule so I could dress accordingly. He happily obliged and we even sat down with our calendars earlier this week and planned together. Little moments like these helped me get a chance to know him better. I realized he had a biting sense of humor when he wanted, too. I also noticed, as we sat across the table from one another, that he smelled like no other man I'd experienced. It was all I could do to not walk over to him and run my nose up and down his body. For once in my life I maintained composure and stayed in my seat.

For cleaning day I wore jeans and a tank top with flats. It was causal but not inappropriate and it made it easier for me to clean when I could get around on the floor and climb the step ladder in comfortable clothing.

There really was little to do so I understood why Mr. Cullen didn't pay for a cleaning person. Plus, it was becoming more and more apparent he didn't want company in the house. I'd heard him more than once telling Alice on the phone not to come visit, that he was fine and very busy. His tone was terse and he always made excuses to get off the phone quickly. I had a feeling they were not as close as I would have expected from her visit.

As I dusted the paintings in the parlor I stopped at a particular painting that had caught my eye over the last couple of weeks. It had beautiful blues and reds and I could faintly see the shapes of two figures, although they were very abstract, mingled in with shapes and designs. I peered at it a little closer, looking at the thick paint, intrigued.



"It's called 'Male and Female'," said the soft smooth voice behind me.

I turned quickly because as usual he'd startled me but for once I wasn't holding anything or walking on an incline. I made a face, noting my disapproval of his sneaking up on me, before turning back to the painting.

"It's beautiful. There is so much going on, every time I come in here I find myself drawn to it. Who painted it?" I asked.

A moment passed and I realized he was standing beside me. "It was painted by Jackson Pollock in 1940." He answered and I watched as he lifted an arm and with his long, graceful hands he began pointing out details.

I listened to him describe the painting with fascination. "There is some confusion as to what exactly is in the painting. Some people feel it is a man and a woman, others think it is one figure but defined two ways. Pollock was very ambiguous in his artwork. He didn't feel the need to explain his paintings to anyone."

"Isn't he the guy with the splatter or drip painting?" I asked searching my brain for filed away art history lessons.

For once my questions seemed to work and his typically smooth face became animated as he spoke. "Yes, but this was an earlier work. He didn't start with the drip paintings that are more recognizable now. I prefer this style to the other. When you look at it can be almost anything you want it to be. You can find what you're looking for in it each time you see it." He looked down at me through the hair that dipped down over his eyes, "I feel this is how most people live their lives, seeing what they want to see, not what is really there."

We stood for a moment, absorbing the painting quietly until he said, "What do you see?"

"I do see the male. Here is his strong, sharp jaw and thick brow. His hair, it's bushy and reddish brown," I tilted my head towards Mr. Cullen and studied him for a moment and commented, "He resembles you."

Mr. Cullen studied me back before flicking his eyes back to the painting. "And the female?" He prodded.

"I'm not sure about the woman though," I said, pointing to the figure in red. "Her facial features are much less refined, yet her body clearly implies her gender. She is so vague, almost like she is something just out of reach."

I leaned in further trying to make sense out of Pollock's chaos but deciding, ultimately, for this day I was satisfied. I faced Mr. Cullen to find him looking intently on the painting as well, dreaming of his own version of what the artist was trying to convey.

I said softly, "Thank you for sharing that with me. I'm going to get back to work now."

Mr. Cullen glanced my way, his eyes never fully leaving the canvas, "You're welcome Isabella."

I took a last glance as I left the room Mr. Cullen was still standing in front of the piece, hands in his pockets, completely still. I realized for the first time since I'd met him he seemed completely at ease and comfortable with me and our surroundings.

Xxx

Later that afternoon I was surprised to hear the doorbell ring. Mr. Cullen was upstairs working and I had been entering in more names, dates and addresses into the database on the computer.

I hopped up and ran to the door, hoping whoever was outside had an umbrella since it was raining quite hard.

I pulled the door open and was shocked to see Alice standing on the stoop under a bright red umbrella. She was wearing a matching raincoat cinched at the waist with a belt. Next to her was the tall, lanky frame of Mr. Cullen's blondehaired friend, who was wearing a gray trench coat to stay dry.

Alice had a huge grin on her face and she took a step towards me quickly, "Hi Bella!"

I gave them both a wide smile and gestured them inside out of the rain. "Alice! I didn't know you were coming. Come in and get out of the rain." I directed and stepped back to give them space to walk in the foyer.

I was a little uncomfortable around the guy since I wasn't sure if he knew that I knew about him and Mr. Cullen but Alice must know since they had come together.

"Let me take your umbrella and coats." I rambled, and hung them up on the hooks by the door, "And you can go wait in the parlor while I find Mr. Cullen."

I bolted out of the room as quickly as my feet would take me and ran up the stairs to Mr. Cullen's door. I knocked gently and he opened the door a moment later, an expectant look on his face. His lean body filled the space between the door and the frame, not allowing me to see into his room. I wondered what was in there that he kept so secretive.

Watching him lean in the door way was one of those moments where I was once again struck by his beauty. His hair was pushed back off his forehead, except for several small pieces, and my fingers twitched with the desire to bush it back. I felt my face warm at the ridiculous thought and said, "Sorry to bother you but Alice and your *friend* are here. I asked them to wait downstairs."

"My friend?" He asked, "Oh, you must mean Jasper. I didn't hear them arrive." He said quickly shutting the door behind him and waved his arm for me to go ahead of him down the stairs.

At the bottom of the steps I turned to him and looked up at his face, "Jasper is really cute. Good job."

"Isabella," he said with a grimace on his face, but I waved him off.

"I'll behave." I said, and not wanting to embarrass him any further I kept walking down the stairs and into the sitting room.



I found Jasper and Alice sitting on love seat together engaged in quiet conversation. Mr. Cullen entered the room behind me and stood awkwardly in the doorway. His face was pained and he was sharing some kind of silent communication with Alice who had a beaming smile on her own face. Confused at the energy in the room I glanced at Jasper who just looked amused and was smirking at Mr. Cullen.

I started backing out the door and said, "If you need me I will be," and I jerked my thumb towards the kitchen, "at my desk."

I heard a low rush of words and possibly a hiss come from Mr. Cullen as I passed him. I was almost out the door when Alice called in her high pitched voice, "Bella, wait. I forgot to introduce you to Jasper."

I stepped back in and noticed Mr. Cullen was looking at the ceiling. Alice had picked up Jasper's hand and smiled at him. I smiled, a little confused at their affection but said, "Nice to meet you officially Jasper, I'm Bella."

Jasper lifted his hand up slightly and he said, "Hi Bella."

I had this horrible flash for a moment where I realized I was the ugly duckling in a room full of swans. My self esteem was forcing my feet to retreat from the room as quickly as possible.

As I returned the gesture I heard Mr. Cullen cough and grunt, "Alice," under his breath.

Alice smiled warmly at me and said, "Bella, Jasper is my *husband*. I didn't get a chance to tell you that earlier."

I felt my jaw drop a little and I looked between Alice and Mr. Cullen trying to figure out what was going on. Jasper, who I was ignoring entirely in order to save one bit of integrity, was sitting on the couch doing the exact same thing.

Mr. Cullen was still not looking at anyone, strategically staring anywhere but at me, Alice or Jasper.

I clenched my teeth and said with a forced smile, "Your husband? No, I had no idea you two were married." I hissed in Mr. Cullen's direction, "that's really, really great."

The tension in the room was thick. I was pretty sure it was due to my immense embarrassment since I had just accused Mr. Cullen of having an affair with his brother-in-law. I wanted to melt into the carpet and disappear, or I did until I was struck with a sudden wave of giddiness and I felt a giggle slip through my lips. I realized everyone else was laughing as well, even Mr. Cullen had a sliver of a smile on his face that he was forcibly trying to squelch.

As odd as the whole situation was the tension was lifted and I excused myself from the room and went back to my desk. I had no idea what had just happened but I went from feeling horribly humiliated to down right giddy in a matter of moments. It was awkward but preferable to the alternative. I heard the trio go up the steps together and shut the door behind them upstairs. I had to admit my curiosity was getting to me. I couldn't help but wonder what they did up there and how I could find out.

Xxx

EPOV

"Edward if you and Jasper need some time alone I would happily give it to you." Alice declared in her sugary sweet sing-song voice.

I chose to ignore her and walked over to my desk chair while the two of them sat on the couch.

*It could have been worse. Emmett could have been here. Or Rose.*

I looked at Jasper after he thought this and narrowed my eyes.

He returned the look except his eyes were wide and innocent and he had begun singing some obscure turn of the century folk song in his head to block me out.

"Does everyone know?" I asked, my fingers automatically moving to the bridge of my nose in irritation.

Alice's mind flittered to a memory and I saw my entire family listening to her as she described the conversation between me and Bella concerning my preferences. Emmett of course was completely amused and doubled over in laughter. Rosalie actually said, "I knew it" out loud before walking out of the room. Carlisle and Esme, supportive as always, kept a straight face. I could only imagine what they were thinking.

I sighed and slumped a little in my chair.

Alice came over and sat in my lap draped her arm over my shoulder and said, "It's okay Edward. It's not a big deal and you really had no choice. You had to protect yourself and the family from being exposed."

*You took one for the team. Of course I'm not sure which team that is anymore but you took it...*

Jasper was a dead man. Or vamp. Whichever.

Alice must have seen it coming because she jumped off my lap and for the second time in so many visits I lunged at Jasper. He anticipated it this time because of Alice's movement, and I landed on the couch with a loud thump. I leapt up in a defensive position.

Alice was now between us trying to calm me down, "Stop it. You know it's funny and we know, of course, it's not true." She reached her hand out and pressed it to my lower chest. Her touch was hard and cold, nothing like the warm, searing feeling of Bella's tiny fingertip.

I nodded and relaxed. I walked back to the couch and sat down on the couch and Alice sat next to me this time and rubbed my arm soothingly. Jasper began messing with the computer, ignoring the two of us, probably trying to stay off my radar.

I looked at Alice and I asked in a desperate whisper, "What do you see?"

"With Bella and Victoira?" she asked.

I gave her a tight nod.

*Right now everything is very murky. I get flashes of the red head and several others but nothing specific. They have not decided on a course of action, but they are working on something and it does involve Bella.*

I leaned into the couch, slowly rubbing my palms up and down my legs. Alice's information filled me with intense feelings of rage and fear for Isabella. I hated the fact I hadn't stopped this group of rouge vampires earlier. I should have and I blamed myself for not making it happen. I wanted to go downstairs and pick her up and lock her away in this safe room until I'd eradicated the danger. I envisioned doing this, carrying her in my arms, inhaling her floral scent, and touching her soft, creamy skin. Hiding her away until I learned all her secrets and she knew all of mine.

I felt Jasper watching me and I glanced his way preparing myself for his thoughts. He had an eyebrow raised in question and I could hear his opinions blaring from across the room.

*Edward, what is going on? Lust was one thing, hunger and desire are another but this? She's human.*

"I know." I said aloud. I did know. Every moment I spent with her I wanted her more and more. I wasn't just feeling lust or protectiveness. I wanted to be her friend.

*Human.. Off limits. Do not touch. Do not engage. I let it go last time because if anyone was strong enough to fight the temptation it was you....*

"Jasper. I know." I repeated, growing agitated. This was exactly why I'd left home. Well, one of the reasons. Between the three of us there wasn't a shred of privacy. Your successes and failures were available for everyone to see and criticize. I couldn't handle it then and I definitely couldn't now.

*Edward, I'm serious. Don't fuck around with her. Everyone...*

Alice shot Jasper a warning look, cutting him off mid thought, and said "It's okay Jasper. Edward isn't going to do anything." I could see the filmy images in Alice's mind. Isabella alone, content in her life. Isabella with me, smiling. Isabella cold and lifeless, gaping wound at her neck. There were others and I shut them out before I saw any more.

*She turned and looked at me with concern, her thoughts filled with her own opinions. You're not doing anything yet. But the decision is really yours. Bella is undecided at this time and I see two different paths. If you leave her alone she will never know the difference, if you pursue her...well, that is a different road entirely with several different options...*

I pushed off the couch and left the room, closing the door behind me and entering into my bedroom. I snorted. Of course there was no bed in this room, so the wording was false just like all of the other parts of this ridiculous charade I was acting in. I knew Jasper was right; the thoughts and emotions I was putting out were outrageous. Dangerous. I had no right to think of Isabella in any way other than as my employee who happened to also need my protection.

I'd been okay with that. I was even dealing with the absurd notion that she thought I was homosexual. I thought this social barrier between us as man and woman would separate us further, keep us apart, make things more uncomfortable, but I was wrong. It had the opposite effect. She was *more* comfortable in my presence. She spoke to me about music and art or literature. She forced me to sit down and plan out our schedules, which led to us making jokes and familiarizing ourselves with one another. This caused a bigger problem than I'd ever expected.

I liked her.

Very much.

I liked her sense of humor, her desire to learn, her curiosity.

I was intrigued by her lack of fear, her complete and utter disregard for self preservation.

I liked that no matter how much noise I tried to make I startled her every time I walked in a room because she was so engrossed in her activity she was completely unaware of me.

I liked the fact she *was* unaware of me. That my physical appearance and typical lures didn't seem to work on her the same way it did on other humans.

I liked the fact that when we were in the room together there was complete and unqualified silence.

Silence. Perfect silence.

And I liked that place on the side of her neck, just below her earlobe, that tinted red the minute I walked in the room.

I'd been pacing around the room, but at this thought I crumbled on my knees in fury. I could no longer deny I wanted Bella the way a man wants a woman and it infuriated me. I was furious at Jasper for being right and at myself for being so weak. Enraged at the forces at work that placed this woman in my path after I'd become resolved to this life.

I'd resolved to live alone, without my family or others. To protect those who needed it without reward or acknowledgement. Why did this insightful, strong, beautiful woman have to walk in and knock down my carefully arranged fortress?

Pulling at the fine threads of carpet with my fingers, I thought of our earlier conversation about the painting downstairs. I'd walked in the room and found her dressed more casually than I'd seen her before, outside of her bedroom that is, and the instantaneous rush of venom filled my mouth at the sight of her. Her long arms were revealed by her sleeveless shirt and her back and neck were on prominent display because her hair was pulled up. She was exquisite.

Before I could stop myself I had spoken, broken the glorious silence that surrounded us. After discussing the painting with her I was astonished that in over sixty years she was the only person, including my family, who noticed the resemblance between me and the man in the Pollock painting. In the early 1940's I'd spent time traveling, without the others, visiting places that interested me. The war was raging and people were focused on bigger things than a wealthy man with odd yellow eyes and especially pale skin. I found myself in New York and met a young Pollock in the art scene. He was pushing the limits of his craft and I was completely entranced. Inspired by my odd coloring and appealing appearance, he asked me to sit for him. As I posed, perfectly still for hours, Jackson began asking me about my life. He wanted to know if I had a family, what I wanted to accomplish. I told him what I thought a seventeen year old boy should say, that I wanted to go to war, to fight for my country. I told him my family was dead, that I was alone and expected to be for a long time. He asked if I had a girl, a woman to fight for and I explained to him that I was destined to live this life as a solitary man.

He gave me the painting when he was done. It was beautiful, and beside my abstract, hazy figure was the ghost of a woman just out of reach.

He knew then what I would be missing for nearly a century. That no man or woman is complete without a partner.

I heard a tap on the study door and Alice swung it open. She gracefully sat on the floor next to me and stroked my hair for a moment. She lifted my chin and we looked at one another, brother and sister, forged together by damnation and difficult choices. Her gold eyes penetrated mine and I could almost taste her sincerity when she finally spoke softly, "Edward for once in your life do what you want to do, not what you think you should do. Everything will turn out okay." I buried my face in her lap and felt her fingers weave through the strands of my hair.

I wanted to believe her, but the images in her head were a mixture of happiness and pain and I wasn't sure if I could be the one to inflict that upon the defenseless woman downstairs.

Xxx

Alice and I were quiet for some time, talking in our private language for awhile, letting my frustration pass. I allowed myself to be soothed since she really was the only one who could reach me that way.

"Edward come here," Jasper called from the other room, and I stood up, lifting Alice with me.

"I'm going to go downstairs while you two play super hero." Alice said.

Before I could argue I heard her voice...*I'll be good, I promise...*and she skipped out of the room.

I found Jasper sitting behind the desk focused on the computer monitor. He pointed at the screen, "What do these latest data entries mean?"

I walked around and read the information on the screen. It was the data I had asked Isabella to enter earlier that day.

I hovered over Jasper and said, "After Isabella's incident on Friday night I went back through the old papers I have upstairs looking for any type of suspicious accidents I may have missed."

He looked up at me with his brow furrowed in concentration, "And these names and dates correlate to those events."

"Yes," I said, "And these abbreviations," I pointed to a series of letters next to each name, "they are for the type of crime, AR for armed robbery, MP, for missing person, A for assault, etcetera."

Jasper leaned back in the chair, his long legs stretched out under my large desk. He ran his fingers through his hair for a moment and I waited for him to explain his jumbled thoughts.

"You're thinking that more than the murders are connected to these vampires?" He asked, swiveling in the chair slightly.

"Yes, Victoria made this quite clear," I told him.

"And you're convinced she was not going to kill Bella that night but take her to the other vampire, the male?" He continued.

I nodded, trying not to be impatient with his process.

*Why do you think he wanted her?*

"Victoria specifically said the word 'addition.' Her exact words were, 'You will make a wonderful addition.'" I grimaced at the image of Bella cowering under Victoria's strength, in the dark, dank alley.

Jasper's eyes flicked towards me for a split second, too fast for human eyes and I read the empathy he felt for my plight. His own thoughts traveled to Alice and how he would feel if she was in danger.

I ignored him, unwilling to entertain the idea that my feelings for Bella could compare to those of him and Alice.

"So maybe he wants to change her? Add her to his coven?" I speculated, feeling my throat close up in horror at this idea.

*Or to his army...*

My head snapped at Jasper's thought.

"An army," I repeated, "Of course."

Xxx

Jasper and I faced one another in thought over this serious possibility. He was thinking of his own days in a vampire army and the wake of destruction they left behind. There was no way I could allow this to happen in my city.

I heard Alice on the stairs and in a second she was in the study, alarm etched on her face.

Jasper and I both went to her immediately, and he wrapped his long arms around her torso, supporting her as she slipped into another vision.

"Edward, what is she seeing?" he asked over her head.

"She sees the male vampire, James, taunting another victim. This time a male." I explained to Jasper and then turned to Alice, who had regained a focused look in her eyes, "Is Victoria there?"

She shook her head and said, "No, I keep searching but I can't find her. James is with another vampire, dark skinned, with long black hair and possibly one other, but not Victoria."

I considered this, "The long haired vampire was there before, the time I missed him. He fed on the woman in the park while James watched."

Alice nodded and said, "Yes, this is what I see happening again."

I scowled at the idea and asked, "Where does it happen? Can we get there in time?"

"I see rushing water and stacks, smoke stacks, some kind of factory or plant." She said with her eyes closed, trying to visualize it.

I caught the image and said, "It's the Paper Mill. By the water." I ran toward my closet and changed into boots for the long run ahead of me. We could still save this person. It was dark in her vision but it was still dusk outside. We had time.

"We're coming with you Edward," Jasper said, suddenly by my side and holding a canvas bag filled with tools to destroy James or any other vampires who crossed our path.

I hesitated, glancing at Alice quickly.

*Bella is fine, she's safe. She is meeting friends for dinner and then going straight home. I see no problems at all...*

I nodded confirmation to Jasper and we filed down the backstairs and I watched Alice and Jasper quietly slipped out of the house.

I found Isabella sitting at her desk, printing out her daily report. I took a moment to inhale her sweet aroma and let my eyes roam over her form.

I cleared my throat this time to give her notice and I saw her flinch slightly before turning my way with a small smile playing on her soft, pink lips.

"Good night, Isabella." I said warmly. The fact I was making small talk with Isabella moments before I tracked down a vicious monster was absurd.

"Have a good weekend Mr. Cullen." She replied back. I watched her hands sort and clean off her desk. I loved to watch her movements.

"Thank you. And Isabella," I watched her pause as she lifted herself from her seat, "be safe."

She nodded slowly and I took that moment to go back into the kitchen toward the garage door. I knew that every second in her presence was making it harder for me to leave her. The urge to stay with her was getting stronger and stronger each day.

I forced myself to go, for both our sakes. I had no right to her life and she wanted no part in mine.

Minutes later, as I sat behind the wheel of my car, barely aware of the fact Jasper was programming the GPS and Alice was busy searching for any information she may have missed, I promised myself this would be the last time I would let James elude me. I assured myself that the city and Isabella would be safe under my watch.



## Chapter Twelve

**Chapter Song: [Liz Phair - Supernova](#)**

EPOV

I accelerated onto the street leading to the paper mill, the one that was edged by the water. James and his companions were in the area somewhere, their victim minutes away from a horrific death.

I pulled to the side of the road in a darkened area in case any humans became suspicious. Alice's vision had been specific enough for us to find the location easily. Before we got out of the car I turned to her and asked, "Can you see anything else?"

Alice's eyes were wide and her entire demeanor was on edge. Her black hair seemed darker, spikier in the shadows of the car. Her eyes were almost black, she hadn't fed recently and the stress was accentuating the bruised shadows underneath. "Yes. One of the vampires is a newborn. He is wild and almost completely feral. The other, Laurent is his name, seems older. He is very much in control and I'm pretty sure he is training the young one. These two will feed on the human while the leader, James, watches."

Jasper and I exchanged looks before moving outside the car. I spoke quickly and quietly handing out instructions.

"Jasper, I want you and Alice to take the newborn and the other one. You have the most experience with them and Alice can anticipate their moves if necessary." I looked them both in the eye to make sure they were prepared to follow my directions. They both nodded yes without argument and let me continue, "James is mine. I've been tracking him too long to let him slip away now and hopefully I can get some information from him before hand."

We moved quickly though the night, hiding the best we could in the shadows. It was still wet, the rain having stopped earlier. I could smell James and Laurent's scents mingled in with the damp, marshy air and the sulfur from the mill. The wind was blowing, bouncing off the walls of the building, making I hard to locate their trail. I closed my eyes for a moment and strained to pinpoint their location.

*What the fuck...* I heard a man think. Images of a young vampire, snarling and leering towards him filled my thoughts. Laurent stood to the side, patiently explaining to the newborn it wasn't time yet...*Riley, you must control yourself...James has not given you the approval to feed...patience...*

I switched to Laurent's thoughts and saw the man, dressed in a uniform, a security guard perhaps. He was backed into a wall, under a towering pile of lumber. His arms were shaking and he was sweating profusely. I watched as he attempted to withdraw the firearm from its holster on his side in vain. His fingers fumbled with the latch, wasting precious moments on a weapon of no use.

Riley, the newborn, was barely hanging on by a thread. His thoughts were jumbled, filled with thirst. He was literally seconds away from tearing the man to shreds. This was some kind of test for him, forcing him to gain control over his hunger. In all my years I had never seen anything like this.

The three of us made our way to the back of the mill, towards the loading docks where the lumber was stored. We were darting through machinery and stacks of materials, trying to find the exact location.

A strong breeze blew past us and Jasper hissed, "To the right," and we hastily wove through to the other side of the platform. I kept my thoughts on Laurent who was still patiently taunting the victim.

Suddenly James appeared in Laurent's view, coming around the curve of a massive stone pillar, and he gave some form of signal. For the second time I was too late and we rounded the corner as the two vampires ripped the flesh from the arms and neck in a frenzy from the human they held captive. The sound of the victim's screams were cut short by the echoing sound of his neck snapping. James merely glanced in our direction as he dropped the man's head and proceeded to brush his hands together, ridding them of dirt.

Laurent abandoned the body as we came into view and motioned for Riley to do the same. Jasper never missed a beat and lunged towards him, snatching a piece of his ear, as he flew over his shoulder. Riley took the bait and ran after Jasper in a flash of anger, clutching the side of his head and snarling in pain. Laurent dismissed Alice's size and went after Riley, disappearing from view. James' eyes were on Alice, I watched as he licked his lips and for the briefest moment he leered at her.

Alice ignored his behavior and took off after Laurent, following our plans. I watched as James walked towards me with a confident swagger.

He looked over his shoulder, his long, greasy hair swaying behind his back. He said, "They should keep each other busy for a while."

I searched his mind and came up blank, his thoughts blocked. I could see what was happening now, but nothing else.

He angled his body back towards me and announced, "Ahhh...Edward Cullen. We finally meet."

The grin was still in place and it was taking every ounce of strength I had not to rip it off his face. Instead, I kept my face smooth, showing no sign of the questions rolling through my mind.

"I've been following you for some time Edward." He said, his voice washing over me like silk. Following me? This was new and disturbing. I scoffed at him, unbelieving.

He smirked and said, "It's true. I have been keeping track of your side venture much longer than you have been aware of me and my little exploits." My eyes were glued on him as he gestured to the lifeless body on the ground. "At first, I thought they were rumors or perhaps a myth. That the stories told of a vampire who protected this city from others of his kind was an urban legend."

He rocked on his heels a bit, shoving his hands into his back pockets. He was filthy, his face and hair covered in dirt and debris. I noted his clothing was worn and tattered and he had the appearance of a homeless person. It was the standard look for our kind as it kept them unnoticed and able to move more freely. His voice and his appearance were contradictory. His tone was refined, the words he uttered calculated and educated yet, his entire presence was abominable.

How had he found me? I thought of all of my systems in place, the security, the 'human' life I lived. The fact someone had penetrated this had me dumbfounded.

When I didn't respond to his musings, he continued. "I admit I was intrigued. I stumbled upon other vampires who assured me it was true, and that not only were you helping humans, you hailed from a coven of non-flesh eaters. A large coven. So I conducted my research and to my astonishment they were correct."

He paused and he opened his mind to me, showing me a memory of my family home in Forks, the one we had kept for over seventy years. Just as quickly though, the image disappeared and his mind was once again blank.

He smiled at me, seeming to know I had seen his thoughts. This was interesting. I wondered how he knew about my gift. "There were seven of you, who mingled in society, working, and studying amongst humans. Your leader, a masochist I'm assuming, actually practices medicine."

This information left me unnerved and I narrowed my eyes in disgust. It was one thing for this vampire to know about me. It was another entirely for him to have information about the Cullen's. I saw a glimmer of amusement cross his face as he caught my discomfort.

"Oh yes, I know all about your family. Some of them more than others in fact." He raised an eyebrow tauntingly and sent me a flash of a dark room, rows of beds against the walls. The image held no connection for me.

"I know you left them some time ago to live this renegade life. That twice in your afterlife you have rebelled against your family. The first time killing less than desirable humans and then later, now, living above the rest of us, attempting to control and manage our nature."

James tilted his head, his stringy ponytail spilling over the shoulder of his faded leather jacket he spoke next in a mocking tone, "You have lived such a troubled life, struggling between good and evil. I on the



other hand embrace my inner demon. The irony is where you like to save and sympathize with the humans that surround us, I relish the moment their heart pulses its final beat."

The flood gates opened and a thousand deaths ticked from his mind into mine. I attempted to push away the images of murder after murder, throats torn, limbs shredded, the bodies of lifeless innocents cast aside for one demon's hunger.

*You are not a God. And you will not tell me where I can and can not hunt.*

His voice was clear and determined. He knew I could hear him and he smirked knowingly. He looked over to the dead security guard and shook his head, "In fact, this man here, you can take the blame for his death."

Taking the bait I asked, "How so?"

"All of this, the murders, the kidnappings, it has all been to bring you to me. All of these deaths were to lure you into my game. To teach you a lesson about playing God." He said.

I cocked an eyebrow at him and asked, "If you knew everything about me why didn't you just come find me and take me out when I wasn't prepared?"

His mouth broke out into a huge grin, "Now where's the fun in that?"

I rolled my eyes dramatically and declared, "I'm here. So let's do this."

We were ten feet or so apart, with a dead man lying to our left. In an instant we could be at one another's throats. I was only waiting for the right moment.

James' demeanor remained non-plussed. "As much as I would like to end this game now, I can't. You added in an extra player and I have been forced to change direction. This, right here, is my effort in sportsmanship, to let you know of the new rules. You see, you have something of mine and in return I prepared to take something of yours."

He spoke as though this truly was a competition. All this information was a bit overwhelming and the bits of his thoughts I could read were cryptic and confusing. I had something that belonged to him?

"Why do you think I'm going to play your games? The others will have caught and killed your men by now and I *will* kill you. You obviously didn't research me enough if you think I'm stooping to your childish level." I told him, adjusting my knees so I was crouching slightly, preparing to attack.

James shook his head at me slowly while taking a step forward. "I wouldn't be so sure Edward. You have the spirit of a competitor, like myself. I doubt you like to lose. Especially when the stakes are so high." He revealed another image, this time of Isabella sitting with her friend at a table.

A low growl rumbled through my chest as I absorbed the picture. It was his memory, crystal clear. I could make out every detail of her delicate features. I realized the image I saw was from earlier this week and Isabella was wearing the same clothing as she had at work.

He howled with laughter, bouncing on his toes with excitement. "I knew you would be interested. You can not resist the frail humans you surround yourself with! I also know you'll want to know that, as we speak, Victoria is gathering some information for me about your favorite human."

I hissed loudly and lunged towards him, landing on his chest, forcing the two of us to fly across the pavement and into the concrete wall. I pushed my shoulder into his throat and prepared to tear him to shreds.

He began laughing hysterically and said, "I should have known you were too impatient for this type of challenge. You're too temperamental and frankly predictable. This is why it was so easy for me to draw you out in the first place."

I shoved my shoulder into him once again, crushing him into the wall. "Stop. Talking." I growled. "Your reign of terror is over. And you're wrong. I do decide where and when you feed when you are anywhere near this city."

I spun him around and had his face smashed into the wall. My foot was planted firmly in his back and I was ready to literally yank his arm off his body. "If you kill me now, you will never find Victoria, who, at this moment, is waiting for your precious pet to return home. She knows how to block you and the seer."

He opened his mind again and gave me a view of Victoria and another vampire standing outside Isabella's apartment. He must have taken them there earlier. The surge of anger was completely overwhelming. My hands shook as I clenched his arm and tore it from his body.

I flung it behind me and faced James who was screaming in pain, preparing to defend himself. Grasping his shoulder he leapt to higher ground, on top of a mountain of lumber, and shouted, "You *will* regret this. I will take the thing that is most important to you and turn it into mine. And then, when you least expect it I will return with my army and take over this city and hunt you down."

I jumped up the pile of wood, scrambling up the side but when I reached the top he was gone, completely out of sight.

"Edward!" I heard Alice call my name in a panic.

I looked down to find Alice below me and Jasper kicking James' amputated arm across the floor.

I assessed the damage from above. Jasper's shirt was torn, revealing deep scratches in his chest. He grimaced as Alice poked and prodded, assessing his injuries. She, on the other hand, was spotless, not a hair out of place.

"They're burning beyond the parking lot. In a pit." Jasper informed me, rubbing the spot where teeth marks were embedded in his skin. "That newborn was a bitch. All teeth and scratching."

I looked at Alice and she shrugged, "Laurent underestimated my size and my ability. He thinks too much. Definitely not spontaneous." She giggled a little and she showed me a picture of Laurent's final moments.

I jumped down and walked towards them. Jasper nudged the arm again with his foot, watching it as it continued to twitch. He asked, "What happened to the rest of him?"

"He's gone. But Victoria knows where Isabella lives. She's there or going there. I don't know," I could hear the tremble in my voice, "Jasper take care of James' arm. Alice, call Isabella and keep her out of her apartment. Call me when you find her." They both nodded, wishing me luck. "I'm going on foot, it will be faster."

In a flash I was out of the mill, traveling through the wet, dark woods, fear taking over my body. I'd been late too many times as far as James was concerned. He had the upper hand on me time and time again. It was understandable now that I knew he had been tracking me. Regardless of my failures I couldn't let the same thing happen with Isabella.

Driven to protect her, I felt the branches push past me as I traveled through the forest, each mile beneath my feet taking me one step closer to her or Victoria. I would deal with whichever one I met first.

Xxx

I was in the shadows of Isabella's apartment, phone in hand. Alice was on the other end assuring me that Isabella was safe. Not only had she been able to see her, she spoke to her on the phone for clarification.

Unfortunately, Alice had not been able to get a position on Victoria which meant she could be in the apartment right now. I used the traditional method and climbed the stairs to get to her unit. Once at the top I slid the key I had made the last I was here out of my pocket and pushed it into the lock. The minute I

opened the door I was struck by a wave of Victoria's scent. I listened intently but couldn't hear her thoughts or any noises from inside the apartment.

I shut the door quietly behind me and entered the foyer. There was nothing noticeable missing or any signs that a vampire had been in the home. In fact, if not for my superior senses Isabella would have no evidence at all that there had been any kind of break in.

I quickly swept the apartment, noting that Victoria had spent the majority of her time in Isabella's room, although again, nothing appeared disturbed. I could smell her scent all over the room. It was strong, as though she had just left.

My phone vibrated and I pulled it out of my pocket.

"She's gone. Do you know where she went?" I asked. I was thumbing along Isabella's bookshelf to see if anything was missing. Everything seemed to be in place.

Alice spoke quickly, "No, I can't see her. Some flashes but nothing concrete. Bella is on her way home, though. I don't think you want her to catch you in her apartment."

"Thanks. Talk to you soon." I told her and ended the call.

I walked to the window in the living room and saw Isabella turn into the parking lot. She seemed hesitant to get out of the car and I wished I could go down there and ease her fears, let her know she was safe.

I watched as Isabella finally got out of the car. She looked around the parking lot and then almost sprinted to the stairway, stumbling once, but managing to stay upright. Once she was out of view I listened to the pounding of her feet two floors below as they echoed off the steps. I placed my hand on the door, feeling the vibrations of her movements as she approached. Her keys jangled, shaking nervously, as she fumbled them in the lock, dropping them once as she had before.

She was breathing heavily from running. I wondered what it would be like to feel her breath across my face. I pressed my forehead to the door willing her inside. Outside her heart sounded like a thousand drummers and I could feel it ricocheting through my bones.

*thump thump thump thump thump thump....*

The knob twisted, the door opened a fraction, and her foot poked around its sharp corner.

I took one last look at her fingers wrapped around the edge of the door and slipped out the window into the night.

Xxx

BPOV

I stepped in my apartment and closed the door quickly behind me, triple locking it as fast as my hands could move.

My fingers were shaking and I attempted to calm myself down a little. Alice's phone calls were freaking me out. The first one was no big deal and I passed it off as just a friendly call. The second one concerned me as she inquired about my location and I could feel her relief when I said I was on my way home. I asked what was going on and she said nothing and that she had a hunch so she wanted to check on me.

A hunch? I had no idea what this meant.

But in light of the Victoria situation I wasn't taking any chances. I glanced around the house and everything seemed in place. I fought the urge to open the closet doors and peek under the bed. Honestly, I'm pretty sure if Victoria wanted me she would just come out and do it.

I went to my bedroom and to change out of my work clothes. I walked to the dresser and began digging through my drawers quickly becoming annoyed that I hadn't taken the time to wash clothes recently. I found a pair of grey cotton shorts and reached in to my t-shirt drawer and pulled out the first one. I sighed deeply when I saw which one it was.

Let It Bleed.

I pulled it up to my face and sniffed the scent of laundry detergent. I'd washed it when I got home that night, horrified at the streaks of dirt and bleach that wouldn't come out. The bleach was so concentrated it actually ate holes through the fabric in several places. I felt terrible ruining Mr. Cullen's shirt and had shoved it under the clean clothes trying to put it out of my mind. I eyed the traitorous pile of laundry overflowing its hamper and cursed the fact my buried sins had floated to the top.

I tossed it on the dresser and dug through the drawer looking for something comfortable to wear. I was left with a never been worn or washed give away shirt from my bank and my ex-boyfriends baseball shirt from freshman year.

Neither was very appealing.

Out of options I put on the tattered Rolling Stones shirt and a hoodie, and refusing to look at myself in the mirror I left the room.

I was on my way to the kitchen when I heard a knock at the door. I instantly froze, wondering if I should open the door or just ignore it. I was going with ignoring it until whoever was knocked again, this time a little louder.

I walked to the door and pushed up on my toes, peeking through the spy hole. All I could see was pale flesh and arguably the most angular jaw I've ever seen.

I quickly unlatched the locks and opened the door to find Edward Cullen standing in front of me doing that thing where he is trying to look calm but his jaw is clenching so tightly I think it may snap in half.

I pushed a lock of hair behind my ear and narrowed my eyes at him questioningly, "Hey, what are you doing here?" I asked. "Is everything okay?"

He nodded, awkwardly putting his hands in his pant pockets and then taking them back out. He was fidgeting. Mr. Cullen didn't fidget. Something was up. Nodding, "Yes," he then looked around for a moment before asking, "May I come in?"

Realizing I barely had the door open at all, I swung it open wider to allow him inside. He brushed past me, lightly grazing my hand with his own and I was shocked at the coolness of his skin. He turned towards me in reaction to our contact and he apologized lightly, looking a little horrified. Was it because he touched me and I'm an employee or was it because he touched me and I'm a woman?

I suspected either one didn't sit well with him.

"Wow. Do you keep the air on full blast in your car? You're like an icicle." I joked, rubbing the side of my hand where we touched, attempting to break the awkwardness of my boss being in my house. Again.

We were standing in the middle section of the apartment, the tiny area between the door and the living room, overlooking the kitchen. He was close to me, too close, and he smelled like rain and leaves. I could see his nostrils flare slightly and he was looking anywhere but at me. I wondered again why a man like this was lost to women.

He laughed lightly and said, "Something like that," and the room filled with one of our uncomfortable silences.

I gestured to the living room, "Please, sit down. Can I get you anything?"

He shook his head no and he sat in the arm chair so I took the couch. He looked ridiculous sitting in our undersized IKEA chair, like a supermodel sent to a J C Penny photo shoot instead of Abercrombie and Fitch. I settled back in the cushions and tucked my legs under my chin.

"Why are you here Mr. Cullen?" I asked, trying to desperately figure out what he was doing at my apartment so late at night. I nervously ran my fingers up and down the pull cord of my hoodie.

He took a deep breath and looked me in the eye, "I'm not sure how to explain all of this Isabella, but I've been watching your house and tonight I fear there has been a breach of your security."

His words were formal and business like. I wasn't exactly sure what he meant. "You've been watching my house." I stated.

He nodded slowly and he explained, "Yes. Well, my security firm has, since the attack by Victoria."

I felt my brow crease and my breathing picked up a notch. "And your security firm feels there was a 'breach'. What does that even mean?" I asked trying to make sense of his words.

"It means we think Victoria entered your home earlier tonight."

I looked at him sitting in my chair, in his five hundred dollar shoes, his perfectly muscular arms peeking out from under his thick black t-shirt, calmly telling me a sociopath had broken into my home. Today. Tonight.

I hopped off the couch and began pacing around the small apartment. Victoria had been in my house. Mr. Cullen had people watching me. My very small, insulated world was leaking all over the place.

I rounded the couch and stood in front of him. His long legs were sprawled out across the floor taking up too much space. "When were you going to tell me you've been following me?" I asked, my voice rising.

His eyes locked with mine and he grimaced faintly and said, "I was hoping not to have to."

I stared back, raising my hands in the air but not responding.

"I was hoping she would go away. That she would leave you alone." He said quietly, his eyes never leaving my own. "But she's not."

In that very moment I felt a sudden but distinct shift in our relationship.

I sat back down on the couch and wrapped my arms around my legs. Closing my eyes I felt the tears pooling behind my lids and I wished them away. I wished for strength but it didn't come.

I pushed my fists into my eyes and whispered, "Why me," behind my knees so quietly I was sure he couldn't hear me.

"I'm not sure," he responded, and I looked up in surprise. "Isabella, I don't know why she picked you specifically, but she is very dangerous. You have to take precautions against her and the others."

I gasped, "Others?"

He nodded solemnly. I rested my chin on my knees, trying desperately not to freak out, but I was failing miserably. I could hear my breathing accelerate and I thought I may begin hyperventilating. Mr. Cullen continued to sit across from me, perched on the edge of the chair, looking extremely uncomfortable. I felt the panic attack coming and I said to him, "Distract me. Anything."

His eyes looked distressed and said, "Ummm...I don't know what you want me to say."

I heard the wheezing starting and bile was rising in my throat. My hands started flapping as I tried to control it.

Finally he blurted, "I have another brother. And a sister. Emmett and Rosalie." I nodded, encouraging him to continue. "We were raised by our adoptive parents Carlisle and Esme. Carlisle adopted me when my birth parents died. He married Esme later and she raised me as her son."

I was managing the panic, it wasn't better, but at the same time it wasn't getting worse. I wasn't expecting this type of information but I was fascinated by his revelation. He raised an eyebrow and told me, "Rosalie was adopted next, then Emmett. Then Alice and Jasper."

I gulped for air but asked, "Alice and Jasper are siblings? But they're married."

He shrugged looking down at his hands, "Yes and Emmett and Rose are married too. They were lucky to find someone who understood our pasts."

We sat together, my steadying breaths the only sound between us. Occasionally I could see Mr. Cullen's Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed. I thought about what he said, how it must be hard to be the only one in your family who felt alone, and in his case, different.

Letting out a deep uneven breath I relaxed just a little and asked, "What am I going to do?"

Moving fast enough to make me blink, he was crouched in front of me, balancing on the balls of his feet. His copper hair was close enough for me to touch and pushed back over his head. I felt his cool breath caress my face as he declared, "Isabella, I promise to keep you safe."

I wanted to believe him but how could he make this type of promise? How could he guarantee my safety? I leaned back into the couch, resting my head in a thick, soft pillow, exhaustion over taking me. No one else was offering to protect me so I had no choice but to put my faith in him.

He was still there, crouching next to the couch. I could see the lean bands of muscle that stretched up and down his forearms as his hands clenched into balls. He gave me the most wonderful lopsided grin and said, "You're tired. I should go."

Fear raced through my body at the thought of him leaving and I sat up, clutching the edge of the couch. "No. Mr. Cullen, please don't go." I begged.

He stopped midway off the ground and hesitated for a moment. He ran his palm over his jaw and shut his eyes for a moment, appearing to have an internal struggle of some kind. My heart was beginning to race again at the thought of being left alone but he simply turned and sat back down in his seat, across from me. I smiled my thanks to him and rested my head back into the pillow, shifting my jacket to get more comfortable.

I evened out my breaths and heard Mr. Cullen say, "Isabella, before you go to sleep, two things..."

I opened my eyes, glancing over at my guardian angel, sitting in the shadows of my living room, and said, "Okay, go.."

He cleared his throat and said, "First, can you please begin calling me Edward? Mr. Cullen seems a little formal under the circumstances."

I laughed and agreed.

I heard the smile in his voice as he laughed with me and waited for him to continue. He paused long enough that I stole a glance in his direction. He was looking at me intently, eyes narrowed, crease in his forehead.

Confused, I felt my hair and wiped my face, feeling self-conscious. Finally I asked, "What?"

He stood up and walked over to me, lifting his hand towards my chest. I scooted back under his scrutiny and felt his fingers as they wrapped around the zipper of my hoodie. With ease he tugged it down and with an incredulous look on his face he asked, "Are you wearing my shirt?"



## Chapter Thirteen

BPOV

*Where did she go?* I wondered, as a cool breeze spread across my face, and I shivered, wrapping my arms around my body. I squinted, trying to see better, but only found myself in an unfamiliar place. It was dark and I could feel the rough, damp ground under my bare feet. I was looking for the girl, but I couldn't find her.

I heard footsteps and ran towards them. She was in front of me, running away. She kept going in the wrong direction.

"Come back!" I called, picking up my pace. *Why would she run away?*

Suddenly I heard her cry out and tumble. I kept running and felt my feet slip from under me and I too was falling, my arms searching for anything to hold. My fingers desperately took hold on the jagged edge in front of me.

I tentatively looked down and found her, Bree, also clinging to the side. We were both hanging from a cliff, where a bright red fire glowed beneath us.

"Help me!" she cried, the fire lapping at her heels. I watched helpless as she kicked her feet, trying to escape the flames. I began crying, tears streaming down my face as I feared for our safety.

My fingers were slipping. I had no idea how to reach her. "I'm coming" I yelled, my voice echoing back. The flames were moving closer and closer to the girl. I should have felt heat from below but instead there was only cold.

I searched around me for an escape, a way off of the cliff. Just above me, I saw a withered, aged root sticking out of the cliff. I dug my toes into the dirt, pushing myself upwards, struggling to reach the gnarled limb. I scratched and clawed, dirt filling my nails, finally making contact with the root. Just as I wrapped my fingers around its cold, rough surface, it transformed. The root reached out for me instead, its long tendrils enveloping my arm, pulling me swiftly to solid ground.

Shocked, I realized it was no longer a root. It was a cool, porcelain hand clutching me tightly. I looked to find the source of the hand and found a man with erratic hair and glowing yellow eyes on the other end.

"Edward," I choked, sobs filling my throat. I was sitting now, in a softer place, and could feel the warm tears flowing down my cheeks. In the darkness I felt him. I felt his cool breath washing over me. I felt the tips of his hair touching my forehead. I felt the warm tears being replaced by the icy trails of his finger tips as he wiped them away. I sighed as his thumb brushed across my bottom lip.

I blinked and tried to unscramble the dark, looking for Edward. A sliver of light came from under the window shade and my eyes adjusted to give me a better view of my bedroom.

No Edward.

I sighed and lay back on my pillow and pulled my sticky shirt from my body. It was third day I'd had this dream. Or nightmare, I guess I would call it, and each time I awoke confused, covered in sweat and tears. The first one came the morning after Edward stayed the night, after Victoria had been in my home. I woke

up on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. There was a note on the coffee table telling me he had to leave but that his security firm would be monitoring my apartment.

Every day I woke up the same way, feeling the pressure of his thumb on my lip, his name on my tongue. I was sure he was there. The dream was so vivid. Every time Bree fell off the cliff, the gnarled root transformed into Edwards smooth arm and when I looked into his eyes I could almost taste his cool breath on my face. I would run my tongue over my bottom lip looking for a trace of him but only found the salt of my tears.

Lying on the bed I thought back to Friday night and Edward and our relationship. He was so hard to read. One minute I found myself comforted and the next not so much.

When his fingers grasped the zipper on my hoodie and he asked me about his shirt, I felt this horrific moment coming. I feared the brooding, hostile, moody boss I had seen in the past. Instead, in that moment, as he leaned towards me, I felt this bolt of energy. The energy that shouts out pay attention, look at me, warning, warning, turn back!

It's the kind of energy that tells you to take a different path to work and you miss a huge pile up on your regular route. The energy tells you to change check out lines at the grocery store right before the woman in front of you pulls out a thick envelope of coupons that stalls the line. The one when you are standing across a room, filled with dozens of people and you make eye contact with a really hot guy and things just click.

When Edward was hovering over me, I knew I was getting a message but I wasn't able to decipher it. My breathing hitched and my face grew hot. My heart was pounding in my chest ready to burst. I was terrified to see the anger in his eyes. But there was no anger. Just the smooth skin of a gorgeous boy with deep soulful eyes. In fact, his eyes seemed pleased and his lips twitched, briefly, but they never revealed their true intent.

I felt this pull, a nagging in my stomach, sending me conflicting signals. My instincts were confused. I had this immense discomfort with him so close but at the same time, I couldn't get close enough. He smelled so good. He was so beautiful. I just wanted to reach out and stroke his face. But, and it was a huge but, when he came so close to me, and reached out, I not only feared his anger, I feared him. I had the sudden overwhelming realization that I had made a very bad decision letting him in my home.

Time stood still, as my mind and body argued over the intent of Edward Cullen. He dropped the zipper, took a deep swallow, and chuckled softly saying, "You know, that one was one of my favorites," before returning to his chair.

Dazed by his proximity, I was relieved when he sat down and stammered, "I'm sorry. Really. And all of my other things were dirty."

He grinned a little putting me more at ease, "Dirty? More than that?"

There he went, putting me at ease. Roller. Coaster. "Anyway, I tried to find a replacement. But I'm having a hard time." I leaned my head back, drowsy, the adrenaline I felt moments ago tapped.

He nodded and ran his fingers through his hair, before mumbling, "I'm sure you are."

I rolled to my side, placing my hands under my cheek and closed my eyes for a moment. Sleep was taking over but I had so many questions and he was here, in front of me, willing to stay. I opened my eyes again and looked at him in my chair, beckoning me. I just wanted to know more. I wanted to know how he smelled like that, and how he got his hair so perfect, but those seem inappropriate on so many levels so I blurted out, "Tell me about your shirt collection."

He looked at me with those crazy gold eyes and said softly, "Another time Isabella, you need to sleep."

I felt my head nodding in agreement, and my last sight of the night was him, smiling at me from the chair.



I thought about his face that night as I tried to shake off the remaining feelings from my nightmare. My arms shot out, stretching to the edges of the mattress, and I kicked the covers off my legs. It was Monday and I had to finally leave my apartment and face the real world, go to work. Things had changed between me and Edward over the weekend. He had called me several times after Friday night, and Alice even dropped by once to make sure I was okay. His tone was less formal, and I could hear the concern in his voice. I had to assure him I wouldn't leave without Angela and that all my doors and windows were locked. He promised that his security firm was watching but no matter where I looked I didn't see them. I guess they were that good.

I pulled open my shade and looked out into the dreary rainy morning. While watching countless hours of bad TV and re-reading every book in the house I had had time to think over the strange behavior of my boss. I was convinced that things were not exactly as they appeared. There was one thing I was sure of though, Edward Cullen was a mystery and I was dying to figure him out.

Xxx

An hour later I had my keys in one hand, coffee mug in the other, and was struggling to throw my bag over my shoulder and open the door. Using my elbow for leverage I managed to twist the knob enough to crack the door open. I pushed it the rest of the way with my foot and it flung back, crashing into the wall.

"Fuck," I muttered, knowing I must have made a dent in the wall. I peered behind the door and saw a dark scuff mark but no real damage. When I came back around I came face to face with him. Edward Cullen was in my hallway with a tense grin on his perfect face.

"Good morning," he said, in his ridiculously charming voice.

I stared at him for a moment trying to figure out what he was doing outside my apartment and how long he had been there. I must have stood there for too long because he spoke again.

"I," he hesitated for a moment, his eyes apprehensive, "I wondered if you would like me to drive you to work?"

Xxx

This is how the rest of my week unfolded. I would wake up, sticky with sweat, sobbing and reaching out to Edward in the dark. He caught me every time, pulling me off the cliff into his tight grip.

I then prepared for work, opened my door, and he would be standing there waiting for me, hand out for my bag which he would carry to the car. We would sit, side by side, speaking only of the weather, current events or work. We avoided the subject of Victoria and why he was actually picking me up each day.

I did learn several things about him though. One was that he drove dangerously fast, but he handled the car with ease, like he wasn't even trying. He was like a race car driver, anticipating the moves of the other drivers without a second thought. I found that I liked the speed, watching his hands maneuver the steering wheel and shift the gears. Another was that he liked to listen to classical music in the morning, soothing sometimes but furious pieces others. His tastes ran more contemporary in the evening, as though he relaxed some at the end of the day.

I also found that he changed his cars with his mood or habits. He had several, three in the garage at his townhouse but I suspected more from the way he spoke of them. He loved his cars, his eyes growing energetic when I asked him about them. On the days he had to go into his office, dressed in a crisp suit and tie, he would drive his silver Volvo, shiny and clean, with lightly tinted windows. The interior was pristine, the leather soft and cool to the touch. Other days, when he was more casually dressed, prepared to work from home, he would arrive in his SUV. When I asked about it I was forced to listen to a twenty minute lecture about how it was the new Lexus hybrid, unavailable to the public until later this year. Apparently,

between the car and the fluorescent lighting, it was clear Edward was very concerned about our earth's natural resources.

Then his third car, which I'd never seen him drive, was tucked away in the corner of the garage. It was an old black convertible that was obviously well cared for and loved but I wasn't sure where or when he drove it.

It was Thursday, Volvo day apparently, and I decided to ask him about it specifically, "Tell me about your other car, the convertible. It seems a little inappropriate for this type of climate."

He laughed a little and said, "Isabella, there is no such thing as appropriate or inappropriate when it comes to a classic." I suppressed a sigh. He was so fracking cute when he was happy.

I forced an eye roll at him and asked, "Fine, what kind of car is it anyway?"

His looked over at me gauging whether or not I really wanted to know. His eyes bore into mine and his body relaxed, comfortable for once. It was one of those moments that if he wasn't gay I would think he liked me. I raised my eyebrows in encouragement and he said, "It's a 1968 Plymouth Belvedere GTX."

I had no idea what that was and it must have been apparent because he laughed again, the sparkle in his eyes as he went on to explain how it was known as the "Gentleman's Muscle Car" and how it has some kind of enormous engine called the Commando or something.

As he spoke I realized how much I loved hearing him talk about the things that interested him. He knew so much about art and music. He could fix my computer or printer when it annoyingly decided to not to work. And this, the talk about cars. He looked like a little boy in a candy shop.

"How come you never pick me up in it?" I asked, envisioning his wild hair whipping in the wind, his arm resting on the edge of the door.

It took him a moment to answer but finally he shrugged and said, "I don't know. I don't really drive it anymore."

His tone changed slightly, sounding sad so I attempted to veer this back in the right direction. "How did you get it? It looks like it is good condition isn't that rare?" I asked, curious as to how he acquired his many collectables.

He became oddly quiet for a moment, his brow furrowing slightly at the question. I couldn't imagine why since it should easy to answer. "I've had it for sometime. Taking care of cars in our family is not really an issue." He said softly.

I laughed a little, looking down at my fingers laced together on my lap. "You couldn't have had it for that long. Contrary to the way you act sometimes, you're not really all that old you know." I said, making a face at him.

He grimaced a bit and studied my face before saying, "It's complicated. We've had it in our family since it was new. It was Carlisle's. He gave it to me, when I was old enough to drive." He looked away at that last part, not meeting my eyes.

I'd wondered before if it upset him to talk about his family. He and Alice seemed close and Jasper as well, but he rarely mentioned any other members of the family. I reached over and placed my hand on his arm, feeling the soft fabric of his suit. "That's really nice. That he did that for you." I told him, gently rubbing his arm a little.

He glanced at my hand from the corner of his eye and mumbled something about, "Yes, it was," and continued to keep his eyes forward. I moved my hand and placed it back in my lap, wondering how he had gone from happily talking about his passion to closing off so quickly.

We spent the rest of the ride quiet, the only sound from the speakers of Edward's classical choice of the day. I thought about how no matter how many steps ahead I took with him I always pushed it too far and we slid back into the same uncomfortable place from before.

Xxx

EPOV

After five days you would think I would be used to it. The trembling, the sobs, the sound of my name as it quivered over her lips. Each time, against my better judgment, I reached out and wiped the tears from her face and brushed my thumb across her thick bottom lip.

The first morning had been by invitation. My being there that is. She had asked me to stay, to keep her company after having her home violated by Victoria. I agreed of course, it was my duty to stay and protect her. After all it was my fault she was in this situation in the first place.

That night she didn't try to hide her fear and it pained me to watch her cry, to worry and spill tears over Victoria and by default, James. I had promised her I would keep her safe and there was no decision I had ever made that I felt more strongly about. She was so tired and sleepy, her eyes barely staying open and when she shifted on the sofa to get more comfortable I saw my shirt under her jacket.

My eyes narrowed and fire licked the back of my throat.

*Mine.*

The thought rumbled in my chest transforming feelings of sympathy to desire as I considered her wearing my shirt again. She was so spirited and independent, and where I would have had emotions of rage weeks before I now was impressed by her tenacity. Following her lead, I decided to push the boundaries a bit and took the opportunity to ask her to call me by my first name. She accepted, happily, and then I did the unthinkable. I moved so close to her and reached out, and tugged ever so gently on her zipper revealing my favorite shirt underneath.

I inhaled her scent, distracted momentarily by the fact she was closer than ever before, our circumstances almost intimate. My need for her blood had subsided a bit. I was desensitizing after spending so much time with her but in this moment I easily could have slipped. The venom filled my mouth as her skin flushed pink and her heartbeat turned erratic.

But my other side prevailed and I choked back the poison and made a joke of it, thinking the whole time how the predator in me felt a small victory anyway. I may not be able to take her as an animal but as a human, a male, she was wearing my clothing, which had its own meaning of dominance.

That night I watched her for hours, her deep sleep eventually turning restless as she twitched and tossed about the couch. I bent over her, wondering if I should wake her, when she sat up, still asleep and called out into the darkness, "Edward?"

I reached out to her and touched her. A blaze of fire ran up my fingertip and I knew I had to leave. Which I did, but, I was back that night, after she and Angela were in bed and I repeated this trend over the next week.

I realized now, after all of these days my watching over her was completely out of control. Since Victoria's break in I couldn't stay away. I wanted to be near her, hear her heartbeat and analyze the words that came from her mind in her sleep. I was so unaccustomed to this type of attraction it had become consuming. In some ways it was the most disturbing thing I had ever done but in others, it was the most normal. After over a hundred years I felt something for someone and it was truly exhilarating.

Of course it was futile, and she could never know. I had already put her life in enough danger as it was. So I took liberties that were inappropriate, and illegal, not to mention possibly bordering on perverted, but I

didn't really care. Because every morning, as dawn broke through her window, I heard her call for me, and it filled my empty heart with a sliver of hope.

So I tempted fate and rubbed her lip, wishing more desperately each day it was my mouth upon hers, and fled before she fully woke up.

Xxx

BPOV

Today was a Volvo day and I was sitting alone in the townhouse completing the jobs left for me by Edward.

He had left early to go into the office, his real office, to take care of some business for the Trust. He seemed so busy already and then you added his obsessive need to drive me to and from work I had no idea how he had any down time. He assured me he was fine so I let it go, just happy to have someone around just in case something happened.

The doorbell rang as I was working on the computer and I disengaged the alarm system to open the door for the post man, who had a thick package I needed to sign for.

After he left I realized the envelope was addressed to Pacific Northwest Trust, with Confidential stamped across the front in bold red letters. Edward usually didn't get paperwork addressed to the Trust here so I took a moment to call his office to find out what I should do.

"Pacific Northwest Trust, Mr. Cullen's office," the voice on the other end of the line said.

"Hi, this is Bella Swan, Mr. Cullen's assistant. I think I have some paperwork at the house that may need to be at the office." I explained and described the envelope to her.

"You're probably right. I can send a courier over to pick it up this afternoon," she told me.

I thought about it for a minute and looked at my watch assessing the time. I needed to pick up Edward's mail and take care of some other errands before he returned anyway so I said, "You know, I'm going out this afternoon anyway, I'll just drop it by then."

I hung up the phone secretly excited to see Edward in his work environment. I'd never seen him with anyone other than his family and I was intrigued to see how he behaved with other people.

An hour later I was pulling Edwards's SUV into the underground parking garage and pulled in one of the spots reserved for guests of PNT. Edward had given me permission to drive his cars while he was out since I didn't have my own. I wasn't entirely comfortable behind the wheel of his super expensive, top of the line cars but I really had no other choice. I walked by the Volvo, parked in the space closest to the elevator, and I quickly pushed the button once I reached the doors. The shadowy darkness of the garage was making me uncomfortable but before the panic could fully take over the doors slid open and I stepped inside.

I looked at my reflection in the mirrored elevator doors as I rode to the top floor to the PNT offices. I was wearing cream colored capris, with a royal blue v-neck, cap sleeved shirt. I had on brown clogs and my hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail at the nape of my neck. I was probably underdressed for his office but since I was only dropping off the package I figured it wouldn't be a problem.

The elevator chimed and on the other side of the doors was a beautiful, open reception area. The floors, hardwood, were a deep reddish brown, and the walls were adorned with beautiful artwork. One wall was solid glass, obviously tinted to keep the glare out. There was a magnificent view of the city that stretched all the way to the water. The space had a very open floor plan with offices divided by large glass walls, so each employee was visible to the reception area. There were large vases of yellow and white flowers brightening the open space, and filling the room with a fragrant light, soapy smelling scent.

I walked in clutching the package and stopped at the curved front desk occupied by an attractive woman in her early sixties or so. She had on tortoise shell half glasses and her hair was grayish blonde, elegantly styled. Busy on the phone she gestured for me to sit and wait until she was done. I found a chair by the windows and I scanned the room, my eyes eventually falling on Edward, in a large office, sitting at his desk.

He was wearing the suit she had seen him in that morning, his tie still perfect, his shirt crisp. His face was smooth and he had a professional air about him but as he bent over, writing with nimble fingers, I realized he looked so young, like a boy sitting at his father's desk.

A young, attractive man in a suit and tie approached his office. I watched as he knocked gently on Edward's door. Without looking up Edward waved him in and the man tentatively walked towards him, stopping several feet away from the desk. Their interaction was fascinating and I was completely absorbed watching them. Edward never looked up but continued to scribble on the paper in front of him, even at one point lifting his hand and retrieving a folder from his employee. It was almost as though he was able to anticipate his moves without seeing them.

I considered this for a moment, thinking of the times Edward seemed to appear from nowhere or had startled me. I always thought it was my clumsiness or unobservant behavior but watching him here made me realize this was not the case. I had no clue though how he did it but he seemed to have some awareness about him. I studied the two men in the office, Edward calm and nonchalant, the other shifting on his feet, clasping and unclasping his hands nervously. After a second, Edward must have dismissed him and he left the office, quickly and looking a little distressed.

"Can I help you?" I heard and pulled my attention away from Edward and looked at the receptionist.

I stood up and walked over to her desk, "Yes, I'm Bella Swan. I called earlier about the package for Edward."

She looked at me quizzically glanced at me over her glasses, "Edward?"

I nodded holding the package out to her. I looked in his direction and found him staring back at me, the corner of his mouth barely turned upward. Before I could smile in return his eyes shifted causing his face to become neutral. I followed his gaze and realized he was looking at the receptionist who was watching both of us intently.

"Umm...Mr. Cullen? I'm his personal assistant." I responded under her scrutiny.

"Of course, I was just taken back by the familiarity." She said, again looking at me with too much concentration.

I peeked at Edward from the corner of my eye and he hadn't moved. He was simply watching me talk to his receptionist, with a concentrated look on his face. I rolled my eyes at him and lifted my hand to wave, breaking his focus and he awkwardly waved back.

His eyes darted around once more and I realized that a small group of office workers had paused and were attempting to discretely watch Edward and I interact through his glass wall. Decidedly he picked up his phone and pressed a button, at that moment the reception phone rang and she picked it up.

Startled by the noise I turned towards the sound and the woman, surprise in her eyes said, "Mr. Cullen would like for me to show you to his office."

Xxx

EPOV

Working as the Chief Executive Officer of a large financial trust was a large undertaking. For a human, that is. For a vampire posing as a human it was just a necessity. I enjoyed it to a degree; it was definitely better than being in high school indefinitely. My job consisted primarily of meetings and paperwork, reviewing numbers and making sure the funds we had available for different programs were being distributed

correctly. All of these were things I could do very quickly, a month's worth of work in a day or two. But, in an effort to appear normal, I had to pace myself and maintain a public image not to arouse suspicion.

I had assembled a very capable team of employees. They all had extensive background checks, most were young, hard workers, looking for a rung on the corporate ladder. I paid them well to work for me for several years and then I encouraged them to look to bigger and better things. They were compensated well for their discretion and professionalism and things generally went well.

The human workers were all the same to me, all part of the façade to protect my other life, my *real* life. I tuned them out most of the time, although I knew they thought I was odd but they could chalk my differences up to being eccentric, wealthy or a genius. Occasionally I plucked words from their minds like, antisocial, egotistical, self-righteous, or idiot savant, but nothing truly harmful and all of these things were better than the truth. In the end, it didn't matter to me as long as they performed well and minded their own business.

There were other thoughts, of course, from my female employees. When meeting me they were all in awe of my physical form. They whispered to one another in the break room, made pointed gestures or comments when my back was turned. I made a habit to ignore them all and none of them ever pushed it too far either being intimidated professionally or sensing the danger underneath my attractive exterior. I can confess that Isabella isn't the first one to question my sexuality but she is the first to say it to my face, which of course only endeared her to me further.

If one was to ask an employee about their boss, Edward Cullen, they would have nothing interesting to say other than he is a dedicated, hard worker and committed to PNT. I gave them little to go on and they expected nothing more. It was the perfect relationship.

On this day, like all others at PNT, I was alone in my office working on some papers, waiting for a meeting later in the afternoon. The office is quiet, a peaceful environment designed by Esme years ago. We had decided the open floor plan, bright yet tinted windows, to keep the sunlight from betraying me, and visible offices spaces would minimize secrets and keep questions at bay. So far it had worked very well.

I should have known the minute she stepped off the elevator. I detected her heartbeat but determined I was imagining things, wishfully thinking. I pushed the pulsing beat down but then I heard it, her name, and her voice filling the regularly dull atmosphere with music.

My first reaction was fear, concern for her being here, if she was in some kind of trouble. But her heartbeat was calm and her expression normal so everything must be fine. Once that passed I realized with a sense of terror that my carefully crafted worlds were colliding. Everything at PNT was in order. My staff, my routine, every little thing had its place here just like it did in my home. But now, Isabella, who had entrenched herself into my other life was now here and I wasn't sure how to handle it.

I looked at her just as she was turning to me and for a moment our eyes met. Brief but electric, I lost my composure for sure. I wasn't the only one who'd noticed, my receptionist, Joyce, was watching us, shifting her eyes back and forth. She commented on Isabella's familiarity with me, by using my first name. Joyce was more observant than I gave her credit for. I shouldn't be surprised. She was the oldest employee I had, but I needed someone I could fully trust to work close to me in the office. Joyce need the job and was old enough not to be interested in me romantically. Too many young women had watched fanciful movies where the powerful executive swept the secretary off their feet, whisking them away to a life of luxury and love. I scoffed at the thought and was pleased that with Joyce this was not a concern.

Isabella shrugged it off, making a face and waved at me, forcing me to respond the same. I groaned internally at the realization this woman compelled my human nature at all times. A hand wave to some was second nature but to me it was a break in pattern. Which normally would have set me on edge, but with her it was all I could do not to burst through the glass wall to stand by her side.

I lifted the phone handle and called Joyce's desk and when she answered I said, "Joyce, please send Ms. Swan into my office." Because she was here and there was nothing more that I wanted than to be with her, even just for a moment.

I opened the door and ushered her in offering her a seat and asked, "Are you okay? Nothing happened, did it?"

Confusion filled her face for a moment and she shook her head, "No, everything is fine. Something was delivered to the house by mistake so I brought it in. I didn't mean to worry you."

I looked at her sitting across from me, ignoring the sly looks from the employees who suddenly became very interested in the area near my office, and frowned, "We have couriers, you know, you didn't have to come down here."

She smiled and said, "I didn't mind. I was out anyway. Plus, I wanted to see where you worked. It is an amazing office, beautiful, but I guess I wouldn't expect less."

The room was filled with her glorious aroma. I had the entire office filled with flowers, freesia, to replicate her scent. I told myself I was doing it to desensitize myself but it was really so I could surround myself with something that reminded me of her. But now, with her actually in my office, I realized nothing compared to the real thing.

I sucked back the venom, less this time, and nodded thanks. I was speechless and completely out of my element. Talking to her in my home or in the car was one thing but having her here in my office, in front of other people was more than overwhelming. I was very aware of how close I had let her get to me compared to anyone else.

"I had to drive your car to get here. Are you sure you're okay with that?" she asked, biting her lower lip hesitantly.

My eyes were drawn to her lip, to her teeth, but I forced myself to respond, "No, I told you that I would rather you be safe driving back and forth to work with me." I made a small face at her, "Plus, you know how I feel about your car. I'm not convinced it's reliable."

She twisted her face a bit and sat up a little straighter before saying, "My car is perfectly fine. Not all of us can afford to drive around in yet to be released extravagant automobiles."

I fought back a smile. I had found I really liked it when she was upset. Her face flushed and her heart beat quicker, she was almost irresistible. I caught myself provoking her on more than one occasion just to see what reaction I would get. So far, she had yet to let me down.

I watched as recognition registered in her eyes, aware now that I was picking on her, and she puffed her cheeks and lips out in a pout. I smirked back, leaning my elbows on my desk.

*Wow. Look at that. I told Nancy he wasn't gay....what I would give to have him look at me that way....*

This thought slipped through my consciousness from an employee in the outer office who had a full view of our interaction. I searched through her mind quickly, settling on what she could see with her own eyes.

In her mind, Isabella and I were both leaning towards one another, like two magnets, inching closer and closer. The smiles on our faces and the comfort in our body language was apparent.

*I don't care what anyone says that girl is more than a personal assistant for sure...*

She was right, I knew this. Somewhere along the line, Isabella and I had passed the position of employee to employer and had moved somewhere else. I settled into my seat, intentionally ignoring the outside voices and focused all of my attention on the beautiful woman in front of me. I listened to her questions and

thoughts, answering where appropriate and wondered, exactly where it was that our relationship had moved and what was I going to do about it.



## Chapter Fourteen

BPOV

I was sitting in the SUV. Causal day of course. Edward was next to me in jeans and one of his t-shirts, Ben Folds, and a lightweight jacket. The funny thing about Edward was that although he was so private, so quiet, his behaviors were predictable, which made me often feel a false sense of familiarity.

We were quiet in the car, occasionally discussing some work that he needed me to do at his house. During one of the quiet spells his phone vibrated in a shelf by the stereo. He glanced at it quickly and pressed the mute button, ignoring the call.

He looked over at me and shrugged. I returned his gesture with a smile and said, "What are you working on today?"

Shifting his eyes to the road he answered, "I have some research to do. I'm a little behind on all the newspapers you have been bringing home for me and I need to go through some things. So I'll probably be locked in my study all day."

I studied the side of his face. His jaw was long and angular. I was completely fascinated by the fact his jaw and face had perfect symmetry. His cheeks were smooth and I noted he never looked like he needed to shave regardless of the time of day. Of course knowing Edward he probably shaved and showered often to keep germs at bay.

His phone vibrated and he clicked it off again, not even bothering to look at the number.

Although I didn't expect an answer I quirked an eyebrow at him in question, wondering who he was avoiding.

Seeing my expression he sighed and said, "It's my family."

I furrowed my brow at little trying to follow his thought. "And you don't want to talk to them." I stated because that much was obvious.

He hesitated, clenching and unclenching his grip on the steering wheel. "No, not now," he said vaguely.

I kept my mouth shut, not pushing further because I was still testing my limits. I found that Edward was more likely to share information about himself if you just listened, rather than if you pushed.

His mouth opened and shut once or twice and as he began to speak his phone vibrated once more. We both looked down at the phone and he groaned a bit, before flipping it open and pressing the receive button.

Through gritted teeth he said into the phone, "Hi."

Suddenly the car became very small and I attempted to make myself busy for a moment by reaching into my bag and pretending to look for something. This lasted about one minute before I realized I had eight pens from my desk stashed in my purse.

He listened for a moment to the swift moving voice on the other end and said, "No."



He managed, quite amazingly, to keep one hand on the wheel and the other on the phone yet still have that hand pinching the bridge of his nose while he listened to the voice on the other end.

I was marveling at his impressive motor skills when I heard him say in an exasperated tone, "No. You know that is not acceptable."

Running his hand from his nose up through his hair he glanced towards me quickly and said, "Fine. I'll be there in a couple of hours." He closed the phone and placed it back in the cubby.

The car was silent and tense after that. Edward turned up the music and I stared out the window wondering if I had forced that issue. I felt like he answered the phone because of me and now it appeared he had to do something he didn't want to. I didn't ask because again it just wasn't my place to ask.

He cleared his throat and said, "So, I won't be home today after all. Obviously."

I nodded, understanding this from his side of the phone call. I gave him a weak smile and said, "I'm sorry. You knew better than to answer the call and you only answered because of me."

His knuckles flexed white on the wheel and he said, "No. Not really. I was avoiding the inevitable. It was only a matter of time."

I didn't understand his words but it was all he gave me so I let it go. We approached his neighborhood and he drove down the back alley to his garage, his hand swiftly reaching up to press the garage door opener. He pulled in but didn't close it behind him as I expected. He walked me into the kitchen and as I put away my lunch, leaning into the refrigerator.

"Isabella," He said, and I turned towards him. "I left the list on your desk. But just so you know, Alice will be here in forty-five minutes. You're welcome to ignore her." He said with a tense smile.

I studied his face. He looked defeated and tired, two things I'd never noticed on him before. I took a step towards him and asked, "Is it really that bad? Going home?"

He closed the distance, marginally, but it was there. We stood across from one another and I searched for his eyes, bending over a little, since they were cast down. I waited and when he finally met my own they looked darker, stressed, yet they still held an odd allure for me. When he spoke, it came out unwavering. "Going home isn't bad Isabella. Going home, for me, is simply hard."

With that he nodded and turned on his heel leaving me, in the wake of his distinct scent, filled once again with more questions than answers.

Xxx

Alice showed up thirty minutes later with a hot cup of coffee from my favorite café. She let herself in the back door, having both a key and a garage door opener.

"That was fast," I said, taking a sip of the steaming drink, "Edward said forty five minutes, *and* you stopped to get this."

She smiled at me, "I may have left a little earlier than he thought."

Leaning back on the counter I eyed her suspiciously and asked, "So you knew he would go home before he did?"

Alice shrugged, "Edward is a bit predictable," I nodded at this, having had the same thought earlier. She continued, "I knew Carlisle was calling him today so I decided to go ahead and come down. Edward can say no to me or Emmett but not to Carlisle," she grinned. "Plus, I'm rarely wrong about these kinds of things, not to mention I wanted to come see you anyway."

I smiled at this idea, the one that Alice wanted to be my friend and I wanted to be her friend too. I told her I had some work to do at my desk and to my dismay she said she needed to tackle Edward's closet. This idea made me uncomfortable at best.

"Really? I don't know Alice. He is going to be really pissed at me if he comes home and you messed with his stuff." I told her, imagining looking at his angry, creased face after I already made him cave to the phone call this morning.

"Bella, Edward is my brother and he loves me. And I am in charge of his wardrobe. Has he not told you this?" She said, tilting her head a little in question. Her hips swayed a little, making her sundress shift side to side.

I stared her down, arms crossed and everything, in an attempt to stop this before it got too far. It was futile of course, since she was all tiny and bouncing, her eyes twinkling with glints of gold, making me want to do whatever she asked.

I sighed and said, "Fine. But you're taking the blame for it. Understand?" She nodded enthusiastically and bolted up the stairs.

An hour later we were knee deep in all the clothing Alice deemed 'unacceptable' and were now sorting them into 'classics' which we would put in storage and 'never again' which would get donated to the luckiest Goodwill store in Washington.

I looked over at Alice who was meticulously removing and sorting the photos in the wardrobe books. She was very much like Edward, graceful hands, quick movements. It was surprising they were not blood related. Breaking the quiet I said, "Edward told me about you all being adopted by your parents. It sounds nice." I groaned internally at this lame comment because being adopted and in foster care I'm sure was anything but nice.

Alice never stopped her task but said, "Yes. We were all really lucky. Carlisle and Esme were really wonderful to take us in. But you know, they understand. They were both alone at one point as well."

I shook my head, "No. He didn't tell me that. He only told me how you and Jasper were lucky to have found one another and your other brother and sister too. That after the difficulties you had faced it was nice to find someone who understood." I was pushing it I was sure. But I had so many questions. Questions Edward would never answer.

She paused physically and verbally for a moment, seeming to consider her next comment carefully. I looked down at the shirt I was folding, taking care to keep the edges clean even though it was going in the charity box. I kept my eyes down as I heard Alice begin to speak, letting her choose if she wanted to share whatever it was on her mind, "When Carlisle found each of us we were all damaged in our own ways. Each of us had suffered in our earlier lives. Abandoned, abused or orphaned. Carlisle showed us a new way of life. It has bonded us together in ways you couldn't understand."

I looked up at her and sat on my heels. I gave her a reassuring smile which she returned. Taking a deep breath I said, "Can I ask a question about Edward?"

"Yes. You can ask, although I can't promise to answer." She answered carefully.

I picked up another shirt and smoothed it on the floor, pushing out the creases. Alice waited patiently as I formed my question. "If you all are so close then why does he spend so much time avoiding you? I know you're aware he dodges your calls and hesitates to have you visit. I've only met you and Jasper. No one else has come to the house."

She nodded and said, "Yes we know he avoids us. Edward had to make some difficult choices in his life in order to survive. It is hard on him to be around us, all married and together. He's never had that. He loves us. But he can't live with us."

I furrowed my brow a little as her words sunk in, "What do you mean, he's never had that?"

She grimaced a bit and took a deep breath, "Look, he will kill me if he knows I told you, and he will probably find out as secrets are nonexistent in our family." I felt my eyes go wide wondering if I should hear what she was preparing to tell me but not having the guts to tell her no. I wanted to hear it.

"After Edward's parents died relationships became very hard for him. He has never truly connected with anyone outside our family although he has attempted to. After being unsuccessful with outside relationships he carefully orchestrated his life to keep people away. He has been afraid to open himself up to the possibilities of what *could* be."

Intrigued I said, "But Alice, he is really great. I know at first he is all hostile and scary but once you get past it he is really quite charming." I noticed her eyebrow rose slightly at that comment so I quickly added, "You know, some guy is really going to be lucky to have him one day."

I stood up and took some empty hanger back to the racks to use later. My back was to Alice and I knew my face was bright red. I hated to admit it but I was finding myself more and more attracted to Edward everyday, which was wrong on so many levels. The greatest was the fact he was my boss. Then there was the problem of him being gay. The whole thing made me feel pathetic and embarrassed.

I heard Alice shift behind me, the tension in the cluttered closet escalated from my discomfort. "Bella, I'm going to tell you something because my brother is possibly the most stubborn and disciplined person you will ever meet. He takes everything to the extreme and nothing will ever make him change his mind once he sets it."

I took a deep breath, listening to the clank of metal against metal as I placed the hangers on the rack. I couldn't help but wonder what on earth she could want to tell me and why she felt the need to continue this conversation. Did she know I was attracted to him? This whole situation was horrifying.

I had no choice but to just deny any attraction or feelings for Edward. I would let her say whatever it was she had on her mind and we would laugh at his need for a date with some ridiculously hot guy and we would move on. Bracing myself I turned and found her right behind me looking up into my eyes.

"Bella. There is something about my brother you need to know." She said in a very serious tone. My face was still annoyingly hot but I nodded, encouraging her to continue, "Edward is not gay."

Edward is not gay.

Oh.

I tossed these words around a couple of times as Alice stood in front of me with a mixture of concern and anticipation on her face. It was possible she thought I was having a seizure because I had no idea what to say about the information she had just shared.

Edward is *not* gay.

*Edward* is not gay.

Of course he was.

"Alice, Edward told me he was gay." I corrected.

Both her perfectly arched eyebrows rose and she said, "No. From what I understand you accused him of being gay and he didn't deny it."

I gaped at her and said, "But, what man doesn't deny he's gay if he isn't gay?"

She smirked and laughed, "Welcome to the world of Edward Cullen. Tickets to the freak show are on your left."

I felt my face grow hotter than before and I found myself crossed legged on the ground. When I spoke next it was a tad strangled and embarrassed. "Okay, if he isn't gay. Then what is he because there is something definitely not normal about your brother."

She sat down in front of me and said quietly, "You're right. He's not normal. He is sweet, and a gentleman, and he cares so much about his family to the point it pains him. He works non-stop and takes on more than he should." She paused and looked me straight in the eye and continued, "And he is alone, and lonely and he puts up barriers so he won't get hurt."

I nodded, pretending to understand but not quite sure I knew what she was telling me. She must have sensed this because she said, "Bella, you are the first person in many years who has broken down his shell and even seen there is something behind the exterior."

I swallowed hard and nervously pushed my hair behind my ear, "What does that mean Alice? He's my boss. And yes, I do like him, I really do, but what do you want me to do?"

Leaning close enough to me that I could smell her sweet perfume she said pleaded, "I need you to be his friend. No matter what happens, or what he tells you, or things you may see or hear, just always be his friend."

She was so serious and so entirely desperate that I could do nothing but nod my head and agree. To what I had no idea, but I had apparently just bound myself to Edward and he didn't even know it.

Xxx

EPOV

The grass and rocks crunched under the wheels of my car as I drove the familiar path towards my family home. As I wove through the woods I attempted to collect my thoughts before I saw the others.

I'd moved away from the family almost twenty years earlier. I had been desperate, depressed, angry and lost. It been coming for sometime and although I was able to hide it from most of the family, eventually a series of events forced me from the home and into the real world on my own. At first I traveled, visiting the places I had been before: Chicago, Rochester, New York, New Orleans, various places in Europe and Asia. It was in these anonymous cities that I began my quiet vigilante work. But this only made me detach more and I realized after living with a coven for so long I was actually used to companionship more than I would have thought.

So I approached Carlisle, who was living with the family in Denali, and asked for his advice and blessing to live near, but not with the family. He agreed wholeheartedly, and when I read his mind it was clear he would do anything I wanted as long as it made me happy.

Which only made it harder, but I was resolved.

The last move the family made was back to Forks, and at that time I moved to Seattle, which really wasn't far at all, and began living my separate life. I laid the ground rules quickly. No unannounced visits, no peeking into my future. They could call and I could visit or ask them to come to me if I wanted but for a long time I didn't. I just needed time alone.

The first couple of years in Seattle proved difficult for both Alice and Esme. They tended to dote and hover about me as though I was a child. I was firm, even though it pained me as well, and we eventually fell into a comfortable existence.

Jasper understood, having lived on his own for many years, and he helped Alice transition. My 'older' brother Emmett struggled with my choice but was supportive, as he always was. He just missed me. Rose, of course, wasn't happy with my decision but that was no surprise. To her it was one more rejection,

evidence that she wasn't good enough for me, but this was far from the truth. I wasn't good enough for them.

Twenty years, countless false documents, and several career changes later, I had evolved into a noted CEO during the daytime with a side job helping those in need and keeping the monsters at bay. I never would have predicted this path. Alice probably would have if I had let her but I actually enjoyed the spontaneity of actually living life.

I pulled my car up to the front of the house and realized it was unrealistic to think things could continue with such ease. Because until recently everything was smooth, in place and under control.

Until Bella Swan entered our lives and James got sloppy. Things were getting complicated. Fast.

Which was why I had to come home to Forks and to my family.

This was no longer just about me.

Xxx

I sat across from Carlisle in his study, completely still, communicating the way we had for many years.

*So this vampire, James, he knows all about our family and you in particular?*

I nodded.

*He was tracking you, while you were tracking him.*

"No, apparently he was following me for some time before I noticed him at all."

We were quiet for a while as Carlisle wrapped his head around the information. James concerned him for several reasons. One was clearly my safety and that of the family. The other was his actions, the murders and possible abductions.

*In the middle of your confrontation he claimed you have something of his?*

Again I confirmed this with a quick nod.

He leaned back in his seat, elbow on the arm of the chair, and placed his chin in his hand. His blonde hair was the same as it had been three hundred years earlier and I noted his eyes were very gold, which meant he had just eaten. Carlisle never took chances with his hunger since he worked at the hospital. He and I were similar in the fact we pushed ourselves, but we went about it in different ways. He strived to be better. I only strived to be stronger.

*What do you think this 'thing' is?*

I shrugged and said, "I have no idea. When he said it he flashed on a memory of long rows of beds, the lighting was horrible. The whole thing felt very institutional."

*But you don't think it's Bella, the thing you have that he wants?*

Ahhh...there we have it. Good job Carlisle, slipping it in when I wasn't expecting it.

I gave him a pointed look and said, "No. Isabella, unfortunately, is icing on the cake."

I waited for the next wave of questions, not prepared in anyway to answer them.

*As I'm sure you know, Alice has told us about Bella.*

I rolled my eyes and said, "I'm sure she did. I'm also sure it has caused a bit of amusement around here."

He gave me a guilty grin and said out loud, "Maybe a little, but that has not been the main topic concerning her."

I raised my eyebrows at him waiting for him to explain further.

*Some of us were wondering how much she knew. And exactly what are your intentions?*

I knew he hated asking this but it was necessary. I would have demanded it as well, but it didn't keep the rage from boiling inside. I knew they would want to take her from me. To keep her from me. There was no way I was letting this happen.

"She knows nothing. Not yet, but with the James situation it is hard. I hate lying to her." I said, unsure if I should reveal myself to him.

This time he raised his brow at me and said, "Your intentions, Edward. What are they?"

I paused and looked around the room. I saw the collections of books, the paintings on the wall, some hundreds of years old. I was able to see myself in here, the way I collected the same things, trying to remember my place in this world. Something that proved I was *here*. Carlisle had his medicine, a lifetime of work, several lifetimes. I had only just begun to make my mark. But the difference between us was even deeper. He had Esme. He had found her when she was human and years later had the opportunity to change her. He knew she was the one even before she was available to him.

Not only did Carlisle save Esme after she flung herself from the cliff in desperation. She in turn saved him. She showed him not only support and companionship, but she gave him love. The most human of all emotions.

I braced myself, knowing I could lie to the others and lie to myself but never Carlisle. I looked at him, eye to golden eye, companions for nearly a hundred years, and said the only thing I could.

"I'm not sure how but I intend to make her mine"



## Chapter Fifteen

EPOV

I walked down the wide stairway from the second floor down to the main level of the house in Forks. The house was quiet although Carlisle was still upstairs and I knew Emmett and Jasper were engaged in a chess game in the living room. I took some time to wander the house, stopping eventually in the music room, where the sleek, black piano was centered in the room.

I looked at it for a long time, drawn for the first time in many years, my fingers actually itching to play. I shoved them in my pants pockets and glanced around the room, at the large windows and open rooms feeling exposed.

*You know, she polishes it every week and tunes it once a month just in case...*

I didn't respond. I couldn't. I couldn't be what they wanted me to be.

An image of Isabella flashed before my eyes and my fingers twitched again, aching to run over the keys. I wondered if I couldn't be what they wanted me to be, could I be what she needed me to be?

*How are you doing it? How do you resist?*

I shrugged and said, "How did Rose resist killing you when she brought you to Carlisle?"

Emmett was silent, his mind wrapping around my words.

Finally he said, "But she's human Edward, how does that even work?" *Isn't it unnatural? I've never desired a human for than more food.*

"But that's the thing. You and Esme were both human when you were found. Yet they were drawn to you anyway and saved you." I justified.

*But this girl, she's not dying. She doesn't need saving.*

I looked at Emmett now, hulking in size, simple in thought, living in a world of black and white. "True. But the only reason she is alive now is because of me. And I promised her I would keep her safe. Which trust me, is almost a full time job." I said grimacing.

Emmett's eyes narrowed and a mischievous grin slid across his face, "So, Jasper says she's pretty. That helps, huh, with the not killing?"

I glared at him for a second and he spoke again thoughtfully. "I guess this explains a lot though," he said and I quirked an eyebrow in question, leery of where this was going.

He continued, "I mean, if you were waiting all these years for a human to fall for then the whole Tanya situation finally makes much more sense."

My hands fisted at my side, yet I tried to remain calm. Emmett was venturing into a deadly area as far as I was concerned.

And he knew it.

With a final smirk he said, with vampire speed, "Because if you were looking for a 'Damsel in Distress', like your new little girlfriend, no wonder that whole thing blew up. Tanya is no damsel, well I wouldn't know of course, but..."

And he was gone, the back door slamming before I reached it, Emmett already deep in the woods behind the house as I reached the edge of the clearing, hot on his trail.

Xxx

Hours later I tried to ignore Jasper as he fiddled with the knobs and buttons on my car stereo. He was riding back to the city with me so he could meet up with Alice. I wished I was alone so I could process the afternoon but I wasn't so lucky. He was currently trying to figure out how to open the conversation with me about my meeting with Carlisle. He mentally ran through a variety of questions and I finally broke down and asked him, "What do you want to know, Jasper?"

He smiled to let me know I fell right into his trap and said, "What did Carlisle say?"

I looked at him from the corner of my eye and ignored the image of Isabella in his mind which was the real question he had. "He said we were going to have to be very careful with this James situation."

I proceeded to tell Jasper that Carlisle and I had discussed the Volturi and my agreement with them. They were fully aware of my activities, including the vigilantism and safe keeping. As long as I kept a low profile they didn't really care what I was doing and even encouraged it somewhat since our ideas of peacekeeping were similar.

Unfortunately, James wasn't low profile. Carlisle suggested I contact them as soon as possible to make sure the lines of communication were clear and to let them know we had things under control. Carlisle was still on good terms with his friends in Italy and I had promised to maintain this relationship.

"You haven't heard anything else from James though right?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, things have been really quiet. I haven't heard of any murders or abductions. The police are still completely confused and are clearly trying to keep the information out of the press because there has been little or nothing reported lately."

"But they haven't gone to Bella's again?" He asked and again I shook my head.

Jasper nodded in approval and asked me how patrolling was going. I had been completely slack on this and I suspected he felt my guilt. Because of this I was forced to admit to him I had been spending my evenings at Isabella's.

Feeling defensive I said, "She's been having nightmares and I felt the need to stay close." The look on his face told me he wasn't buying my excuse.

I ignored him for a while after that until his thoughts became louder and sharper.

*How are you going to handle this? I mean, Edward, she thinks you're gay. And even if she doesn't, you're a vampire. A vampire. She's pretty cool but no one is that cool...*

I snapped my head towards him, "What do you mean even if she doesn't?"

*Look you're the one who let Alice spend the day with her. Who knows what she said...and you know, you don't have forever...*

I narrowed my eyes at the windshield thinking about this. He was right. Our time in Washington was coming to a close. It had nothing to do with Isabella, it was just the reality of our lifestyle. I had one shot with this amazing woman and I think I had decided to take it. Unfortunately, I was used to living a year like it was one day and I no longer had that freedom. If I was going to do this I had to do it now. Which meant that little games like me being gay had to stop. But, as much as I wanted Isabella to know the truth, that story was just a distraction from the larger issue at hand.

I meant what I said to Carlisle. The words came out of my mouth before I even knew they had formed. I *did* intend to make her mine. The decision had been made with or without my consent. I no longer really had control over it. It didn't hurt that lately I'd wondered if she was having similar feelings to mine. I noticed her questions and gestures were becoming more familiar. I had such little experience with this, though, and I wasn't sure if she was comfortable with me because I was 'safe' or if she was just comfortable with *me*. Of course if I could read her mind like every other freaking member of the human race I would know what she thought.

What I did know was that as long as she believed I was out of her reach, she stayed out of mine. But lately her being out of my reach because of a lie just wasn't enough anymore. It was getting harder and harder to say away from her. And I hated lying. About everything, all the time.

But Jasper was right so I said in all seriousness, "What am I supposed to do Jasper, come out and say, "By the way, I'm not gay?" I continued my false conversation. "And Isabella, you know all that weird shit I do? It's not because I'm gay it's because I'm a vampire. Apparently the traits are easily confused..."

I groaned and rubbed my head, glancing over at Jasper whose attempts at concealing his laughter were weak.

"If it were you, what would you do?" I asked him, completely serious.

Jasper propped his elbow on the window of the car and leaned into his hand. "What would I do? Well, I would probably have eaten her weeks ago."

A growl rumbled protectively in my chest at the thought, but I knew he was telling the truth.

"But," he continued, "honestly Edward, you are the only one of us who would ever get in a situation like this in the first place. You are going to have to figure this one out on your own."



He was sincere in his thoughts, which was more than I expected. Jasper had a long history of violence and destruction and it would have been easy for him to disapprove.

He was right. I had to figure out what I wanted and if it was even possible for her to want the same things.

Xxx

BPOV

After work Alice dropped me off and I went to the kitchen to find some dinner. Angela was out with Ben of course. They were getting quite serious and he had been over quite a bit lately since Angela didn't like to leave me alone. It was Friday night and I insisted they go out and I was actually looking forward to just relaxing and watching some TV alone. I had been trying to process all the information Alice shared with me today at work and I was still a little stunned that Edward wasn't gay. I believed her because she seemed so sincere but really I wondered what I had gotten myself into with this family.

Alice's comment about being Edward's friend no matter what I learned about him was totally cryptic. I wanted to be there for him and help him though what ever it was that haunted him. But at some point he was going to have to open up to me and let me in. He had already proven he could be a good friend to me and I really wanted to do the same for him.

I pushed these thoughts aside as I opened the refrigerator looking for something to eat. I eyed the pathetic choices inside and determined that the leftover vegetarian chili was not appealing. Frustrated that I had neglected to go to the store recently, I began digging through the kitchen drawer for the takeout menus.

Five minutes later I was scrolling through the numbers on my phone looking for my favorite Thai restaurant when I heard a sharp knock on the door. I checked the spy hole and once again was accosted by the sight of my favorite jaw line. Placing my hand on the knob I took a deep breath and tried to control the ridiculous grin on my face. I was happy to see Edward, especially since he was gone all day and I missed riding home with him. The problem was my grin was a little more enthusiastic than necessary and the growing feeling in the pit of my stomach was completely inappropriate.

I unlatched all the locks, knowing Edward would be listening to make sure I had the door secure. That was a conversation I did *not* want to have again. When I finally had the door open he was waiting on the other side with a terribly sheepish look on his face and two bags of Thai food from the very restaurant I was getting ready to call.

"Hi," I said flashing him a quick, controlled smile.

He gave me a killer one back that ignited the spark in my stomach. "I thought you may want some company and I brought dinner. You like Thai, right?" He asked and held the two bags up as evidence.

Incredulous, I nodded my head at him as he walked past me into the apartment and I relocked the door. He put the bags down on the table and began gracefully removing containers and placing them on the table.

I watched as he pulled out spring rolls, sticky rice, coconut soup and my favorite tofu and vegetable curry dish. I placed my hands on my hips and narrowed my eyes at the scene unfolding in front of me.

He glanced up and noticed my demeanor and with wide topaz eyes said, "What? Is something wrong?"

I felt my lips twist up and my brow furrow trying to figure out exactly how to approach this. "Edward, what made you decide to bring Thai for dinner?"

He was busy opening lids but his hands stopped for a brief moment before continuing. "I thought you would like it, I know you don't eat meat so I thought this would be a good choice."

I considered this for a second but wasn't deterred, "Did you know this is my favorite restaurant?"

He looked up, his ever smooth face completely innocent, "Is it?"

I rolled my eyes, pulling my hands from my hips and wrapped them around my chest defensively. "Yes it is. And this happens to be all my favorite food."

He turned now to face me and gave me another fabulous smile, "Really? I guessed."

I glared at him, "You guessed and happened to bring exactly what I was getting ready to order from my favorite restaurant? You're good Edward but not that good."

He leaned back on the counter between my kitchen and dining area and crossed his arms back, looking ridiculously attractive. Calmly he said, "You're wrong. I am that good."

I gaped at the smirk lingering across the corners of his mouth.

"Really?" I challenged.

"Really." He accepted.

I waited for him to explain, because he was going to.

He pulled a chair out from the table and gestured for me to sit in it. I did and he pulled out his own and sat down across from me. The spices and heat from the food tickled my nose and were making my mouth water. He must have noticed because he said, "Go ahead and eat. I'll explain."

I pulled out a plastic fork and spoon out of the wrapper and took a tentative sip of the steaming hot soup. It was delicious. I raised an eyebrow at him to proceed.

"First Bella, you are more transparent than you think. You've brought leftovers from this restaurant more than once to work."

I grimaced knowing this was true. Stupid observant boss. It made me wonder for a moment what else he had noticed.

"That doesn't explain you bringing it here tonight, just as I was going to call," I retorted.

He rolled his eyes at me this time and said, "Alice called and said she had just dropped you off so I knew you were home and hadn't eaten."

He hesitated at the end a bit and I said, "And..."

His eyes flicked to the table, the smirk gone a bit and the sheepish one returned, "And I checked your refrigerator this morning while you were getting your raincoat. I knew you had nothing to cook."

I recalled opening the door this morning and greeting Edward. He suggested I get my raincoat saying the news predicted rain. I went back to my room to get it, leaving him in the doorway, and came back moments later with him in the same spot. Edward was either really fast or really lying. I wasn't sure which one yet.

I pondered these things for a minute dipping my spring roll in sauce and taking a bite. The sauce was thick and tangy, and a glob of it dripped down my hand as I picked it up. I noticed Edward watching me eat, his eyes shifting to the mess on my hand. Knowing he was such a clean freak I decided to push his buttons a bit since we were in my house and on my time.

I put my elbow on the table and twisted my arm so I could see the sauce slowly dripping down my arm. I looked at Edward carefully and said, "Okay. But stop checking my refrigerator. It's creepy and it's not like you eat anything anyway." Before he could respond I leaned towards my hand, never taking my eyes off his, and stuck my tongue out, taking a long swipe at the sauce.

I expected him to be repulsed. Perhaps he would scrunch up his face in revulsion. I thought it was possible he would gag, run to the bathroom and return with soap, antiseptic or bleach.

He did none of those things.

Instead I watched him swallow hard and lick his lips.

Busted.

Alice was right. He wasn't gay.

Slowly I pushed my chair back and walked into the kitchen, and turned on the faucet. I pumped some soap into my palm and washed the remaining sauce off my arm, all while keeping my back to him. I decided I was going to confront him. I was just going to come out and ask him if he was or wasn't gay. I had to clear the air, especially now.

I opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of wine. There was no way I was doing this with out assistance. Pouring myself a generous glass I walked back to my seat where Edward was sitting exactly as I left him.

He eyed the glass and the change in my demeanor and said, "Okay. I won't go in your refrigerator anymore. Not unless you ask," He qualified. and then attempted to change the conversation, "How was your day? Alice said she kept you busy. What did you do?"

I took another bite of my dinner, chewing slowing and plotting my words carefully. "It was a good day. Alice and I had fun. By the way, she is completely responsible for your closet. I was an innocent bystander."

"I can imagine," he muttered loud enough for me to hear and said, "Fair enough. I am aware that you can't stop Alice from doing whatever she has her mind set on."

I nodded and smiled, working up the courage to ask my question. I speared a chunk of tofu on my fork and looked up at him, and said innocently, "You know Edward. Alice was telling me about your family today and some things about you. She made me realize you and I may have confused some information awhile back."

Interest flickered though his eyes and he cocked his head slightly, "What do you mean?"

"Well, and I apologize for talking to her about your personal life, but I wondered why someone as successful and attractive and caring as you are, wasn't in a relationship." I paused and took a long sip from my glass, letting the moment grow. "I also asked her if perhaps you would be open to me setting you up with one of my friends. He's fantastic." I flashed him a conspiratorial grin.

Edward was completely still across from me. Everything about him, from his hair to his hands to his feet, appeared frozen. I sat back in my chair, holding my glass, rocking my wrist back and forth to let the liquid swirl around in a circle. I was completely freaking out inside. I had no idea why I felt the need to push this man to his limits but I did and I was.

There was a battle raging behind his eyes. I watched it unfold like a bad TV movie. He was working out his lie in front of me and for that I was going to take him down.

"That is really nice of you, but I don't think I have the time for a relationship right now," he said convincingly. If I didn't know better I would've believed it. I needed to file this fact away for the future. Edward Cullen is a possible con man and has no problem lying right to my face.

I met his deceitful eyes and decided to call him out. "Edward, I know you're not gay. Alice told me."

He gaped. Only for a second but I saw it.

Fueled by anger and the fact I had caught him I shouted, "What the fuck Edward? You're not gay? Who says they're gay when it's not true?"

Not waiting for an answer, I downed the rest of my wine and slammed the glass on the table, thankful it didn't break. I stood up and walked into the living room and settled into the couch, leaning against the side cushions, pulling the blanket draped over the back across my legs and closing my eyes, hoping that when I opened them he would be gone.

I waited for some time, listening to the quiet of the apartment, thinking about what he had done. I was stunned and I tried to remember what Alice told me about Edward and his need for barriers. I had promised her I would remain his friend and I would, but it would take some time for me to trust him completely.

I must have dozed off at some point because when I opened my eyes the room was dark except for the lights coming through the living room window from the parking lot. I reached over my shoulder and fumbled with the switch on the lamp next to the couch, eventually making contact and twisting the knob between my fingers.

Light filled the room and my heart leapt into my chest. "Holy..." I breathed as my regained use of my lungs. Edward was sitting next to the couch, on the floor, staring intently at me.

I ran my hand over my face and sat up on the couch. "What are you doing here?" I asked, annoyed but relieved it was only him.

Completely calm and assured he shrugged and said, "Bella, I never left."

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes again thinking that maybe this time he would leave. I opened one eye and looked out.

Nope. Still there.

"I'm sorry I lied to you." He said in the quietest voice.

"I'm sorry you lied to me too." I spat back.

"I promise I won't do it again. No matter what, from now on I will always be truthful." He resolved, doing that trick with his eyes where I forget my name.

I shook my head a little trying to focus and said, "Why did you do it Edward?"

I thought he would hedge again but instead he moved to me, kneeling so close I could feel his cool breath across my cheek. The feeling was amazingly familiar and I reached up to rub the spot.

His eyes shifted and lingered on my hand and he said, "I did it because in my entire life I've never known anyone like you. And I was afraid that if you got to know the real me you wouldn't want to work for me anymore and you wouldn't want to be my friend." He looked down at his hands, giving me a view of the top of his thick, glorious hair.

I reached out to lift his chin so I could see his face and he flinched away from my touch, a look of pain crossing his face. My hand hung in the air for a second, feeling an ebb of electricity, before I returned it to my lap.

"Edward, I promise that I will always be your friend and there is nothing more that I want than to get to know the real you. But it's a two way street. You have to give as much as you want to get." I said and I meant it. Friendship is about both people. I suspected that other than his family Edward didn't have much experience with this so I was willing to be patient. About some things at least.

I narrowed my eyes at him and said, "No more lying. I'm serious Edward. It's a deal breaker."

He nodded and his lips pulled into the smile I suspected he knew I couldn't resist. I patted the sofa next to me and smiled back and gave him some space as he climbed in the seat. "I'm sure you don't watch a lot of TV," I said, rolling my eyes at him, "but I didn't get a chance to watch *Lost* this week. If there is one thing you need to know about me it's that there's nothing I like better than a good mystery."



## Chapter Sixteen

BPOV

Angela and I were sitting on the patio of the coffee shop under the shade of a wide umbrella. The sun was bright and we were lingering over our lunch break catching up on each other's lives since she spent so much time with Ben lately.

"So, you're coming with us on Saturday night to the music festival?" Angela asked.

I took a sip of my iced coffee and answered, "Yes, I'm going but Tyler knows this is not a date, correct?"

Angela nodded and said, "Yes, I told him and he knows, he is just happy not to be the third wheel again!"

We laughed a bit because it does suck to be the third wheel around two people in love. I thought briefly about Edward and his status as the fifth wheel in his family and had some sympathy.

"I'm pretty excited just to get out. I feel like I've been trapped indoors this summer either at work or at home." I said pulling my hair over one shoulder, fanning the back of my neck a little.

Angela paused for a minute, fingering her straw before saying, "So how has work been since you un-outed your boss?"

I snorted and covered my mouth with my hand. "It's been good. We've both been busy so I haven't seen him much."

"But things haven't been uncomfortable?" she asked.

"Not really. It is a little weird that we are now 'friends' since he is my boss, but really I do like him. He's different. In a good way." I shrugged trying to play off my actual interest. For some reason I hadn't told Angela about my promise to Alice and the intensity of my connection with Edward.

"Different? I'll say. As in he's gorgeous. And rich. And for some reason seems wants to be your friend when he shuts everyone else out." She taunted.

I made a face at her and said, "Stop. Or I won't talk about him anymore with you."

She pushed her sunglasses on top of her head where I could see her eyes and she continued, "Isn't he's still picking you up and dropping you off for work because he's worried about your safety? Or so he claims. I have a feeling it is more than that Bella."

I thought about it for a minute. I wasn't really comfortable revealing my new attraction to Edward. It was still a bit awkward with him being my boss and the fact he had lied to me. But there was something else, I suppose I would simply call it chemistry.

"Okay, I admit it. I'm pretty sure he may be attracted to me. You know, I just get that feeling, like there is a current of energy between us. But sometimes it feels like good, exciting energy and sometimes it feels dark and mysterious. There is something about Edward Cullen that I just can't put my finger on." I explained.

"Ha!" she laughed, "Yeah, I know what you want to put your finger on..."

"Shut up, I'm serious." I told her feeling the heat rush up my face giving me away, "I'm done with this conversation, move on."

We talked a bit more about the upcoming music festival, on Saturday afternoon and evening. It was primarily local bands, food and drinks but Angela and I had gone ever year since we were freshmen in college. A short while later Angela needed to get back to her job so she began packing up her things to

leave. I was going to sit for a bit longer and read my book and enjoy the warm weather. Just as she said goodbye a shadow passed over the table and a waitress appeared to take our trash. I looked up and realized it was the pretty girl who normally worked the counter with the long black hair. I smiled and said, "Oh hi! How are you? I haven't seen you in a while"

She returned the smile and answered, "I'm pretty good. I spent some time on the coast, back home so I have been off for a couple of weeks. How about you?"

"Okay, I was going to tell you, I keep having these horrible dreams about that missing girl on the poster." I shivered a little just thinking about it. I'd woken again that morning, the same as all the rest, chasing Bree off the cliff and ending up in Edward's arms. It was getting tiresome.

She sympathetically grimaced at the thought, "I can't escape her either. Even back home they were talking about her."

I looked at her questioningly, "Really? How so?"

She gestured to the chair asking permission to sit with me, I nodded and she quickly pulled it out and sat down. "It's a long story but I come from the Quileute tribe in La Push. My whole family lives there. I was one of the only people in my graduating class to actually leave the reservation. Everything there just felt so slow moving and archaic. I was tired of living in the past and decided to take my chances in the city."

I was intrigued by her background for sure and studied her rich brown skin before asking, "What do you mean 'living in the past'?"

"My tribe still follows many of the old customs and legends. There is a tribal chief and ceremonies, including many traditions. As a woman there is no place for me there other than as a wife or a mother. I'm not interested in either of those things right now."

I made an exaggerated motion of shuddering at the thought and we both laughed at the idea of a commitment as serious and long term as marriage or motherhood.

"But what about the poster, the girl Bree, what does she have to do with it?" I asked still trying to figure out where she was going with this.

"I shouldn't really tell you. What happens during tribal council is supposed to be very sacred." She actually looked around the patio to see if anyone was listening. "But, I don't believe in any of it. It is all propaganda spread by the elders. Boogie men and werewolves."

"Please don't feel like you need to tell me if you're uncomfortable, I was just wondering." I said.

"No, I'm not kidding. I don't believe a word of their tales. When I went home we had a bonfire and cookout which was pretty normal. Afterwards the elders typically tell the same stories and this time was no different except they mentioned Seattle and the murders going on here. Several people begged me to stay home and not come back but I have spent my life resisting their brain washing and this time was no different. The elders launched into their favorite story about an enemy tribe that they battled during our great grandfather's time. This opposing tribe was made of demons who drank the blood of their victims for nourishment. Their skin was ice cold, their teeth razor sharp and if they chose they could turn you into one of their kind with a simple bite to the skin."

Fascinated I whispered, "Vampires."

She rolled her eyes and said mockingly, "Yes, vampires. They don't call them that but the thoughts the same. The legend tells us they are beautiful creatures that easily lure you in with their looks and dazzling features. Our forefathers claim they visited these parts before and now they have returned, feeding once more on the innocent."

"And they think Bree was taken by these demons?" I asked. I thought about the Bree of my dream, calling for help, the flames licking her feet.

"Yes. They suspect she is either dead or has been changed into one of their kind."

"What are they going to do about it?" I wondered envisioning battles in my head. "Do they have vampire slayers or demon fighters? Because that would be awesome."

She laughed and said, "I know, right? It's all just a story the old people like to share to scare kids from leaving the reservation. Ironically, they claim there are two things that keep you safe. One is a different legend about our people turning into enormous wolves that protect our people and land. Apparently, our tribe has a treaty with some of these demons so they can't come on our land. As long as they stay away, everyone is safe or if you stay trapped on the reservation forever you also have no need to worry." She scrunched her nose in frustration, "It's really very convenient way to keep people afraid and tied to the tribe. It definitely works on the less strong minded of us."

"So you're telling me you come from a tribe whose history involves werewolves and vampires and you don't want part of it?" I joked. "You know, vampires in movies usually are pretty hot. Oh and speaking of, guess what?"

"What?" she responded still laughing about mythical creatures.

"You were wrong about Mr. Cullen being gay. You may just not be his type." I teased.

Her eyebrows rose a bit and she said, "Huh. Interesting. If I'm not his type I wonder what is?"

I felt my face grow warm and I shrugged, happy when she announced she needed to get back to work before she got in trouble for socializing on the job. I agreed that it was time for me to go as well. As I stood and collected my bag I asked her quickly, "Exactly where is La Push? I'm not originally from Washington so my geography of the area is limited."

"La Push is in the middle of nowhere. The closest thing to it is Forks. But I'm sure you've never heard of that either." She laughed and walked back into the shop.

Xxx

Later that day I was sitting at my desk when Edward appeared at the doorway. His brow was furrowed a little and he said, "Bella, do you have any idea where my brown boots are?" The minute my name hit my ears, I instantly mused how my shortened name sounded so different, personal coming from his mouth.

Edward had just returned home from the office and had changed out of his suit. From my desk I observed him standing in the doorway, shoeless, with thick brown and cream striped socks on his feet.

"I'm not positive, but I think Alice may have given those away. They were not deemed 'classic' enough to keep. And I believe she may have commented that it is July and 'who wears dark brown lace up boots in the middle of the summer.'" I said, and tried to look innocent.

I saw a bit of annoyance cross his eyes but he shook it off and defended in a soft voice, "I wear boots all year. I always have."

"Well, maybe you should consider making a change." I said in an intentionally patronizing voice, knowing perfectly well this would never happen. This man was entrenched in his habits.

He considered this for a minute, or so it seemed, but he turned and went back upstairs.

I continued my work at my desk and started to type up the report for the day when he appeared back by my desk. I looked down and saw he was wearing a different pair of brown boots.

"See, I'm flexible. I found a different pair. And I'm okay with it." He said with a tense smile. "I am perfectly comfortable in these boots instead of the others."

I studied him for a minute even though I knew my jaw was hanging a little at his absurdity. Everything about Edward was perfect as usual. His hair and fair skin, his t-shirt that pulled just so across his chest and the snug jeans that hung exactly right on his hips. And then his boots. Which were also perfect but basically the same as the ones he had on before. By the look on his face I could tell he actually felt proud of himself and was consciously making an effort to push his boundaries. I couldn't help but smile since I found his stunted behavior charming.

Crap.

Only stupid girls with crushes find stuff like this charming.

"Edward," I said, trying to keep the laughter down, "I know you think you're trying, but this is not different."

He furrowed his brow in confusion and said, "But, it is different. I don't usually wear this pair."

This time I laughed out loud and said, "Come on, let's shake things up a bit," and walked out of the room, past his alarmed expression and up the stairs into his dressing room.

Once in the room I got down on my knees and started rummaging through his rows and rows of shoes. I finally found what I was looking for and pulled them out. I turned around and sat at his feet and said, "Here, put these on," and slid the shoes towards him.

He eyed them skeptically but sat down on the floor across from me nevertheless. He held up the shoes, one in each hand, dangling them from his long fingertips.

"These? I don't know Bella." He said, his discomfort clear.

"Yes these. It's summer, and you are clearly going somewhere casual, and boots are for winter. Or hiking. Sneakers are for summer." I said forcefully. "If you want I could find you a nice pair of flip flops."

Panic spread across his face and he began quickly unlacing his boots. Again I was mesmerized by his fluid movements, but I was distracted when he paused before putting the new ones on. He seemed like he just couldn't commit to actually wearing the shoes.

I sighed and picked up the shoe in front of me and began loosening the laces for him. They were basic, navy, low top Converse. I had noticed them before while organizing the closet, and I could tell they had never been worn before. They still held the strong smell of canvas and rubber.

"Let me see your foot." I directed, holding my hands out.

He looked at me like I had asked him to take his pants off or something. I rolled my eyes and said, "Edward, just give me your foot."

He slowly moved his striped socked foot towards me. His knees were up and his palms were back on the floor behind him. I picked up his foot and slid it into the shoe, meticulously pulling the long, white laces taut one row at a time. I kept my eyes on the shoe but I could feel Edward's eyes on my hands and occasionally I could hear him take a deep swallow.

As I tied the top of the laces in a neat bow I found myself rambling to fill the silence, "When I was sixteen I got a job at the mall selling shoes. It was terrible. People would come in and want to try on shoe after shoe. They would tell me their shoe sizes and then I would have to go to the back of the store to find the style and size they asked for. There were these huge shelves of shoe boxes in the back. Rows and rows of boxes that all looked exactly the same. Every time I had to go back there I would get completely confused and overwhelmed. They could've used Alice to organize it for them." I took a peek up and found his eyes looking



into mine. I gave him a small smile and picked up his other foot, adjusting the seam and smoothing out his sock before putting the second shoe on.

I continued my story saying, "After a couple of weeks I couldn't take it anymore. I told my boss I had too much school work and my mother was making me quit. I wimped out but that job just wasn't for me." I finished and felt Edward shift, wrapping his arms around his legs and placing his chin on top of his knees. My hands were still resting on the top of his shoes occasionally adjusting the laces trying to get them to line up perfectly.

He looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "I wish I could have known you then."

I shook my head and said, "You weren't missing much, I promise. I was awkward and gangly. I was, embarrassingly, even clumsier than I am now. Plus I had braces and I would get so nervous around boys. I don't think I even spoke to a guy in my class until I was a senior."

He didn't look convinced, "I doubt it was all that bad. I bet you were cute."

I felt the heat rush up my face and decided it was time to get out of this very close situation. I stood up, almost falling and was caught on the shoulders by Edward's very fast hands.

"Thanks," I said grimacing. "I guess my clumsy days are not that far behind. By the way, those shoes look great. Change isn't so bad is it?"

He looked towards the full length mirror that hung on the wall, assessing himself. I also glanced over and saw us in the mirror together. Edward was tall and lean, he towered over me, and again I was struck how every part of him looked perfect, down to his shoes. I noticed though that where he usually had been so distant and reserved with me, keeping such a separation between us, his body language right now was not showing this. He was leaning, just a bit in my direction, almost but not quite, entering into my personal space, his eyes fixed on mine. It was almost if I leaned back towards him we would meet somewhere in the middle.

He broke his gaze with me and looked down at me and said, "No Bella, I'm beginning to realize change, although difficult for me, can be very good."

Xxx

EPOV

I walked up the steps to Bella's apartment, a couple of steps behind her. I carried her black satchel on my shoulder and with every step she took up the staircase I was enveloped in her scent. It didn't bother me as much now, just a twinge here and there. It often caused me a problem when we were close and my other emotions were running high, forcing me to struggle to control more than one desire at a time. Of course this kind of discipline was an exercise I relished and I saw it more as a challenge than an obstacle.

Currently though I was faced with a different situation. My usual desires were being overshadowed by a sense of panic I had never experienced before. I had been formulating a plan for sometime to get to know Bella a little better and break through some of the remaining tension. I'd almost done it today in the dressing room but the situation got away from me. One minute she was teasing me, the next we shifted into a more intimate moment. Bella often lulled me into a sense of comfort with her words and movements making the most common moments more than that.

The boots were trivial of course but it was just one of the things I clung to in my life. The fact I was so ingrained in my ways was becoming more and more apparent. Bella, almost magically, coaxed me with her voice and calm nature. She lured me to the floor of the closet and I allowed her to put the shoes on me as if I was incapable of actually doing it myself. Just having her that near me and being that innocently intimate with someone was incredibly overwhelming. The venom dripped down my teeth as I was listening to her

heartbeat and inhaling her scent, but I sat there patiently, swallowing it down, reveling in such a small moment with her.

The irony was that as a vampire I was supposed to be able to do this to my prey. It was easy for me to convince them to come near me, intrigue and tempt them. I wasn't prepared for my victim to turn it around on me.

We reached the top of the landing and walked towards her apartment door. I handed the satchel to her and she said, "Thanks, Edward. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

I didn't want to leave her; every inch of my body wanted to stay. It would be hours before I could sneak back in but I had to go hunting and patrolling before the night was over. I watched her fumble with her keys as usual, restraining myself from helping her. Instead I watched her long hair curl down her back before allowing my eyes to roam down to the hem of her skirt, settling on the spot where it grazed the back of her thighs. I lifted my eyes upward as she finally inserted the key in the lock and twisted the knob open, giving me a wave goodnight.

I stopped myself before I turned the corner, gathering the courage to actually do what I had planned on all along and said, "Um, Bella, I was wondering something..."

She turned away from the door and I could see her face in the fading daylight, her brown eyes curious. She placed her hand on the edge of the door and leaned a little. "What is it Edward?" she asked.

I groaned mentally. I was about to do something I hadn't done in my entire hundred years of existence as a human or a vampire. Thank God I don't sweat, I thought, as I fought to compose myself. I smoothed my face and made eye contact, using my abilities in my advantage. "I wanted to know if you would go with me to an exhibit tomorrow night?"

She paused, her face completely unreadable, but her heart began pounding just a bit faster. "An exhibit? What kind?" she asked.

I decided to move a little closer to her, near her fluttering heart. "An art exhibit. You had shown an interest in my collection at home so I thought you may want to see some other work."

Her eyes lit up at the thought. "That would be great. In fact I just found a book at the library on impressionist artwork from the time period of your Jackson Pollock painting. I've been reading it at night."

I knew this of course. It was in her room, lying on the bedside table. When I told Carlisle I intended for her to be mine I never said I would play fair. I planned on using every advantage I had to win over Bella Swan.

I couldn't contain the smile creeping across my lips. She actually said she would go. I thought she would, but with Bella I was never exactly sure where I stood.

"Great." I said, attempting to conceal my excitement.

"So, tomorrow...after work?" she asked, her hand back on the doorknob.

"Yes, after work." I nodded.

She smiled again and pushed the door open, moving inside. I waited just a moment, inhaling the last wisps of her scent in the night air, mentally congratulating myself on successfully asking a woman out. Forcing myself to leave, I ran, faster than appropriate, down the stairs to my car heading to the forest to hunt.

Hours later I found myself standing over the remains of a large elk. I recalled my gorging from weeks before and my first visit to Bella's apartment. The shades of my inner animal were less now and I could almost feel the humanity pulling from the depths of my soul. My hunger was tempered after tonight's hunt but not totally satiated. I had determined though, that after meeting Bella, I was quite sure there was only one solution to that problem. This was a concern but it also brought the entire situation into perspective.

Nothing would ever compare to the taste of Bella's blood, but if I ever succumbed she would be gone forever. The satisfaction would be fleeting and the despair eternal. It was much more in my nature to want to keep my treasures with me than to use them and cast them aside. I had rooms of knickknacks, baubles, books and clothing to prove this point. Bella of course was more than these things, but I knew now that I wanted her with me more than any need to feed from her. I finally realized dissatisfied hunger would be an affliction I would have to adjust to.

I buried the animal carcass and traveled back through the thick, dark forest. I thought of Bella tonight as she agreed to go with me to the exhibit. Her eyes lit up at the idea and her pulse quickened a bit. These observations were all I had to go on, as usual, since my mind reading abilities were useless on her. I was getting better, though, at deciphering her behaviors and expressions. I was certain she was excited about my offer, I just wasn't sure exactly what she was excited about. I wasn't quite lame enough to believe it was actually a 'date,' as this whole situation of a vampire 'dating' a human was beyond reason, but the idea was there all the same.

The air was cool as I traveled through the brush, using my senses to take me back to my car. I had hunted for several hours, making sure I was well fed, anticipating the strength I needed not only to resist Bella, but to fight James if necessary. As I leapt over fallen logs and the underbrush I thought about how I came so close to blowing it with Bella last week.

The night I showed up with the Thai food I was convinced I knew what I was doing. During my nights with her I had taken to roaming the house. On more than one occasion I found the crinkled paper menu on the counter, favorite items marked in her distinct script, and the remains of her meal in the refrigerator. I knew she never ate enough, that she led a fairly strict vegetarian lifestyle, which was amusing as I had just drained an animal dry in the middle of the woods. I snorted to myself, recognizing the irony of our vastly different versions of the term 'vegetarian'.

I *thought* I knew what I was doing, but no. I almost blew everything. My impromptu arrival, the food, then the horror of her confronting me with my carefully placed lies. She gave me an opportunity, a chance to say, "No Bella, I wouldn't like to be set up with your friend because I'm not gay..." Instead, I choked and the same lies spilled out of my mouth smooth as silk. But she knew, because Alice had already told her the truth. I wanted to be cross at her for the betrayal but I really couldn't since she was forcing me to do what was right, to do the thing I wanted so bad but was afraid to on my own.

Sitting across the table from her, watching the gooey food drip down her arm, I knew I should have been repulsed, but no, repulsion was the furthest thing from my mind. Cooked human food is very unappealing to us. The smell alone is beyond disgusting and it assaults all of our senses. But watching Bella eat, watching her do anything, completely changes my view on the most mundane, formerly offensive actions. I was mesmerized by the trail of sauce, inching so slowly down the curve of her arm and when she stuck her tongue out and lapped it up I felt my own instinctively mimicking her moves.

Her eyes bore into mine and I knew immediately I'd showed my hand. She knew exactly who I was and what I was thinking with that one reaction. I didn't need to read her mind for that.

She was angry, really angry, but this wasn't the first time she raised her voice to me and grown frustrated with my absurd behavior. Since the first week we met we had clashed over one thing or another and I knew if I could give her time and apologize I could make it right.

I waited as she stilled in the other room. She was entirely frustrated but the wine and food must have made her drowsy and instead of coming back to confront me further or kick me out she fell asleep on the couch. I waited in the dark, as I do every night, inches from her face, but knowing this time I wouldn't run when she woke up. When she did, I apologized and promised never to lie again, which is my intention. Bella was a part of my life now. Even if I could I wouldn't leave her unprotected. Even if I wanted to leave, I couldn't as I

was now bound to her like no one before. The lies were coming to an end. She would soon find out the truth; it was the only way to keep her safe and to make her mine.

I was at the edge of the forest now, stepping out of the canopy of trees and walking to my car. James had been quiet for too long and I was coming to realize my behaviors alone had given him an advantage. My life had taken on an obsessive predictability to the extreme point that I couldn't even wear a different pair of shoes if necessary. If I was going to protect Bella and stop James' insane plot I would have to start thinking outside my constricted ways.

I got in the car and cranked the ignition, accelerating quickly down the street towards the city. Balancing my old life, my work, and my mission with the new desire for Bella was proving to possibly be the biggest challenge of my existence so far.

I hoped I could pull it off.

Xxx

It was past midnight when I left my car in its usual spot and quickly climbed the stairs to Bella's apartment.

*Edward...*

I stopped in my tracks and peered into the darkness. "Alice?" I said, lower than a whisper.

Alice appeared around the corner, near Bella's door. By her side she held a package in her tiny hand.

*I had a vision, someone was here and it seemed faster for Jasper and I to come over and see first, in case James was luring you away from patrolling...Emmett's on his way down now...*

"Where's Jasper?" My eyes kept darting to the door, wanting to go inside and make sure Bella was safe. Alice's hand wove into mine, effectively keeping me from leaving her side.

*She's fine, listen...*

I focused and heard her faint heartbeat..thump, thump, thump...steady in it's nighttime rhythm.

*Jasper is in the woods trying to recover their scent...*

I inhaled deeply and found traces of it myself...it was one that had been here before and then another, unfamiliar one. Vampires but not Victoria or James.

I pulled her back into the shadows, but where we could still see the stairway and Bella's door. "What did you see?" I asked.

I watched as Alice closed her eyes and searched her memory and watched as she described it out loud. "I saw flashes of Bella's door, not open, closed like it is now. I saw pale fingers attaching an envelope to the door. Then they were gone."

"You saw them here, at the door, but not before they got here?" I asked putting the pieces together.

"Yes. No notice, they had already come and gone by the time I saw it." Alice responded, her eyes flashing with irritation. "Again, they are blocking me until they want me to see something. This is why I was worried it could be a trap for you."

I grimaced with her and asked, "Will Jasper catch them? Should we go too?"

She shook her head, "No, it was a long shot, he was hoping they would make a mistake."

I noticed her hand and the envelope. "What's in it?" I asked and reached my hand forward.

She handed it over and I quickly opened it, inside was a thin gold chain with a cross on it and another object. I poured them into my hand, and Alice quickly picked up the second piece, a brooch made of gold in the design of a flower. Its stem swooped into an elegant 'B'.

Alice asked, "Is it Bella's?"

I shrugged, "I'm not sure. I've never seen it before. It looks antique though, Victorian perhaps. This one," I held up the delicate cross between my fingers, "it looks like the one the media has shown being worn by the missing teenager, Bree. But the brooch doesn't look like something a modern teenager would wear."

Alice nodded in agreement and we both thought about the jewelry for a moment considering the fact Bree must have been taken by James or Victoria. It easily fit the scenario we'd been considering. The missing object from Bree and now one possibly from Bella only confirmed it. James was behind the abductions. The thought they had been so close to taking Bella made me sick with rage.

*Jasper's coming back, let's go meet him...*

I hesitated, not wanting to leave Bella and Angela alone in the house. Alice touched my hand, "Emmett will be here soon, let him keep an eye on Bella, we need to go back to the house. James is playing games but is leaving clues behind for us to find. Let's see if we can figure out what they mean."

I listened once more to the sound of Bella's heart, thumping inside, knowing she would be safe with Emmett outside keeping guard. As much as it pained me to leave her, Alice was right, she wouldn't be safe until James and the others were destroyed.

Xxx

BPOV

*Where did she go?* I wondered, and waited for the cool breeze to rush past my body. My dreams no longer unfolded for me piece by piece. I had begun to live them like a script, always knowing what would come next before it happened. I pushed through the motions every night knowing at the end Edward would be there.

"Come back!" I called, picking up my pace. *Why would she run away?*

Suddenly I heard her cry out and tumble, like always. I kept running and felt my feet slip from under me and I too was falling, my arms searching for anything to hold. My fingers desperately searched for the jagged edge I knew was protruding from the side of the cliff.

I tentatively looked down and found her. Bree was also clinging for her life, the bright fire beneath us.

"Help me!" she cried, her teeth gleaming from the brightness of the fire below. I watched, helpless, and felt the tears begin to stream down my face.

"I'm coming" I yelled, knowing though that it was of no use. I could never get to her in time. The flames were moving closer and closer to the girl. This time though I felt the heat, the cold air that normally surrounded me was gone. Panicking a little at the change I looked for my escape.

My eyes fixed on the root above me, and I felt a sense of relief as I began scratching my way up the side of the cliff towards salvation. My fingers brushed the cold rough surface and I waited for it to transform from a root to a strong safe arm. It never happened. For once there was no transformation, instead the root crumbled under my touch shattering into brittle pieces.

My hand grasped at the dirt and debris and I shouted, "Edward!" desperate to find him, desperate for him to save me. But there was nothing to hold on to and he wasn't there. I felt my body begin falling, tumbling towards Bree and the fires below.

I woke with a start, the edge of a scream on my lips, drenched in sweat. I searched my room futilely and only became more confused. I'd had the same dream for weeks, every night, exactly the same. Something had changed and there was feeling of dread in my chest. As weird and abstract as my dreams had been they

had always been consistent. Like Edward. Weird but there. Now, the lingering feeling of desperation was still enough to make me wonder: where had he gone and why did he leave me?

Xxx

After showering and getting ready for the day my nerves had calmed from my dream but were beginning to start up again thinking about my plans with Edward for that night. I heard Angela in the kitchen and prepared myself for the onslaught of questions she would certainly have once I walked in the room. I took a deep breath and walked out of my bedroom.

"Angela, do we have any more bagels?" I asked, entering into the kitchen with my satchel and a couple of hangers holding my clothes for the art exhibit that night.

She pointed to the counter and raised an eyebrow in the direction of my clothes as she finished chewing. I picked a knife and began slathering cream cheese on the top and ignored her gesture.

"Going some where after work?" She asked.

Placing the knife in the sink I walked over to the stool next on the other side of the kitchen counter. I shrugged nonchalantly and I sat down and replied, "Maybe."

She waited for me to continue but I didn't. Instead I took a large bite of my bagel, trying to contain the smug grin that threatened to escape. Angela knew me too well.

"Bella, are you going out with Edward Cullen?" she asked in a firm yet curious voice.

"Define going out." I challenged.

Happy to play along she said, "If he is taking you to dinner, or any other specific location, just the two of you, alone, wearing special clothes, *and* he asked you before hand. That is going out. A date in fact."

I pretended to think it over for a second, "Ummmm...then yes. Edward and I are going out. *But*, I don't think I would call it a date."

Angela literally began buzzing around the kitchen saying, "Oh my god, Bella. Oh. My. God. Edward Cullen asked you out."

I couldn't help the smile that tugged at the corner of my lips partially because my roommate looked like she may jump over the counter and sit in my lap out of sheer giddiness. But really, I couldn't hide my own excitement about my plans with Edward tonight. It wasn't a date, I knew that, but at the same time it was something other than just two friends going to an art exhibit. I told Angela this and explained the Jackson Pollock painting and how he offered to take me to a special exhibit of this type of work.

My phone began ringing, and as I picked it up Angela said, "Bella, I don't care what you say, that is a date," and she walked out of the kitchen towards her room, closing the door behind her.

I picked up my phone, glancing at my watch, and realized it was time for Edward to pick me up.

"Hello." I answered.

"Good morning Bella. It's Edward." I felt my heart beat just a bit faster at the sound of his voice.

"Hey, are you here? Do you want me to come down?" I asked picking up my bag and the hangers with my clothing and walked to the door.

"Actually, I can't come get you today, I'm sending my brother. There was an emergency at work and I can't leave right now. He should be there any minute." He answered, and before I could respond I heard a sharp knock on the other side of the door.

"Jasper?" I asked and swung the door open. "Err...not Jasper." The largest man I had ever seen was standing in my doorway with a frightening grin on his face. I eyed him, trying not to gawk at his massive size. The more I looked I realized he was really very attractive and I was slowly becoming convinced Edward grew up in some strange foster care system of genetically superior people.

"No, my other brother, Emmett. I'm so sorry." He apologized, and broke me out of my oogling.

"It's fine Edward, I'll see you in a little bit." I hung up the phone before he could continue.

I slung my bag over my shoulder and took in the hulking man in front of me. "So you're Emmett." I said, trying to focus my eyes on his face and not the ridiculous size of his hands.

"I am. And you must be Bella." He stated in a voice softer than I would have expected. He held out one of the giant paws towards my bag. "Edward said I'm supposed to carry that."

I rolled my eyes, "I know Edward thinks I'm helpless but I'm not. I'm actually capable of carrying this on my own."

He nodded, flashing me another brilliant smile. I walked past him, holding my head high. Too high, it seemed, since I tripped on the threshold, causing my bag and clothes to tumble in front of me to the ground. Fortunately I never fully fell since I was being held several inches off the ground by the two enormous hands I had previously been studying. He gently placed me back on my feet and I sighed in embarrassment before stealing a look at Emmett, who was shaking with laughter. I took a moment to straighten my shirt and hair, knowing my face was an impossibly dark shade of red. I picked up my bag and forcefully shoved it towards him. He took it without a word and followed me down the hall. At the top of the stairs I turned to him, making as much eye contact as possible with our height difference and said in my most authoritative voice, "Do *not* tell Edward this happened."

A huge grin broke out across his face, once again showing me his perfect, gleaming white teeth, and he nodded. He made a face and said, "Are you kidding? If I deliver you to his house with even a scratch on you, I'll never hear the end of it. This is strictly between you and me."

I grimaced at the accuracy of his statement. I suspected he was right, Edward, for whatever reason, had definitely accepted the role of my protector whether I'd asked him to or not.

"Good. Now, let's go before he drives over here to find out why we're late." I said, and we both laughed as we walked down the stairs to the parking lot.

Xxx

EPOV

I looked at myself in the mirror while I quickly buttoned the cuffs on my shirt. It was pale green, one of Alice's selections, of course. She picked it out, along with an entire outfit, before she left, laying it on the dressing table for me to see when I walked in. Now I found myself analyzing the mop of hair on top of my head. It was its usual catastrophe, sticking up and in total disarray. There was little I could do at this point, I thought as I attempted to poked and prodded it into some kind of submission. Nature made my hair this way, immortality froze it in place. Yet I stood here, in front of the mirror, fussing over it like a school boy.

Bella was downstairs changing for our evening and I was convinced with every passing minute this was possibly the longest day I'd ever lived. After we left Bella's in the early morning hours we came back to my townhouse to discuss the tokens left by James and what they could mean. After looking up Bree's information from the easily hacked police system we determined that the necklace and cross were hers. There was an inscription on the back that said, "Love, Mom and Dad" which matched the information in her file.

The brooch was harder to determine as Bella had not made a police report or told me of any missing items from the break in. We suspected it must be hers, but had no concrete evidence. I decided I would have to ask her about it soon to make sure. Jasper did look in the files of the other missing people and murder victims that matched our profiles and wasn't able to connect any of them to the brooch, which only convinced us further it was most likely Bella's.

I hid upstairs all day, away from Bella, as I wasn't sure I could actually face her before tonight. What if she changed her mind? Or came to her senses? What if she realized after all this time that I was truly a monster, a demon, who needed to be feared? Part of me almost hoped she had figured this out before the evening came and I could put this entire fantasy of mine to rest.

Of course this wasn't the case at all. Emmett bounded up stairs once they arrived to tell me how much he liked her, and how her stubborn, combative personality was perfect for me. He also mentioned how she brought a change of clothes for tonight and how excited she was about the exhibit.

When he said it the gleam in his eye was just a bit too intrigued. I sighed and said, "Emmett, don't make me regret letting you drive her to work."

He stood across from me, hulking over even my tall frame and rolled his eyes, "I won't. And you're welcome. I knew you weren't eating her because she was pretty. Don't even try to deny it."

"I'm not denying anything. Or admitting anything. Not to you." I said childishly. Emmett had this tendency to bring out my inner fourteen year old even after all this time.

We had been sitting in my bedroom. Jasper and Alice were next door in the office on the computer. I had a stack of papers on the couch and was rummaging through them for some notes I had taken earlier. Emmett, rarely invited to my house, was looking at the shelf on the wall that held some personal objects. I watched as he picked up my signed Shoeless Joe Jackson ball and began practicing his windup.

*Do you think you would have gone to see him in the World Series if you hadn't changed?*

Emmett loved to talk about baseball. Before he was a vampire he had never seen a professional game, since there were no teams in the south at the time.

"Probably," I answered even though he already knew this. We'd had this discussion a million times.

"Would you have gone with your dad?" he asked, again knowing the answer, but obviously wanting to pretend we hadn't. When you live together for over fifty years subjects tend to come up more than once.

"Yes, he loved baseball. And he worshipped the White Sox. He was the one who told me to keep an eye on Shoeless Joe." I said, trying to remember as much as I could. It no longer hurt to remember, it just was difficult to place the memories.

"I would have loved to have seen Babe Ruth. Just my luck I become immortal the year he decides to retire." He said wistfully. I laughed at the irony of the fact we can have anything we want unless it is bound by time and humanity.

Mid-pitch I heard his mind start to rumble, moving from baseball to me. *So Edward, I know it's been a long time since you've been with a woman. About...twenty years, right?*

I focused on the paper in front of me, pretending to ignore him, yet it was useless because of the whole mind reading thing. He had me trapped.

*I'm actually being serious...how exactly is this going to work, you being a vampire and Bella being a human?*

I looked up this time and said, "Really? That is where this is going?"

He nodded and I was shocked to see his face was completely free of humor or mocking.



I sighed and said, "Look, I'm not going to deny I've thought about it." I shifted my gaze away from Emmett down to my hands. "I thought about it a lot, but I just don't know the precedence on this. If there even is one."

*Have you talk to Carlisle? He may know...*

"No, not yet. And look, you're way ahead of the game here. I can't even touch Bella right now, not until she knows what I am. One touch and she could possibly run in terror. Our skin," I held my hand up, "is not normal. It doesn't feel like a human feels, you know that. It may repulse her. I have no idea how she'll respond." I said trying to convince myself to push past my wants and think of her needs. "I'm also not sure if I would hurt her, and that is not an option."

*Then what are you doing? Are you just going to tell her?* His mental voice was incredulous.

"Emmett, I have no idea what I'm doing. Although I do realize I have to try, and if that means I have to come out and tell her, when the time is right, I will." I'd said, standing up and walking into the other room effectively ending the conversation.

It was mere hours later and I was regretting those words. I wasn't sure if I ever could tell her the truth. I wanted to and I had promised not to lie any further to her, but I was terrified of her response.

I took one last look over my shoulder into the mirror, compulsively trying to make the hair on my head do *something* other than what it was. It was mostly nerves, I knew, I'd looked exactly the same for the last ninety years. Some things never change. Leaving the dressing room, I forced my feet to crawl at human speed, one step at a time, until I stopped at the landing at the bottom of the stairs.

I smelled her before I saw her, flowers mixed with shampoo and adrenaline. It was her specific scent and I begged the venom in my mouth to not respond. I followed her trail to the library where she was scanning the books, touching their spines gently. Her hair was knotted up on the back of her head, loose tendrils falling haphazardly down her neck. I could see my favorite spot, the one under her ear, and it was all I could do to keep my distance. I watched her turn towards me, letting the skirt of her black sun dress flutter around her legs. The fabric was pitch black and accentuated her pale coloring and showed more skin than a vampire could ever resist. I smiled when I saw her and rejoiced when her entire face lit up in response. She was possibly the most beautiful creature I had ever seen and I opened my mouth to tell her, but the words stuck in my throat.

"Edward," she said, cutting me off and pulling a thick black binder off the shelf, "Is this what I think it is?"

Huh? I was trying to focus on the book in her hands and not the gentle curve of her neckline, "Umm...what do you think it is?"

She opened the book and held it up, "Comic books. Lots of them. Individually wrapped and numbered and tagged." She was now flipping through the plastic folders, running her fingers over the covers with an excited look on her face.

"Oh, yes. Those are mine." I said. Her excitement amused me. Only Bella would find this to be the most interesting thing in a room full of first editions and rare books. But I was also concerned she would ask me about them and where I got them. The weight of my promise of honesty to her was heavy on my mind.

I cleared my throat to get her attention and she closed the book slowly and looked up. I saw her eyes take in my appearance for a moment, starting with my hair, (my godforsaken hair) and ending at my feet.

She took a step towards me her lips curved evilly. "Have you already forgotten our conversation about trying new things?" She taunted.

I pulled up the hem of my pants and said, "No, look. Not boots. Shoes. Brown yes, but not boots." I couldn't help but laugh with her, "I'm changeable you know, and with the right motivation I find I can do almost anything."

I dropped the hand holding my trousers and faced her awkwardly as my words hung in the air. It had been so long since I was around someone I cared for, if I ever really had, and just now I said it out loud.

We stood in the library, me in the doorway, Bella still near the shelves, neither knowing exactly what to do next. Her hands smoothed the fabric of her dress, and mine were precariously close to running through my hair. It was clear she was waiting for me to do something. Anything. For a brief second I considered running since she could never catch me but I caught sight of myself in the mirror across the room. I was shocked at the actual panicked expression on my face. I focused on my freakish gold eyes and wondered if I could pull this off. Like Emmett implied, there was no way this could possibly work. I was a monster and she was an angel.

Oh god. What the hell was I doing?

"Edward, do you know what my favorite superhero is?" I heard Bella say, snapping me out of my momentary breakdown.

"No." I answered, realizing she had moved closer to me with an eager expression on her face.

"Batman." She replied quirked her eyebrow at me, almost daring me to argue.

Batman.

"Batman," she continued, "Has such a sense of conviction and drive. He was overcome by the tragedies of his past but decided to help people instead of hurting them. I know he doesn't have real super powers but he uses discipline, strength and intelligence to fight for those in need. But he has such conflict in his life and it shows in how he chooses to live. Batman chose his path which kind of makes him more awesome than someone like Superman. Living a solitary life, in the world, but at the same time not." She closed the distance between us and handed me the book she still held in her hands. With a cocky grin she said, "Not to mention he drives the Bat-mobile which is pretty much the coolest car ever *and* he has a jaw line the ladies swoon over."

Placing the book on the table by the door, I ignored the obvious parallels to my life and instead returned her smug grin with one of my own before saying, "The Bat-mobile, huh? What if I told you I could possibly challenge your idea on the coolest car ever?"

She rolled her eyes and said, "Doubtful. But if you want to try I'm game."

I said, "Follow me," and left the room, walking through the house to the garage. I heard Bella's shoes click on the floor behind me as I flipped the light switch and walked across the garage to the far side. I stopped at the sea of blue tarp and stopped for a moment, thinking about what I was about to do. I glanced at Bella who was eagerly behind me waiting for me. I nervously rubbed my jaw and grabbed a fistful of the tarp in my other hand yanking it off in one quick swoop. I paused to admire the object of beauty in front of me.

I turned and looked at Bella, whose eyes were wide and had the most gorgeous smile on her face. I placed my hand on the slick, black roof and said, "Bella, *this* is the coolest car ever."



## Chapter Seventeen

EPOV

I stood over by the car, tarp in hand, and looked at Bella with what I'm sure was the widest grin I may have had on my face in years.

Instead of a smile back, her head was cocked and her expression a bit skeptical. She finally said, "*This* is the coolest car ever? Better than the Bat Mobile?"

I nodded and ran my hand down the side of the car before placing my fingers on the door handle.

"Your convertible? I mean, it's beautiful and hot but superhero worthy? I'm not so sure." She scoffed in the direction of my baby.

"Bella, I can assure you this car is more than just superhero worthy. Let me show you," I informed her and walked around the car, opening the passenger side door for her. "The Bat Mobile is a fine machine, but it's a bit flashy for my taste. I think something a bit more understated is appropriate."

She had a gleam in her eye that was absolutely wicked, and she followed me around the car, quickly ducking in, saying, "thank you," as she adjusted her dress when she sat down on the shiny, soft leather.

Her scent whirled around me and I shut the door with minimal force before walking around the car in exaggerated human speed as I tried to compose myself. I was still reeling from the fact that when I was about to completely embarrass myself and slip into my awkward, less than human demeanor, Bella had managed to calm me by pulling out those comic books, making everything right.

Stopping behind the car, I contemplated the new emotion spreading through my body. I couldn't be sure, because I had no experience with this, but I was almost positive what the feeling was. I'd seen it in movies, read about it in books and heard others think of it for years. I had even forced myself to pretend I had these emotions on my own, trying to make it work, to fit in with the rest of my family. But it always felt false. And now, I knew for a fact that it had been.

Just because I knew what it was didn't mean I was ready to admit it out loud. Because what if she didn't feel the same way? What would I do then?

I watched Bella sit in the car and marveled at how this woman had changed the course of my life by simply being herself. Sucking it up, I forced myself to approach the door, open it and slide inside next to her.

"You want the top up or down?" I asked, pretending like this wasn't the most important night of my life.

"Whatever you want, Batman," she said with an arched eyebrow, still not looking completely convinced.

I suppressed a smirk at the irony of her calling me Batman and pressed the lever that caused the top to fold into itself before easing down into the back of the car. "It's nice out, the sun is down, and for once no rain." I said, thankful the weather was cooperating.

"I thought you didn't drive this anymore." She said, recalling our conversation from earlier.

I gave her a sideways look, my fingers on the key inside the ignition, "I didn't, but I told you, Bella, I can change."

Which was surprisingly true. I'd found I could change. I realized that there was no reason I should stop doing the things I loved to punish myself. There was no changing who I was, there was only acceptance. Bella was helping me accept me for who I was, even if she didn't have the whole picture yet.

I cranked the engine and it roared with life. An enormous hum vibrated off the walls and I told her as I backed out of the garage, "Emmett drove it down here yesterday. Rosalie was making some modifications."

"Rosalie?" she asked, her hair fluttering around her face with the movement of the car. With the top down and the engine purring, her scent and heartbeat were lost under the power of the machine.

I smiled and said, "My sister, Rosalie. She is our family mechanic. She is very good. Actually better than I am."

She smirked at that and mused, "Imagine that. Well, show me what she can do."

I accepted her challenge with a slow, lopsided grin that forced her to give me one in return. Bella had no idea of my power behind the wheel of a car. Other than running, there was no place I was more comfortable.

"Rosalie removed all the original electronics here and installed a state of the art GPS navigation system. It also has a built-in phone and tracking system. If someone even thinks of touching this car the information goes right back to the computer in my office so I can find it." I explained while pointing out the features. "Plus, this car has an enormous engine. They were built that way but Rosalie has upgraded it as well to modern standards."

We had been traveling through the city at a normal speed but I maneuvered us onto the highway. Once I was sure there were no police or traffic problems ahead, I quirked my eyebrow and said, "Is your seat belt secure?"

She hooked a finger through the belt and tugged. "Yep."

I shifted into gear, and as my tires squealed against the asphalt I said, "Hold on tight." And we shot off into the night to see exactly what a superhero's car could do.

Xxx

Exiting the highway, I stole a glance at Bella sitting next to me. I could tell she loved the speed as much as I did. The whole time we were moving she moaned and squealed and even though I saw her fingers clenched around the leather upholstery I could tell it was out of excitement, not fear. She acted scared but the wide smile on her face told me faster was better, and I was happy to oblige.

"Okay, you win. I admit it," she confessed breathlessly. "Who taught you to drive like that?"

"I taught myself. It's instinctive." And I found myself gazing at her hair that was wild from the high speed and open roof. I couldn't help but grin.

"What?" she asked, and she realized where my eyes were and she instinctively touched the top of her head. "Oh crap." She groaned and pulled the visor down to see the damage.

While she wrestled with her hair (I couldn't even look at mine after my near hair freak out earlier) I attempted to walk, not run, to the passenger door to wait for Bella. Apparently satisfied, she snapped the visor up and turned towards me with a conflicted look on her face.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing. I just look like a rat built a nest on top of my head," she said and narrowed her eyes. "You should have warned me."

I laughed. "You said it was my choice and anyway, I think your hair looks beautiful." I said, this time without gagging on my words.

Bella's face rushed with blood and I could feel the venom begin to pool in the back of my throat. I silently prayed for it to pass and focused on the long strands of hair flowing around Bella's face. My fingers twitched, and before I could stop myself I reached out and pushed a strand smoothly behind her ear, never touching her skin.

I continued, "The wild, untamed look suits you." If I could have blushed I would have, but I couldn't, and it only encouraged me.

"Thanks," she mumbled and I could hear her heartbeat quicken as her own blush deepened.

As we casually walked down the street Bella pointed out a series of posters plastered to the side of a building. "Oh, Angela and I are going with some friends to the music festival downtown tomorrow night. Do you want to come with us?"

I forced myself to pause as though I was considering her offer. I wanted so badly to say yes but large crowds were difficult for me. The smells and sounds were so invasive and that didn't even include the overwhelming mental noise from so many people.

Normally I would have lied, but in an effort to fulfill my promise I answered truthfully. "I don't really do well in crowds. But thanks for asking." I attempted to appease her with a smile.

"Okay," she said in a slightly rejected tone, which made me feel horrible. I suppressed a frustrated sigh. What a way to start a date.

In an attempt to make her more comfortable, I began talking about the exhibit and some of the different artists we would see. As always, she seemed so interested in the things I had to say, which caused my ego to soar. We came to the front of the museum and Bella stopped short. "We're going to the Seattle Museum of Art?"

I nodded and told her that there was an exhibit here I wanted her to see.

"But, Edward, the museum isn't open at night. We're way past closing time," she said.

Unconcerned, I said, "Bella, follow me."

We climbed the steps to the front door and a man in a suit was waiting with the front door open. As we approached, he said, "Mr. Cullen, I'm Michael Barnes, director of the museum."

"Good evening, Mr. Barnes. I appreciate you opening the exhibit for us." I glanced at Bella who had a look of confusion on her face.

I gestured for Bella to go ahead and she walked through the door into the main lobby.

The director stopped and said, "I think you know your way around, right?" I nodded. "Good, I will be in my office if there are any concerns." And with that he said 'good night' and walked off.

I looked down at Bella who was gaping at me and the retreating form of Mr. Barnes.

"What?" I asked feeling the grin on my lips.

"Edward, the museum is closed. What are we doing here?" she asked in a hushed whisper, suspicion filling her eyes.

"I'm taking you to see some artwork. Shall we?" I asked, and started for the staircase to the second floor. If Bella was ever going to fit in my life, she would have to realize at some point the Cullens don't live like others. We have money and resources and connections. We used them all when the time was right.

As we walked through the exhibits I let her set the pace, pointing out the pieces that inspired her or drew her attention. Bella was drawn to color; bright hues and abstract work seemed to be her favorite style of artwork. She spent a tremendous amount of time looking at a series of Kandinsky paintings, commenting on the subtle differences in each piece.

She walked towards one in particular and looked up at me with amazement in her eyes. "I love this one. It's so different with the black background."

Her dark eyes were shining under the spotlights and I could almost hear the wheels turning in her mind. If only I could hear her thoughts instead of guessing. I was forced, as usual, to prod her for further information. "The irony of this painting is that Kandinsky was noted for his dislike of the color black. This painting is actually his final one. Composition X is its title."

She turned away from the picture, a sly smile lifting the corners of her lips, and said in a falsely impressed voice, "Mr. Cullen, is there anything you don't know?"

I shrugged and thought briefly how the only thing I wanted to know what was locked in the mind of this gorgeous woman in front of me.

We continued through the museum like this, Bella pointing out a painting or sculpture, and me answering her questions effortlessly due to the years of sleepless nights and a photographic memory. We walked slowly, taking in each piece, and I listened as Bella spoke in a hushed, reverent tone. It was so quiet here, not a voice to be heard, a thought to pick out. Just me and Isabella alone.

It was close to perfection.

She wandered a bit ahead of me towards the next room and I wistfully looked at her hands gently swinging by her sides. I wished I could simply just clasp them in my own. I shook my head slightly at the foolishness of my desires. Until I met Bella, I'd never understood the need to touch another person like this. But now it was an ache. An overwhelming need to thread my fingers through hers. To rub my thumb over the creases in her palm or to simply cup the sides of her petite face in my hands.

"Are you coming?" she called, her voice echoing off the high ceilings from the next room, pulling me from my fantasies.

I walked in and found her engrossed by a collection of Native American Paintings by Stephen Mopope. As I opened my mouth to give her history on the Kiowa Five, a group of artists from the Kiowa Tribe in Oklahoma, Bella turned to me and said, "Isn't your family from Forks?"

Surprised by the sudden change in topic I replied, "Yes. They live there now. Although I didn't live with them there." *This time*, I thought, feeling guilt by the omission.

"Oh. Have you ever been to La Push?" she asked.

La Push? I looked over her shoulder at the image of a native warrior dancing in full ceremonial clothing. The Quileutes? My confusion quickly turned to unease.

Knowing my promise was going to be tested, I braced myself and I looked her in her unassuming eyes and said, "Once."

"Oh," she said and wandered over to the next painting. "I love this one, with the people dressed in feathers, like birds."

I followed her for a bit responding to her comments and thoughts until curiosity got the best of me. I turned to her and spoke her name to get her attention and then said, "Why were you asking me about La Push and Forks earlier?"

She looked around and found a bench across the room. Bella motioned towards it and together we walked over and sat down.

She paused for a moment before speaking, her upper teeth biting down on her lower lip, drawing my attention to their perfection. "I haven't really told you this but ever since my house was broken into I've been having nightmares," she said this while twisting her hands in her lap nervously. I longed to pick one up and comfort her.

"You told me you were having problems sleeping. Nightmares? What about?" I asked, feeling myself hovering over the line of truth. I had wanted to know the truth about her dreams for weeks. I heard bits and pieces when she mumbled in her sleep but the clearest part was my name at the end.

"It's the same one. It's horrible. I'm chasing after that missing girl, Bree. The one they talk about on the news." She paused, crashing her face in her hands. I nodded in understanding, but was actually shocked. Bella knew about Bree. This was interesting.

"I chase her and she falls, then I fall and well, the only way for me to get away is to climb up a cliff, but I can't do it alone. Then in the end, you come and save me." Her face flushed a bit but she didn't seem truly embarrassed. She looked almost thankful.

"I'm sorry you've been having bad dreams," I told her. "I don't understand though, what does this have to do with La Push?" I pressed. Which was true, but wasn't at the same time.

She laughed. "No, I'm sure you don't. There is this girl at the coffee shop. You know the dark haired one, she's a Quileute." I nodded because I did recognize the girl although I had no clue she was a member of that tribe. Bella took a deep breath and said, "She told me this crazy legend about vampires and how they have lived in this area before and now they are back stealing the lives of the innocent. They are convinced Bree is one of these victims." She rolled her eyes at the end making me think she didn't fully believe the story.

Who would?

I wasn't exactly sure how to respond and finally spit out with a nervous chuckle, "That's an interesting story. Did she say anything else?"

Bella hopped up from the bench and walked over to another painting. "She went on to tell me about werewolves and treaties." She looked over her shoulder at me and smiled. "She wasn't much of a believer. It's just so strange, me having these horrible dreams and then she told me these crazy legends. I felt like they were connected." She turned towards me for a second and said, "And then your family is from there and you're in my dreams. It all seemed like an odd coincidence."

I pushed off the bench and found myself behind her, watching her as she studied the painting in front of us. I wanted to tell her everything but she was so unnerved, and disturbed by the information, I was worried I would only make it worse. Instead, I leaned in and said, "I am sorry about your nightmares. I don't want you to worry. I promised you that I would make sure you're safe."

She turned and we were now facing one another, so close I could see my reflection in her eyes. I absorbed her face, soaking up every detail I could. The smattering of freckles across her nose, her long feminine lashes, the crease under her left eye when I felt a jolt coming from my left hand.

She'd placed her hand in mine. It was warm and soft and filled me with such a strong current of electricity I thought my heart may actually begin beating. Bella's eyes widened and I heard a small but sharp intake of breath come from her mouth but she didn't let go.

And I didn't make her.

She dipped her head for a moment forcing me to lose eye contact and I heard her softly say, "Thank you for keeping me safe." The back of her neck burned scarlet and she whispered, "In real life and in my dreams."

Intentionally this time, I found the strength to lift my free hand and placed my fingers under her chin, tipping her face upwards. The softness of her body amazed me and it took all the control I had not to run my fingers down her neck and push my nose into her hair. With one hand clasped in mine and the other cupping her face, I found her eyes and said, "You're welcome."

Xxx

BPOV

"Bella, you have to wipe that smile off your face or Tyler is going to get the wrong idea." Angela scolded.

I tried. I did. I even used my fingers to push the corners of my lips downward but couldn't. They were permanently stuck upwards. Like the Joker.

The Joker. This made my smile widen even further as I laughed to myself thinking about comic books, Batman, and the best date I'd had in my life. Angela rolled her eyes at me while I giggled at one sided jokes, and eventually directed her attention to the large stage in the middle of the park and the roadies setting up the next band's instruments. Ben and Tyler were attempting to get beer in the staggering lines across the field, and we were holding down our spot lying on blankets that were spread across the grass.

I was beaming. I knew it. I could feel the girly, pathetic, "I'm falling for him" giddiness emanating off of my body. My non-date with Edward took a sharp and sudden turn when I slid my hand into his very smooth, cool one. It was forward of me, I knew from experience that he wasn't fond of touching, but as he towered over me and promised to keep me safe, I knew I had to see what would happen if I did. I wasn't disappointed. Separate, we were two people muddling through life. Together we were electric. I knew this the instant we finally, physically connected.

Angela turned back to me and said, "Bella, you're almost vibrating." She looked me up and down slowly with narrowed, suspicious eyes, "Hell, did you have sex with him? You have this post-coital glow going on."

"What?" I shouted, a little too excitedly. "No! Umm. No. Nothing like that." The thought slightly horrified me and taunted me at the same time. Edward was barely receptive of me touching him and I could hardly imagine anything further.

Except I had imagined it. For weeks now, if I was honest with myself about it. The thought of his perfect lips on mine and those freakishly long fingers roaming around my body had distracted me more than once when I should have been focused on other things. I considered it the whole time we drove home from the museum, yet, with Edward, I was never sure if we were on the same page.

He walked me up the stairs as usual. The only difference was he walked a little closer and once or twice I felt his tentative hand graze my back, which was enough to cause shivers to run down my spine. I thought for sure he would kiss me at the door, and I waited eagerly as he stared at my mouth instead of my eyes. I noted how his gaze kept shifting down to my exposed neck, hunger and desire present behind every blink. But behind the desire, I could see the smallest hint of fear and doubt filling his amber eyes. Something was holding him back and I wasn't going to blow it by shoving my tongue down his throat by my front door.

I looked at Angela's amused expression, "No. He didn't even kiss me." I confessed unhappily.

Her mouth dropped a little, "So you're acting like this and you didn't even get a kiss? Wow. Remind me not to be there when you finally do take this further."

I blushed of course, but it was more about my own silliness than her innuendos. Angela and I had discussed sex more often than was probably normal. We didn't keep secrets, but something about my relationship with Edward kept me teetering on the edge. I wasn't even sure it was a relationship. I was close to squealing just from simply touching his hand. That was very fourth grade and not impressive but with Edward something told me it meant much, much more.

"I have no idea where this is going so don't get your hopes up. Edward is...well the more I get to know him, the more questions I have." I mused.

"That doesn't make any sense. Explain please," Angela said.

"Well...Edward is..." I stumbled, looking for the right way to say it, "Edward is, you know, wealthy, intelligent, young, amazing looking, talented...but..." I trailed off searching for the words.

Angela laughed at my hesitation. "But? He sounds perfect to me."



I grimaced a little and stretched my legs out on the red and blue blanket we had brought with us. "But he's not perfect. At all. He is completely compulsive to the point he can hardly function. He is alarmingly socially awkward. And half the time he acts like a forty five year old man hell bent on maintaining a perfect lifestyle at the expense of actually living his life."

Angela leaned back on her palms, her legs crossed. "And the other half of the time?"

I smiled at the thought of the other Edward. "The rest of the time he is like a seventeen year old boy who loves gadgets, fast cars and hiding from his family."

We laughed at the thought and my fingers found a tuft of grass on the edge of the blanket and I began pulling at it softly. "But then, there is something else. I don't know what it is. It runs deeper. Sometimes it scares me and other times it just pulls me to him like whatever he's hiding is the most amazing thing I could ever desire. Like *he* is the most amazing thing I could ever desire." She caught my eye and I confessed, "He also has this whole 'tortured soul' quality. Somehow he's damaged and I just want to help fix him."

I continued my grass molestation while Angela was oddly quiet. The field around us was filling up with happy festival goers and I finally heard her say, "Bella. That sounds really intense. But, you can't save people, you know that."

Paranoid I'd told too much, I mumbled, "I know. I don't know why, but I am so drawn to him. Well, part of it may be the fact I think he may be Batman. You should see his car." And I rambled on about the convertible for a while and our date trying to lighten the mood. I did not tell her about the Quileute legend, Bree or Edward's cool touch. Those were my thoughts to ponder and I wasn't prepared to share.

Luckily, Ben and Tyler came back carrying plastic cups of beer, and the music started and the night flew by. Tyler was great, he seemed perfectly clear we were nothing more than friends, which made it more bearable to listen to his conversations about B movies and horror film costumes. By dark, we were having a great time dancing and spilling drinks all over ourselves, and as I breathed in the cool summer night air, I realized how nice it was to get out and enjoy life a little. I had definitely spent too much time cooped up indoors all summer.

Before the final act began, I decided to make a bathroom run while the crowds were low. "Hey guys I'm going to go run to the restrooms over there, the one by the beer truck," I said, pointing to the well lit pavilion.

"Do you want company?" Tyler asked.

I laughed. "No, you know it will take you half the time in the men's room as it takes me in the women's. Plus you'll miss too much of the show. I'll be right back." And I darted through the crowds.

The line snaked out the door and around the side, still crowded, even at this point in the show. I waited patiently until something caught my eye.

Leaning against the wall was a small girl with long dark hair, her back was to me but when she turned I could see the side of her face I immediately recognized her.

Bree.

I hopped out of line and called out, "Hey!" To which she didn't respond and actually began walking away.

"Bree!" I yelled over the music and crowds, picking up my pace, trying to find her in the mass of people. I felt like an idiot following this little girl. I didn't know her of course, but I had this intense connection to her. Maybe this is what my dreams were about. Maybe I was supposed to be the one to find her.

She was several people ahead, swiftly ducking between people, just beyond my reach. I, on the other hand, felt the crush of the crowd as I stepped on one woman's foot and had a full beer cup spilled on my shoes as I

struggled through. I lost her for a moment and a swell of panic rose up in my chest. The need to find her, to make sure she was safe, was overwhelming.

Thankfully a moment later I spotted her ahead, breaking through the swell of people, scooting past the First Aid tent and into a darker area of the field. I used two hands to push a couple off of me that was more involved in making out than anything else, and eventually I freed myself from the throngs of people.

"Bree!" I called louder this time, since she had quite the distance on me, and I was relieved to see her slow her pace and look around for who was calling her name.

I started running a little. If it was her, I had to catch up, I had to help her. I'd been dreaming about her for weeks and I knew her parents must be worried sick. I couldn't believe she was here, in front of me.

What I couldn't figure out was why she was back here all alone. If she wasn't being held against her wishes why was she wandering around the festival? I stopped running as it dawned on me that maybe things weren't as they seemed with this girl. It was too late for me to stop though. I had to know if she was okay. She'd haunted me, and there was no way I was letting her loose until I found out she was okay.

We were close to the edge of the field but the lights from the concert were still illuminating the area, casting a shadowy glow over the grass. I was breathing heavily from running and was glad to see her finally stop and turn towards me.

"Bree?" I questioned. "Is that you?" It was hard for me to see her face the way she was standing.

"I'm Bree. Who are you?" she said in a small weird voice. I recalled she was just a teenager and she would probably be worried about a stranger approaching.

I took a tentative step towards her, "I'm Bella. I saw your photo on a poster at my coffee shop. Your parents are looking for you. Are you okay?"

Her upper lip curled slightly and I watched as she inhaled deeply. The gesture was oddly familiar and Edward's face flashed in my mind. She turned fully towards me and said, "I'm fine, Bella. In fact, I was sent here to find you. Thank you for making it so easy." She took another breath through her nose. "You smell heavenly."

Sent to find me? I peered at her in the darkness while my internal alarms began to sound. I found her eyes in the darkness.

Rubies.

Bree's face was pale and hollow. Her eyes shone bright red and she had a maniacal expression on her face. This was not the little girl whose picture I obsessed over and dreamt about night after night. This girl was a monster, like...

Oh no, oh no, oh no.....

I heard a branch snap beside me and I looked over quickly. In the odd lighting I could see a halo of red.

No. This couldn't be happening.

Not again.

"Awww... you're not happy to see me?" Victoria purred. "I've come to visit you more than once. We even left you a gift. But I was a little disappointed that you didn't send a thank you card. You know, one of those pieces was an antique and very special to James," Victoria said, and I cringed at her cryptic words.

I found my voice, "I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

I thought I heard Bree make a sound like a hiss under Victoria's booming laughter. She cocked her head in question and said, "Your boyfriend didn't tell you about your gift? How selfish of him."

I'd heard that once, keep them talking and never let them take you to a second location. I wanted to smack myself for remembering something like that, when clearly it would be useless against a psychopathic stalker. But I tried anyway, "My boyfriend?"

In a flash, Victoria stood in front of me and reached out towards my face. Her ragged fingernail scraped across the contours of my cheek and she brushed my chin with her impossibly smooth and cool hand.

Smooth and cool.

I shook her off, but for the second time, the image of Edward appeared in my mind and this time it made me stop.

"You think Edward's my boyfriend." I stated more than asked, finally making the connection. I hastily took a step backwards, trying to get some space between us.

She gave me an odd smirk and said, "Of course he is. He's your mate. Or he wants you to be, I guess." She laughed and stole a glance at Bree who looked like she was coming down from a high. Victoria made a cooing sound in her direction, "I know you're hungry young one, but you know the rules. Only James tastes the blood of this treasure."

Her words slid around me like pieces of a puzzle, sometimes they didn't fit but others were interlocking and everything looked clearer.

Before I could stop myself I whispered, "Vampire."

Victoria cackled at the word, "Welcome to the game, Bella. Everyone has been playing around you. Now you can play with us too. Although it is too bad you don't get to pick which side you want to play on."

I saw the evil glint in her eye, similar to last time. My feet began moving instinctively, propelling me towards the crowds but it was futile. Before I could even move, Bree was behind me, hands clasped around my upper arms. I could feel her cool breath on my neck as she inhaled and exhaled slowly. She smelled fresh, like lemon, but when I looked down her hands were filthy, covered in a thick coat of grime.

I felt pathetic but there was no way I could fight her off. She was inhuman and had been stalking me. She was determined to take me to 'James' and I didn't see how I could stop her. Victoria looked around my now shaking frame, settled her eyes on Bree and said, "Young one, you can touch, but do not taste." And she put one hand on top of Bree's and said in a vicious tone, "But do not damage her or we will all pay."

I shuddered from Victoria's words and tried to fight back the tears that were threatening to spill. She spoke so freely of my death, as though it was inevitable. Desperate, I tried the last thing I could think of, hoping someone would stumble upon us and save me from this impossible nightmare.

"Victoria, what do you mean Edward wants me for his mate?" I said shakily.

Bree never loosened her grip but Victoria did pause for a moment before giving me an amused eye and asking, "You really don't know?"

I shook my head nervously confused by this whole line of conversation but enthralled at the same time. Softly I replied, "I have no idea what you are talking about."

Victoria's amusement turned to hysterical laughter and she tossed her head back, forcing her red hair to shake in waves over her shoulders. From behind me, I heard small giggles coming from the demonic girl holding me prisoner.

"Well this makes everything so much more interesting. See, James is *my* mate. My partner, my other half. We've been companions for decades."

I knew my face betrayed my disbelief as I processed this information. Decades? Victoria couldn't be older than me. She moved closer, so close, I could see the thick rows of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her

movements were unnaturally fast and disconcerting, and my eyes couldn't keep up with the level of speed. She smirked. "It's what our kind does. And Edward wants you as his mate."

Slowly it unfolded in my mind, almost like a series of photographs. Edward. I thought of his habits, the secrets, the lies. Why he was so young yet appeared so old. His cool hands and cryptic words. I considered the lack of food or drink in his home, his strength and beauty.

The look of hunger in his eyes. My heart lurched into my throat.

Edward was a vampire.

No.

Victoria's head nodded. "Yes, you're boyfriend is just like me. And like Bree behind you. Well, not just like us, he has chosen an "alternative" lifestyle." She rolled her eyes at this and continued, "Regardless, you don't belong to him and James wants you more, and whatever James wants I will give him. Because that is what a mate does for the other."

She turned and walked into the woods with no other words. Bree's fingers dug into my arms harder as she pushed me along taking me with them, back to this man named James. Also a vampire.

Edward was a vampire. Victoria and Bree were vampires.

Bree released my arms when she realized I was no longer resisting, and pushed me ahead into the forest. I stumbled and fell more than once, and her small hands yanked me up from the ground. I flinched knowing the bruises would be worse than last time. Slowly the realization took over that it no longer mattered. Bruises, cuts, and heartache no longer mattered. These two creatures were marching me to my death.

Xxx

EPOV

I was panicking.

I closed my eyes in the middle of the crowd and tried to get my bearings. One minute she was standing in the line for the restroom and the next she was gone.

Her silent mind shut me out and I was blind. Thrusting my hands into my hair, I dropped to my knees in frustration in the middle of the park. I knew I was over reacting, but ever since she told me she was coming here I had a sense of dread. There were too many people. It was too easy for them to get to her and for me to lose her.

I rocked back on my heels and listened.

*This band is great....hey, ass face....if he touches me one more time...I wonder how long the beer truck stays open after the band finishes...*

My gift was a blessing and a curse. In a crowd of two thousand people it was a curse straight from the devil. Finding Bella among this crowd was literally like looking for a needle in a haystack. Even my vampire eyes weren't that good.

I pulled out my phone, stabbing my finger at the button going to the only person who could maybe find her if I couldn't.

"Where is she, Alice?" I spit out with unnecessary hostility. She didn't deserve it.

"Bella?" She asked, knowing there was only one 'she' I would be concerned about. "What's wrong?"

"You can't see her?" I asked, the unfounded panic rising again.

"Ummm...." The phone went silent and I began pacing around the park, looking for any sign of Bella. I couldn't catch her sent over the overpowering odors of food, drinks and sweat.

"Alice?" I asked tentatively this time.

"Edward, all I see is her in the woods at some point. She won't be alone and she is not going willingly. Other than that it's shifting and moving too quickly. Whatever happens isn't determined. The only thing I know for sure is you need to find her in the forest." Alice stated.

I closed the phone and wove through the thick crowd. I had no choice but to ignore their blaring thoughts and obnoxious minds. I passed a couple engaged in a deep kiss and sighed with relief when I smelled Bella on the back of the man's shirt. She must have come this way and brushed into him.

I saw the First Aid Tent ahead and thought maybe she had gone there. It was likely with her level of clumsiness. She wasn't there but I found indentions in the grass just beyond the tent. There were two sets of footprints, one possibly running behind the other both leading to the shadowy darkness towards the forest.

What would make Bella come into the darkness like this? I wondered and was instantly hit by a scent wafting in the breeze. I'd smelled it before, at Bella's home and on the necklace left on the door.

Bree.

I groaned, knowing that only this little girl could lure Bella away from safety, and I berated myself for not telling her to stay away if she saw her. But what could I do? Comments like that would only force her to ask more questions and cause me to tell more lies. It was an unfortunate cycle I was hoping to break.

I picked up my pace and opened my thoughts, trying to catch hold of Bree's mind. I could only hear the faint murmurs from the distancing crowd and the music from behind me. I could smell her, though, and it was becoming stronger as I approached the edge.

Suddenly, I was struck by a different scent, Victoria's and I realized she had been here as well. Bella's odor was strong, filled with adrenaline and fear and I felt the panic surge through my body again.

*Hungry....soft skin, flowers, grrrr....* Bree's thoughts were unfocused, immature, and unpredictable. Her ideas were followed by the image of Bella's neck. *My neck.*

The vision sent me into a rage and I pummeled through the trees and brush, with a viciousness I'd never felt before.

I saw them up ahead. Small and wild, red and dangerous, and lastly, timid and scared. My eyes zeroed in on Bella being manhandled by Bree as I crashed towards them. I cringed at the sight of her filthy hands touching Bella's fragile skin. Her fingers were pressed in, causing Bella to flinch, and the thought of her pain caused my fury to rise. Her body was mine and mine alone to worship and their disrespect would cost them heavily.

Ahead, Victoria heard me coming. I could see it in her mind as I raced in her direction. Her mind began processing escape plans and considering how angry James would be if she failed to bring his treasure back. She waived for a moment, weighing the fact she knew I was here for Bella not necessarily her. She made her decision quickly, flight being her best weapon of defense and before I fully reached them, she fled into the darkness of the forest.

Bree paused at the sudden disappearance of Victoria and jerked Bella to a stop. Bella yelped and cowered a little from the pain. I winced with her and decided how to proceed. Bree was a newborn and very powerful. Bella had no idea what was coming, and I didn't want to shock her with what I may have to do to save her. Regardless, I made my decision quickly.

"Bree," I said, lower than Bella could hear, in an attempt to not startle her.

The newborn turned to me, placing Bella between me and her. Bella's eyes widened with...hope? Fear? I wasn't sure. I was never sure. Her face was pained and her skin splotchy and red. And I felt my face tilt to the side, longing to reach out for her.

I heard a hiss and my eyes snapped back towards Bree, and I directed with venom in my words, "Take your hands off her."

I saw her fingers fumble, as though she wanted to but instead she tightened her grip causing Bella to whimper in pain. I pulled my eyes towards Bella and realized she was close to slipping into shock. Her eyes were unfocused and she had yet to utter a word of recognition.

Bree began speaking in her young, high pitched voice, "You can't save her. No one saved me, and look at you. You're no different. Just because your eyes are gold and not red doesn't take away what you really are."

My eyes flickered to Bella's and I breathed a perverted sigh of relief that she still seemed dazed and unable to understand her words.

"Bree. Take your hands off. Or I will take them off for you. Like James. You saw what happened to him." I said, and watched in horror as her fingers moved this time but instead of dropping to the side, they pushed to Bella's head and twisted, exposing her neck.

I lunged forward, thrusting my body between the two, shoving Bella aside as gently as possible. I heard her stumble to the ground but Bree was my priority. Her newborn mentality came out in full force as she growled and hissed at me. She was barely two months old. Hunger and the desire to fight were the primal urges that coursed through her infected veins, and now that Victoria abandoned her she had no reason not to follow her instincts.

Pushing thoughts of Bella aside, I dove at the newborn and began my task of tearing her limb from limb. She howled like an animal in pain until there was nothing left. She may have been stronger, but I was smarter and more disciplined. It was really no match.

I had no idea how much Bella had seen or what she understood but at some point she crawled far away from me and began retching in the dark, dank forest. A feeling of absolute dread filled my body as I preformed the ritual of burning the body and I realized my opportunity to have this woman had been completely shattered.

I knew all along she wasn't mine to have. I was placed here to protect her. My need for her was irreversible but now that she knew, really knew, I was wasn't some fairy tale or folk legend passed on by generations of old men, but in fact the real monster that haunted her dreams, there was no way she would want me in return.

I covered the remains with dirt, stamping out the fire, and tentatively walked towards her with my hands in an open gesture. "Bella?" I called her name and waited with fear for her response.

She was sitting on the ground, her pants smeared with dirt from kneeling on the ground to vomit. Her pale arms covered in purple bruises and she rubbed them unconsciously. She looked up at me with confusion and apprehension in her eyes.

I dropped to my knees in front of her and whispered, "I'm so sorry. I promised you and I failed."

My knees pressed into the soft dirt and we sat in the quiet of the forest together. The energy between us had shifted. The air was filled with pain and fear. When she remained silent I pushed my desperation aside, and twisted my neck to make eye contact.

"I won't hurt you. I promise. Let me take you back." I said in an even tone, unsure of what she was thinking.

I attempted to help her to her feet. She flinched at my touch, so I distanced myself from her once she was stable. Her eyes were clouded and she was mute. Mouth and mind. The only sounds were our feet on the dirt and her erratically beating heart.

She stumbled through the forest, arms wrapped around her body. She couldn't see clearly, as it had grown too dark, so occasionally I was forced to point out a tree or branch or hesitantly nudge her the right way. It was so far removed from our gentle touches last night. The excitement and flare were gone. My touch now repulsed her just as I always feared it would.

I'd lost her.

I had her and I lost her.

We made it to the edge of the forest and we could see the lights on the field. The music had stopped and people were gathering their things to leave. I had to address the situation. I had no choice. It was for her safety and my own.

"Bella," I said softly.

Her head tilted upwards and her eyes slid towards mine but never fully focused.

"I know what you saw back there was," I forced myself to be honest, "disturbing. But I really need you to keep what you saw to yourself."

She swallowed deeply and finally spoke, her voice was shaky and low, "Who would I tell Edward? What would I say? That I'm being hunted by a pack of deranged monsters? That deep in these woods are the burnt remains of a missing little girl that will never be seen again? That I finally thought I found the man of my dreams and he's..." She gasped for air as the words and tears rolled down her face. "Not *human*?" The last word came out in a strangled whisper.

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. She thought she found the man of her dreams and all I was, was a monster. I couldn't respond, since everything she said was true. Instead, I held her gaze, hoping she understood what she needed to do.

Bella steeled herself for a moment. She wiped her eyes with the back of a dirty hand and I watched as her chin jutted out in determination. "I'm not telling anyone anything, Edward. Your secret is safe with me."



## Chapter Eighteen

BPOV

I sat on the bed, legs crossed under me, and my fingers shoved into my closed eyelids. If I pushed hard enough I could see stars flutter across the darkness of my lids and pretend I was floating in space.

I'd learned this when I was young, maybe five or six years old. Buddy, my family dog, died and when my mother came to tell me I refused to acknowledge the truth. Instead I ran from the house to the empty lot on the corner of my street where I sat in the middle of the overgrown weeds and grass and shoved my fingers in my eyes in an attempt to pretend I was somewhere else. In the dry, desert air I allowed myself to float away from the tragedy of losing my best friend. My mother tried to lure me back home with promises of cookies and ice cream. My father threatened to punish me, but nothing worked. When I was finally ready to accept the truth I rose from the trampled grass and walked home. From then on, when I experienced

something particularly painful, I would shut my eyes and attempt to disappear. Objects don't touch in space. They swim around one another, magically weaving in and out without making contact. It was the perfect place to hide.

This is how I spent the week. I refused to get up for work or take a shower. I huddled on my bed, sticky with humidity from the hot August air, and floated soundlessly in my own sense of space. Occasionally I would gasp for air, realizing though there was no oxygen in the atmosphere for me to inhale. I existed in an endless bubble where everything transpired in slow motion. There were no sudden movements; everything was smooth, muffled, and lethargic.

Angela came in and spoke to me but her words no longer made sense. They came out garbled and confused, all variations of the same question. "Are you okay?"

I'd pull my fingers from my eyes, blinded momentarily by the light and mutter, "It's the flu, I'll be fine," before returning to my state of semi-consciousness.

But I wasn't okay. I wasn't sure what I was. It wasn't quite fear. I had accepted that night that I was surely meant to die. My dreams told me so. Victoria had told me so. Who was I to question fate?

I also wasn't especially confused. The information that Edward and the others were vampires only made things clearer. The murkiness and mystery were set aside, revealing the cold, stark truth.

My boss and friend was a murderer. A demon. He was a creature of the night. It was possible he slept in a coffin and transformed into a bat. How was I to know? What I did know was that I'd seen him tear a young girl to pieces while I watched. His swift movements came faster than my eyes could comprehend but I saw his strong, flawless body take command and destroy the girl who was determined to steal my life. I observed the pain and anguish written on his face as he came to me as I cowered in shock, bruised and damaged. I vomited that night in the woods not from fear, but from the fact that as I watched him everything became tragically clear.

I knew that the man of my dreams wasn't human. He was involved with some greater society of other worldliness that I couldn't even begin to process. I knew though, even before Victoria explained to me, that Edward wanted me to be his mate. Before she fully explained what those words meant, I knew.

Edward and I were connected by something larger than either of us.

I pulled my fingers from my eyes and rubbed them a little, acclimating them to the light. I was ready to come down from space and enter the land of the living and accept what lie in front of me.

Xxx

EPOV

I pushed the image of Bella, injured and distraught, out of my head while I ran through the wilderness of eastern Washington. The trail ran cold two hundred miles east of Seattle, and as I circled the area desperately trying to recover the scent, I finally broke. Deep in the woods I used the quiet and isolation to succumb to the anger and despair over the loss of Bella.

When Bella told me she was going to the concert I declined her invitation but knew I would follow to keep her safe. Alice checked Bella's night and all she saw was her and her friends having a good time. I was so in tune with her scent and pulse that I was sure keeping up with her wouldn't be an issue. She could have fun and I could have peace.

Hiding among the festival goers, I listened as Bella and Angela discussed our date the prior night. Her friend was interested in all the details and her questions allowed me an insight into Bella's closed thoughts. She was excited about our night together, which was clear from her bright eyes and red tinted cheeks. And



when Angela asked her if we'd had sex I almost choked, horrified at the bluntness, yet I found myself leaning towards the two of them, desperate to hear her reaction.

She quickly denied any contact between us, although the smile never left her face, and I thought I could see a trace of interest in her eyes. The idea that Bella could be interested in me the same way I wanted her was thrilling, even though it was tempered by the reality of our situation. Some things may not be possible even if the opportunity arose. I preemptively pushed these thoughts aside and settled into my surroundings, prepared to observe until the girls were safely back home.

My failure came when Bella struck out on her own, away from her friends. She was in my line of vision the entire time but a swell of people thickened between us and in an instant she was gone. I truly thought she had more sense, but I hadn't anticipated Bree being the one to lure Bella away. She had told me the night before that the missing girl was monopolizing her nightmares, so when she saw her she was instantly intrigued. I was so blinded by my obsession with Bella that I had underestimated the danger of James and his coven.

In the forest, miles from home, I picked up a large boulder that was wedged into the shoulder of a cliff, and I heaved it as far as I could throw. My muscles strained under the weight, and the feeling of pressure momentarily took away the pain in my heart. I listened as it crashed through branches and eventually fell in the dark with a loud thud, breaking the stillness of the night.

"Feeling better?" I heard from beside me.

It was Carlisle. I had heard him moments before as he searched the area for me, following my frenzied trail through the forest.

I ignored the question, since he knew the answer already, and sat on a wet log on the forest floor. Taking my silence as permission to continue, he sat next to me and said, "Emmett is at Bella's keeping watch. Alice is in hysterics, having missed this again. She is convinced something is wrong with her and that she's losing her touch. Rosalie and Esme are doing what they can to calm her down.

Like a child I fumed, "You're here keeping tabs on me, so where is Jasper?" The years of independence were slow to shift aside. Reaching out to Bella forced me to reach out to my family as well. I needed them and part of me hated it. It was one thing for my family to see me when I was happy or successful. It was another for them to find me in pain, licking the wounds of my failures.

"Jasper is doing some research. He may have a lead on the jewelry left at Bella's house," he said. He showed me images of the brooch and Jasper leaving town.

We sat in silence. Even through the recent strains in our relationship we had always been connected. He created me, nurtured me, accepted my flaws. In many ways he replaced the father I had lost. There were times when I rebelled against him and his ways and then there were times that I made him proud. Our relationship was complex yet eternal, constantly shifting with the passing of time, yet always fundamentally the same.

I thought of these things when I asked, "How much do you know?" I was hesitant to admit my failure, but prepared for his reproach.

I could see Carlisle clearly in the darkness. Part of the vampire package was perfect night vision. Even now I could see the purple blemishes under his eyes, indicating his need to feed. He looked sad and worried and his thoughts reflected this as well.

"Alice saw Bella wander off once she made the decision to follow Bree. She then saw you find her shortly thereafter and Victoria's decision to run didn't come until later. Victoria was avoiding making a decision until just before and apparently kept Bree in the dark until necessary. They seem to know Alice's gift well." He explained all of this, but didn't bring up *what happened*.

He wasn't going to bring it up. He would wait for me to speak of it and tell him in my own words how my world came crashing down. I scuffed my toe in the dirt, pushing aside years of leaves and decay. I didn't want to say it out loud. But I had to.

"I've lost her you know." I mused, almost more for myself than for him.

He didn't speak for a minute but his mind ran through the options of what could happen now that Bella knew the truth, and the consequences of her finding out in such a traumatic way. Carlisle was always a doctor first.

"Humans are resilient and if she loves you..." he trailed off because it was more of a question than a statement.

Uncomfortable, I stood up and walked several paces away and finally said, "I'm not sure if she does. She possibly would have but now..." I paused, grimacing at the truth, "I disposed of Bree in front of her, Carlisle. It was brutal. Bree had a newborn's strength and I was forced to fight her. I just don't know how Bella will recover from that. Or ever see me as more than a monster."

Carlisle remained calmly sitting on the log, his blonde hair looking silver in the moonlight. "Edward, you need to give her time. Alice is convinced she won't tell, which means for now you have to just wait this out. Your position in the community is too respected for her to risk the humiliation of revealing the truth, but it is going to be hard on her. You just need to let her have the space to decide if this is something she can adjust to."

I knew he was right. He always was. Carlisle was the rational one. He was the member of the family that took his time researching and patiently waiting for results. I would have thought I was the same way until Bella entered my life.

I found his eyes in the darkness and said quietly, "I've waited so long for her. I'm not sure I can bear it if she doesn't want me."

I felt his arm sling across my shoulders, and he gripped the side of my arm tightly. "I felt the same way when I first met and treated Esme. I knew then that there was something between us, but the time wasn't right. So I waited and eventually, after more than two hundred years, I was blessed with my match. If you push Bella I have no doubt she will run. Her brain has to absorb this information and digest it. You're stronger than you realize and you mustn't be a burden to her."

I nodded in the darkness and I heard him laugh softly, "I know this is painful for you Edward. Patience is not one of your virtues. But if you think she is worth it you can wait."

We sat in silence for awhile after this, Carlisle eventually left to hunt and I traveled back the way I came, running hard and fast to clear my mind. I forced myself to go home and not go directly to Bella's. Emmett was there and he would take care of her if necessary. I was determined to give her space, as much as I could, while she processed this through. But I also decided that I would wait and watch and remain close by so that when she was ready I would be there.

Xxx

BPOV

I woke to the darkness of night, the air thick with heat and damp with unbearable humidity. With a shaking hand I pushed the sticky hair off my forehead and flopped back on my pillow. Now that I had pulled out of my denial I had to face the reality of my situation. I finally allowed myself to think about Edward and where he was or what he may be doing.

Up until this point neither of us had made a move. I skipped work and didn't even attempt to call in and make excuses. Edward had been noticeably absent from my life as well. I had become used to his phone

calls, drop-ins, and heroic visits in my dreams. I hadn't heard from him since the concert and it was clear he wasn't going to contact me first. If ever.

During my seclusion my mind divided into two separate theologies. One firmly believed that I had made up the entire event. That it was simply another one of my vivid dreams and I needed to get a grip on reality. I considered that I may have been so giddy from my date with Edward that I fabricated this situation so I could run away and not address his flaws.

The other struggled through nightmares, inspected the vicious purplish bruises on my arms, and cried over the death of a young girl.

I knew which one was real.

My nightmares had turned into something worse. Reality. They turned into a familiar play by play of the actual events except for the end. In my dream Edward doesn't save me, instead I'm left marching to the thick, dark forest. I realize immediately that my fear is not about Bree or Victoria or this other man, the vampire named James, they are taking me to. Those things I'm prepared for. I am accepting of my fate. I stumble after Victoria in the forest and I feel my heart wedged in my chest, panic rising in my throat, as I wait for him to appear. But he doesn't, and even in my sleep I fear he never would.

Except tonight. He was there, lingering in the shadows of the forest, waiting to reveal himself in my dreams. I could feel his presence, the static rolling from his body, the intensity of his eyes behind the cover of darkness. Before he showed himself, I lurched out of my heavy sleep still aware of the tinges of electrical current smoldering in the air.

The air crackled around me and I suddenly became terribly self aware, I stilled on the bed, listening to the quiet of the apartment. To the utter, impossible silence of my room. I could hear nothing, feel nothing but the spark in the air and I was compelled to find out. I sat up quickly, tensed, and whispered, "Edward?"

My ears strained against the night, only noticing the faint whine of the appliances, when I heard him.

"I'm here." His voice was soft and more alluring than I'd remembered.

My body had mixed reactions to the sound of his voice. I felt my muscles relax but I was acutely aware of the erratic thumping of my heart in the otherwise silent room. The small space was engulfed with an electric surge that frightened me and I found my hands grasping for the edge of the quilt and pulling it over my body protectively.

As though a blanket could protect me from him.

The room was smothered in darkness. I couldn't see him, there were no outlines or shapes to make out in the room, but I felt him near me.

I took a slow steady breath and said, "Why are you here?"

He didn't answer right away and I thought the air may suck out of the room. Eventually he whispered, "I couldn't help it, this is where you are."

His confession knocked me back into my pillow. A bubble of fear rose in my chest. I wasn't afraid of Edward. Not really, but Victoria's words were stamped in my mind. Edward wanted me for his *mate*.

I pushed these thoughts aside, unable to process them, and did what came naturally to me in awkward situations. I swallowed and joked into the tense darkness, "Don't you have to get permission or something to enter my house?"

I heard him laugh bitterly under his breath, "No. That's...ummm, no."

"Should I get out my holy water or garlic? I hid some under the bed." I pushed again, easing the oppressive pressure in the room.

I waited for his laughter to wash over me but it never came, instead he groaned. "God Bella. How can you make jokes about this?"

I rolled to my side, pulling my blanket up to my chin, and peered for him in the dark room again, in the direction of his voice, but couldn't locate him. It was better this way. We could speak more freely in the dark. He could do whatever he wanted and I would never see it coming. I was at his mercy.

"What am I supposed to do? Start screaming? Run away? I don't think that would turn out so well for me." I sighed, again avoiding the reality of these thoughts.

"Are you afraid of me?"

"No. Not really."

The words sank in the air. I had no idea if it was appropriate. I wasn't afraid but had no idea if I should have been. The other side of the question was left unspoken.

"How did you get in here?"

"Through the front door. I have a key."

A chill ran down my spine and realization took hold.

"You've been here before. At night? While I'm asleep?" I knew the answer to this. I had felt him in the room every time I woke up. His soft thumb on my lip, his cool breath in the air.

"Yes."

Again we were silent. I was thinking of my next question. He was probably bracing himself for my words.

"You were in my dreams. You saved me time and time again. But then you didn't." I absently reached my finger up to my lips to rub it like he had done so many times before.

My skin never touched the flesh of my lip; his hand was there, cool and firm, guiding it away while his own took its place. I sucked in a breath of surprise but reveled under the familiar yet gentle caress of his thumb. He stroked my bottom lip tenderly and I froze in my spot afraid to move. It was a stark contrast to the brutality I'd witnessed in the forest. There were at least two sides of Edward Cullen and I didn't know which one to trust.

"I'll always be here to save you." He choked and pulled his hand away.

I was trembling from his touch. Something so simple lit a spark in my body and I was immediately consumed with fear and intoxication. I craved his touch and his presence but I knew this was all horribly wrong.

Tension in the room grew thick, and I feared he would leave, so I allowed my curiosity to take over. This situation was unreal but I was in the middle of it. I had questions that needed answers and I realized this may be my only chance.

I took a deep breath and plunged in head first, "I have some questions I would like answered."

He was quiet for a moment, probably shocked by my brashness. But then again, probably not. He cautiously answered, "I suspected as much. Go ahead."

"Why are your eyes gold, and Victoria and Bree's are red?"

I heard him shift from his position across the room. "It is the difference between us. They consume human blood. My family and I only drink from animals."

I absorbed this information. I heard the words, but was having a hard time working it through my mind until it made sense.

"Animals."

"We hunt for animals in the forests and we, umm, drink from them." His voice was laced with disgust but also defensive. "Being a monster wasn't a choice any of us made, but we do make choices about how we live."

Bree and Victoria's words came back to me. They said something about Edward living an 'alternative lifestyle'. I could only assume they didn't approve of saving humans when they appeared to get so much joy from killing them.

He was waiting for me to speak again and I mulled my next question. "Have you ever killed a human?" I finally asked.

His answer was quick and sharp. "Yes."

The tension rose dramatically but sitting in the dark next to a killer I was forced to ask the most obvious yet inane question. "Do you want to kill me?"

He paused this time. Almost for too long and my heart was pounding so loudly in my ears I didn't know if I would hear him when he finally answered.

"Yes. No. I don't want to kill you now, but I did," his voice was quiet and strained. "More than you can understand."

His words were shocking and harsh. Truthful. He was attempting to be truthful even in this situation. He promised me he would never lie again and I now knew this was true.

I curled myself in a tight ball, wrapped under a thin summer quilt and I almost begged, "Help me. Help me understand."

"I don't know Bella. I just..." The self-hatred was evident. Edward didn't want to hurt me. I knew this from his touch, his actions, but his nature compelled him to. I could hear this in his words. I sat back up and leaned forward a little hoping to feel his tug, his pull.

"When I first saw you, or even before, your scent filled the house and it was exquisite. I'd never smelled anything so...divine." I heard him inhale slowly, deeply, and my hands clenched at the sound of desire in his voice.

"Everything about you draws me in. The steady beat of your heart. The smell of your fear. The pulsing veins running down your neck. Your blood calls to me Bella, like none before." His voice was tight as though he was struggling with himself, and suddenly I felt a flutter of air. The next time he spoke he was farther away, somewhere across the room. "I'm sorry."

I was still sitting on the bed, my fingers nervously picking at the fraying edge of the blanket and said, "Don't be sorry for things you can't control Edward."

I couldn't figure out what to say other than that. Edward admitted he was a vampire and that he desperately wanted to kill me. Before. Not now. He also admitted, although in few words, that he was still drawn to me. That he was here because he wanted to be close to me.

Minutes passed and I heard the latch of the door click as he opened it. A sliver of light filled the room from the hallway and I could see his faint outline. "I want you to know that I won't hurt you and I will keep my promise. Victoria and James will not harm you either. I will keep my distance but I will be watching to make sure you're safe."

I opened my mouth to say something. Anything, but the words wouldn't form. He opened the door further and I could see him fully now. His hair was ruffled as though he had been running his hands through it

constantly, and he was wearing a plain black t-shirt and jeans that were both wrinkled. His eyes were so dark, almost black. He was beautiful and tortured and not human.

We stared at one another, both disheveled and lost. I blinked and he was gone. The only sound was the door shifting back into place and once again I was in the dark.



## Chapter Nineteen

### *Chapter Songs:*

[Angels And Airwaves – A Little's Enough](#)

[Angels And Airways – Good Day](#)

EPOV

The days passed slowly following my late night talk with Bella. In order to distract myself I hunted, researched, and attempted to locate James and his coven. From the reports in the news, I suspected he had abducted at least two more people during the last several weeks, most likely in an attempt to replace the loss of Riley and Bree.

Jasper was focused on finding the origin of the brooch. Emmett and Rosalie settled in to watch Bella, which forced me to keep my distance. I was back to patrolling the streets at night to see what information or leads I could come up with. I kept an eye on the Quileute who worked in the coffee shop in case her furry friends decided to join the fight, but so far there had been no sign of contact.

As I roamed the busy commercial district, my thoughts always drifted back to Bella. Her reaction the night she awoke to me in her bedroom had not been what I expected. Honestly, I didn't truly know what to expect, but Bella always surprised me. She had been nervous and apprehensive when she discovered me in her room. I could hear this in the increased tempo of her heart and in her wavering voice, but I also knew she wasn't truly afraid of me. She was cautious, and had questions, all of which I tried to answer the best I could. If she wanted to know more, I would have shared, but only when she approached me. I was afraid to give her more information than she was ready for.

When I left her room that night, I knew I had to leave contact up to her. I definitely planned on keeping watch over her, the James and Victoria situation was too dangerous not to, but I wouldn't cross the lines of entering her home again until she asked. I knew if I wanted her back in my life I had to give her a chance to work through the situation.

Emmett had become very protective of her during his days and nights watching her. He'd developed a soft spot for her clumsy nature and biting sense of humor. She was fine, he promised, allowing that she was simply staying at home and he overheard her tell Angela more than once she still recovering from the flu. Surprisingly, Rosalie also seemed intrigued by the human I'd chosen, and kept her normal scorn and hostility to herself for once. I knew she wasn't happy about spending her time guarding a human, but she was concerned about the threat James posed to our family and our life in Washington, so she kept her criticisms to a minimum.

The minute I left her room that night, my phone began ringing nonstop, and when I finally answered, it was Alice begging me to allow her to visit Bella. I was firm in my response. Alice was not to have contact with

her while we were in this situation. We fought over this for days, until I was forced to go to Carlisle to have him speak with agreed that we all needed to give her time and space, allowing Bella to have the opportunity to make the first contact. Although Alice had no problem nagging me until I relented, she unequivocally respected Carlisle's opinion and dropped the subject for the time being.

Xxx

It was after dark the night Emmett and Jasper burst into my office, where I had been sitting at my desk, solemn and brooding, as I watched tapes of Bella innocently working around the house. I was completely enthralled by the way she performed the most common tasks and activities.

When I realized they were in the doorway, I snapped off the monitor quickly and busied myself with the paperwork in front of me.

"Too late, Edward." Emmett laughed, as Jasper gave me a sympathetic nod, since he obviously could feel my immense humiliation. I grimaced as Emmett continued, "You should realize we have super hearing as well. Stop being the pervy stalker we all know you are and listen to what Alice told us." Emmett declared, and if I could have, I'm sure my face would have been red from the humiliation of being caught.

I stood up and Jasper said, "Alice had a vision of a cabin in the woods. She thinks it may be where James and Victoria are hiding out."

We were out the door in a second, and Jasper filled me in on the rest of the limited details as we hurried down the stairs. "She isn't sure where it is, but she thinks it's on the outskirts of the city. Other than that it wasn't clear. We're just going to have to search."

I agreed and we entered the garage. Piling in the Belvedere, with the top down, I drove out of the city and we combed the valleys trying to catch the scent of James and his followers. An hour before dawn we were successful, and found a small, wooden cabin reeking of vampires nestled in a thick grove of trees and backing up to the forest. Quietly, we forced our way inside, only to find the home recently abandoned but clearly having been the resting place of a group of vampires. James and Victoria's scents were all over the house, confirming that we found the right place. We spent some time familiarizing ourselves with the others' distinct smells as well. In all, it seemed James had been able to turn and maintain approximately ten vampires for his army. Not a huge undertaking for us, but they were primarily newborns whose strength and hunger was not to be underestimated. Jasper, who was familiar with the vampire army concept, was certain that keeping a group this large in close quarters would only cause the newborns to fight amongst themselves, incurring casualties from within the group.

As we searched the house, Emmett opened the basement door and he winced. "I think I found the owner." He descended the stairs and he began kicking the dirt floor with the toe of his boot revealing the remains of a man. He most likely never would have been discovered by the police if we had not found him first. James was particular who he turned and kept for his army, and apparently the man who lived here didn't fit his standards. As we left the cabin, Jasper placed an anonymous call to the police, and although we were unable to actually locate James or Victoria, we learned how they were hiding and how many of them there were.

"Wrangling ten newborns would be very difficult. There was no way they could hide out in the city," Jasper said in the car on the way home from the cabin. "This scenario fits. They break into a house, a home invasion of sorts, murder the owner, camp out for several days and then leave when people would begin to notice the owner missing. James is very precise in his movements."

I agreed with this theory and we discussed our next measure of attack. James would most likely repeat this pattern, since he needed space to manage the newborns and covering from the sunlight. Jasper would go back to researching the brooch. I would travel the less populated areas of the city and suburbs, combing the minds of friends and neighbors who may be missing someone, and Emmett would go back to guarding Bella. It was only a matter of time before they made an attempt on her life again.

After that night, I did as we discussed. I kept to my work and stayed away from Bella. It was possibly the hardest thing I had ever done, even harder than those first days when I was overwhelmed by her scent and the desire I had for her. I wanted to be with her and to protect her. I wanted to reach my hands out for her and touch her smooth skin and soft hair. But what I wanted was irrelevant, so for the time being I focused on keeping my promises.

Xxx

I sat in my car outside the house and opened my calendar one last time.

Tuesday August 18th

9:00 AM-Board Meeting

Noon-Lunch

2:00 Officers Meeting

4:00 Budget Review

I had written this information down in my planner weeks earlier. Edward would be out of the house all day at one meeting or the other and the house would be empty. If I went through the garage, the Volvo would be gone, and I knew that upstairs in his closet there would be one less ridiculously expensive suit, one starched shirt, a matching yet fashionable tie, and one of his fifteen pairs of black work shoes that also cost as much or more than my car.

I snorted to myself as I stepped out of the car. At one point, I found this behavior of Edward's predictable. Obviously, this was far from the truth. I used this humor to propel myself up the front walkway and steps of Edward's home. I caught my reflection in the mirror and noted my attire. I intentionally dressed down, in jeans and a tank, not giving the impression I was here to work. I didn't want anyone to mistake my appearance as a reemergence of things being back to normal.

This was another reason I'd decided to go in the front door instead of the garage. I wasn't entirely sure of my job status at the moment and it seemed presumptuous to enter the back. *Was I fired? Had I quit?* My paycheck had been deposited as usual, and for once I wasn't going to argue whether or not it was ethical for me to take it. I considered it workers compensation for the mental and emotional turmoil I had undergone during the last two weeks. I doubted there was a clause for 'my boss and potential boyfriend is a vampire and I am now suffering from post traumatic stress after the grand reveal of this information' that I could sue over, but it still felt justified.

Once again, I found myself standing on the front stoop, bracing myself for what would be on the other side. As I pushed my key in and twisted the knob, I found a surprise in the elegant foyer. Alice stood in the hallway with an eager, expectant look on her face. She was wearing a bright multicolored summer dress and thick high heels that made her several inches taller. It was clear she had been waiting for me, although I'd only just decided to come earlier this morning.

"Bella!" she exclaimed and rushed to me. She held her arms out to me expectantly and I could only eye her warily. I absorbed her yellow eyes and pale skin that I knew was cool to the touch. I hadn't asked Edward about the other members of his family, but clearly I had my suspicions. I wasn't afraid of Alice, but I didn't attempt to embrace her either.

"Hi, Alice," I said and squinted my eyes suspiciously in her direction before asking, "How did you know I was coming?"

She pulled back a little and I think she actually squirmed under my gaze. "Since you hadn't been to work in a while, Edward needed some help."



I felt a rush of guilt at that, but in all, I wasn't convinced. "True, I guess. But how did you know I was coming? You were waiting for me."

Alice took a little bouncy step forward and gave me a tentative smile. "Edward told you he would be watching to make sure you were safe. Didn't he?"

My mouth dropped in horror. He had told me that, but I assumed it would be his security crew, not Edward himself. "He's been watching me? Like outside my house watching me?"

Alice shook her head and smiled. "No, not Edward. He's keeping his distance like he promised."

I breathed a sigh of relief. For some reason I needed him to give me space, real space, so I could work all this out. I wanted our next meeting on my terms. "If it's not Edward, then who? His security team?" I asked.

She hesitated for a second, although the reassuring smile never left her face. "Something like that. Look, I'd rather Edward tell you all this, okay?"

I nodded in agreement because Edward and I had many things to discuss, my 'security' only being one of them.

We stood in the foyer together, Alice grinning while I grimaced with my hands shoved defensively in my back pockets. I hadn't expected her to be here and now that she was, my plan was a bit derailed.

Alice finally broke the tension and said pouted, "I wish I could tell you more, but I'm not really allowed to talk to you. I've probably already said too much."

I rolled my eyes. "So Edward just tells you what to do and you comply?"

A wicked grin formed on her lips and she sniffed, "No, I don't. Which is why I'm not allowed to talk to you."

I couldn't help but laugh at that statement because it was so obviously true. Alice was clearly not controlled by anyone, even Edward. I realized in that moment how much I missed Alice and her enthusiasm. I also missed Jasper and his quiet charm. And I even wondered where Emmett was, with his giant hands and quick wit. But most of all, I missed Edward.

Lost in thought, I realized Alice had left the room for a moment but now stood in front of me with her bag and coat. "Bella," she said gaining my attention, "I need you to remember your promise to me, the one you made that day we were cleaning Edward's closet."

I knew what she was talking about. I had been thinking about it for the last several days. I had bound myself to Edward. I promised to always be his friend no matter what I saw or heard.

I had been set up.

"This is what you were talking about isn't it? You knew I would find out," I stated.

She nodded and said, "Yes, I knew you would find out, although not that way. But I was serious. You mean so much to him, please give him a chance. I don't know what would happen if he lost you."

The severity of her tone scared me a little, everyone spoke of Edward so seriously, as though he was fragile and scarred. I'd seen several sides of his personality. He was so strong and in control while fighting Bree, it was hard to reconcile that side of Edward with the scared man who couldn't wear tennis shoes or who snuck in my room in the dark.

The only thing I could do was nod at her, and before I could react she gave me a quick hug.

Turning on her heel, she started towards the kitchen and the back door. As she swung it open, she called out, "You've got two hours before he gets here, the key to his bedroom is hanging behind the mirror at the top of the stairs, and Bella," she paused as I walked into the kitchen where I could see her, "I said be his friend. I never said go easy on him. Give him hell. He deserves it."

Xxx

EPOV

It was late afternoon before I made it to the house. I cancelled my afternoon appointment with the CFO because it would have been impossible for me to even pretend to pay attention during that meeting. Ever since Bella found out, everything else had lost meaning. My time at PNT was almost painful. Being around so many slow paced humans was completely frustrating. They only reminded me of the one human I couldn't be with, and I was reminded how their blood was unappealing, their scents weak and bland. I longed to inhale the sweet flowery scent of the woman I loved.

When I arrived at home that afternoon and opened the kitchen door, I was shocked to find the house brimming with her perfume. I roamed the downstairs, catching faint trails of her movements through the house. She had been here. Sitting at her desk. I found her footsteps were imprinted in the threads of the library carpet, the oils from her fingers trailed down the rows of my CD's and her fingers had touched the edges of her favorite paintings.

All of these were new. She had been here.

I felt my heart surge as I rejoiced that she had been in the house and began to fantasize that maybe she came looking for me and that she wanted to talk. As I passed the main stairway, I noticed the scent was stronger going up the stairs and I rushed up to the dressing room hoping to find her.

At the top of the stairs, I calmed myself in an attempt for once not to startle her and I carefully opened the door to the oversized closet. My heart dropped a thousand feet when I realized she wasn't there and the room was empty. I ran my nose over the rows of clothing longing for a rush of her smell and stopped short when I got to my beloved t-shirt collection. I began flipping through the shirts and realized quickly exactly which one was missing. I sighed with the knowledge that she chose that particular one because she was hurting, and she wanted me to know it. I was turning to leave when something caught my eye. Bella's own shirt, a red tank top was hanging from the hook on the back of the door that opened to my bedroom. I walked over and took it down taking a deep, satisfying breath of her luscious scent. I paused when I discovered a second smell on the shirt, and my suspicions suddenly rose.

Alice.

Unsure of what exactly had happened in my house today, I decided to go in my office and review the security tapes before I made any other rash moves. I opened the door to my bedroom, the only access to my office, and actually uttered a gasp of surprise at the scene unfolding in front of me.

In my private bedroom, where only my family had been allowed with my permission, I found Bella lounging on my black leather couch. Overshadowing the faint strains of music playing in the background, was her powerful heartbeat that exploded in my ears the moment I opened the thick door. Unsurprisingly, I realized immediately she was wearing the missing t-shirt from my collection. In her lap was a thick, leather bound photo album, and she had one of my baseballs held up to her nose.

There were so many things wrong with this picture, but at the same time everything was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

This room was my haven. It held the collectables from my past, the items that documented that I had existed before and after the change. Throughout the room were objects that I had possessed for decades and refused to part with. Besides the baseballs and leather album, this room held the only parts of my parents I could keep. Next to the couch was dark wood chair, simple straight lines, from my father's office. I'd had it reupholstered several times, but it was his all the same. Across the room was a chest from my mother's dressing set, as well as an armoire. Now Bella, who was truly the only person I had loved in my entire existence other than my parents, was nestled in the middle of it all. My past crashed into my present and it all slid perfectly into place.

She glanced up at me standing in the doorway, unaware of my thoughts, and commented as though I had been in the room the entire time, "You know I can almost still smell the leather on this ball. And it's what? Seventy years old?"

There it was. The question that opened all the other questions. Whether Bella knew it or not, she had just opened Pandora's Box and no matter how we tried to put the lid back on there was no going back.

I nodded, unable to verbally respond although I knew the specific answer. I caught that ball in nineteen seventeen. When I was sixteen years old. That ball was ninety-one years old.

I watched as she held the ball under her nose again. She took in a small sniff before focusing her attention on the book in her lap, while running her fingers down the faded programs I had mounted inside. "You went to the World Series in nineteen seventeen and saw Shoeless Joe win the Series. But you didn't go when they lost in nineteen nineteen. Why is that?"

I was gaping at her knowledge of baseball and my idol, confirming my theory that Bella was the biggest mystery of my lifetime. I pushed the sound of her raging heartbeat out of my ears and said, "I would have gone. But I couldn't. It..." I floundered for the right words, "It would have been too soon."

She cocked her head to the side. "Too soon for what?"

"Too soon after this," and I gestured to my body. "After my change."

She studied me for a minute, her appearance calm. The only thing giving away her nerves was the sound of her thrumming heart. I watched as she swallowed, the veins on her neck expanding gently. "So you were born in..." she ventured.

I wanted to run from the room and hide. This was the single hardest conversation I'd ever had. The other night in her room, I was cloaked by darkness, and although things were still tense, the tough questions laid ahead. I promised to be truthful and I was determined to keep my promise. I steadied my voice and said, "Nineteen oh one."

"Nineteen oh one," she repeated.

I nodded slowly.

"And you were *changed* in..." she asked, her voice strong but her eyes wide.

I locked my eyes with hers. "Nineteen eighteen."

I watched as she quickly calculated in her head, knowing where she would arrive as she subtracted the numbers.

"Seventeen?"

I nodded again never losing contact with her eyes.

"Seventeen," she repeated, scrunching up her forehead until creases formed.

"Yes. Seventeen." I forced my voice to remain calm. If I showed my nerves I could lose her. She was here, and I wasn't going to scare her off if I could manage it.

Obviously still considering my age, she pushed the album off her legs and pulled her knees up to her chin defensively, wrapping her arms tightly around them. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting her head hit the back of the couch. I noticed how tired she looked, the dark circles tinted the skin under her eyes. She also looked too skinny, and I wondered if she had been eating enough and if her nightmares were still keeping her awake. Trying to keep to my word, I hadn't asked Emmett or Rosalie any of these things, but I doubt they considered what was normal eating and sleeping habits for humans.

With her eyes still shut, she began talking again, "You don't seem seventeen. Sometimes you do look young. I notice it when you are lost in thought and I can see this trace of youth in your appearance, but not in your eyes. You're eyes have the depth of someone much older. You're seventeen, but at the same time you are actually..." and again she began subtracting mentally. As she worked it out, I focused my eyes on the way the fabric of her jeans pulled across her knees. Her shoes, plaid slip-on sneakers, were on the floor under her body, and her shirt, *my* shirt, draped over her shoulders.

I finally broke the silence, "One hundred and nine."

With her head still back, I could see her lips forming the words. "One. Oh. Nine." Over and over. I feared we were one step away from Bella running from the house in terror, so I attempted to redirect the topic. A little.

"Bella, why are you here?" I asked. I was still standing in the doorway. I needed to move, but I also wanted to block her exit if she attempted to leave. I was incredibly desperate, but at the same time I wasn't sure what to do with her in my room either. I wanted her here so badly. I'd had thoughts of her sitting in that exact spot. The circumstances were not the same, but as long as she was here I would take her.

Her head popped up, making her hair fly around her shoulders a little, causing a ruffle of her scent to pass in my direction. She narrowed her eyes at me in accusation. "Why am I here? You broke into my room right? Without my permission? While I slept? On more than one occasion?"

"True," I admitted.

"Well, turnabout is fair play. I figured I could snoop around your room the way you snooped around mine." She challenged and I couldn't really argue with her.

"Okay. That seems fair to me," I said. "Although for the record, I want it noted I didn't really 'snoop' around your room."

She rolled her eyes at me. She still had her arms clenched around her legs and had them tightly bound to her chest. "Whatever, Edward. How do I know you weren't rummaging through my underwear drawer while I slept?"

I felt my jaw drop and I did the only thing a guilty man could do with an accusation like that. I lied. "What? That's what you think I did? I did not. Ever."

From her position on the couch Bella eyed me carefully. "Fine. I believe you," she said before muttering under her breath, "Maybe."

I took the moment of distraction to move further into the room. I just wanted to be closer to her. Feel her. I had missed her so much. I walked over to the shelves against the wall and picked up a photograph in a heavy pewter frame. Bella's eyes were on my back and I could tell she had shifted out of her defensive position and was now leaning a little in order to see what I had in my hands. She was curious, which was what continually kept her in trouble. I glanced down at the frame in my hands. Bella had no idea how hard the next few moments would be for me. I was going to show her the real me, the human me. It was something I had never shared with anyone, including my family.

I carried the frame over to Bella and sat in my father's chair next to the sofa, giving her some space. Sinking into the rich leather cushion, I offered her the frame and she gently took it from me. It was a black and white picture of a man and a woman standing outside. It was faded and worn, the edges crumbling under the glass in the frame. The man was dressed in a dark suit and tie, the woman in a long, white lace dress and an enormous hat.

Bella leaned forward, hovering over the photograph, so close I could see her breath leaving faint marks on the glass. Silently, she alternated between looking at the photograph and then glancing up at me, comparing

the two. Her dark hair fell over her shoulder, trailing down her chest, almost grazing the frame and I was amazed at the way she studied the photograph, as though she needed to memorize every detail for later.

"That is a picture of my parents. On their wedding day, or so it says on the back of the photograph."

"They were so beautiful," she said in an almost wistful voice. "You have your father's hair, but I think your mother's cheekbones."

Her words thrilled me. Even after all this time I had this need for a connection to my parents. These mementos were all I had. Encouraged, I left her on the couch and went over to the armoire against the far wall. It had several drawers inside as well as a closet. I slid open one of the drawers and pulled out a second frame.

Inside, was a photograph of me and my father outside the Polo Fields where the World Series final game had been held. I walked back over to Bella handing her the photograph before sitting down again across from her.

She ran her finger down the glass of the picture, tracing the images inside. She tilted the frame and pointed to one of the people and said, "Is this you?" The amazement in her voice was clear.

"Yes. On the day the White Sox won the Series. The day I caught that ball in nineteen seventeen." I pointed to the ball she had placed on the couch. "It was one year before my entire family fell ill to Spanish Influenza. One year before my mother and father succumbed to their deaths in a dreary, understaffed, poorly equipped hospital. One year, Bella, before my mother begged her doctor to save me, pleading for my life while she burned with fever. On that day in nineteen seventeen, standing outside that ball field, I thought I had my whole life ahead of me. I had no idea at the time of the things that would come." I said, picking the frame out of her hands and studying it for a moment.

Bella leaned back on the couch, her eyes focused on me. Her body had relaxed, her heartbeat normal, the level of fear in her scent was stabilizing. We sat across from one another, Pandora's box opened and turned on its side, the contents spilling on the ground.

I was waiting for her to take the lead. I needed her to ask me. To let me know how much she wanted to hear.

Bella let out a long, deep breath and placed the frame on top of the photo album on her lap. She flipped absently through several pages before shutting it again. "Tell me about it."

"Are you sure?" I asked, giving her an out.

"Yes. Edward, I want to know how this happened. How you became you," she said.

I ran my fingers nervously through my hair and began. "My parents died that year, in nineteen eighteen. We all became very ill, and the last thing I remember was being in the hospital. I have no memory of it or what happened to my parents really. What I do remember is waking up thinking my body was on fire and that surely I was in hell. The pain was indescribable." I stopped to allow myself to monitor her reaction.

Bella only shifted on the couch, folding her legs underneath before saying, "What was the pain from? The illness?"

I shook my head and laughed without humor. "No, Bella. It was the venom. Carlisle was the doctor my mother begged to save me. It was almost like she knew he could. That he would. Carlisle had me moved to the morgue, which was a testament of how close to death I was. The change begins when you are injected with the venom and then it proceeds to poison your entire body and it is immensely painful. I begged for death a thousand times before the pain stopped."

Bella was silent but listening intently so I continued, "Carlisle took me from the hospital, easily due to the chaos of the epidemic, and then it took around three days for the pain to subside and my change to fully occur. I woke in an unfamiliar house in the countryside with Carlisle who explained everything."

"And this was in nineteen eighteen?" she asked I assumed in an attempt to grasp the basic concepts of my time.

"Yes, I was the first person he changed and we became companions for some time. He later changed Esme, who you know as my mother, and then Rosalie, and later Emmett." I explained with little detail.

"What about Alice and Jasper? Did Carlisle change them as well?" I could hear the nerves behind her question. She wondered if I had changed them.

"No, they came to our family on their own. Jasper is quite a bit older than me, and Alice has no recollection of her time before her change."

Bella had begun nervously running her finger along the seam in the couch. She had more questions I could tell, but I needed her to ask them, so I waited patiently for her to continue.

"Why don't you eat people? I don't understand. Why are you protecting me?" she asked.

I grimaced at the idea of Bella envisioning me 'eating' people. "Carlisle decided when he was changed that he couldn't kill humans or anyone with a soul. He made a specific choice about how he would live and he brought me and the others into his way of life." She still looked confused so I explained further. "Carlisle lived differently than most of our kind. He studied and worked and chose to only take the lives of animals, not humans. In those early years, we hunted in the forests of Canada and the northern United States, and he taught me how to keep the demon at bay and fight against my primal nature. He taught us to use our immortality to help others and never forget that deep down we still retain the humanity we were born with." I paused and my gaze moved from her face to her hands, which were folded on her lap. I slowly stated my next words so she would understand. "Carlisle's methods are what saved you the first day our paths crossed."

I stole a glance at her face and was surprised to find her demeanor unchanged from before, although her heartbeat had quickened. Mentally, she was accepting of all of this information. Physically, her body was telling her to be afraid. Bella was strong and I could tell which part of her was winning no matter how foolish it was. What I was going to tell her was terrible and scary and dark and terrifying. It was who I really was, and she needed to know it.

In a quiet but determined voice, Bella said, "I know you're trying to scare me, but it won't work. You had your chance to kill me or let me be killed and every time, you've saved me."

"Bella, I need you to understand something." I told her and I found myself turning towards her and reaching my hand out tentatively to run my fingers along the smooth skin on the top of her hand. I needed to feel the warmth of her hand under my own to give me the courage to speak. I waited for her to flinch but she never did. Instead, she flipped her hand over and ran her own fingers over my palm. The feeling of her hand in mine, after what we had been through was more than I could begin to explain.

I took a deep breath to settle my nerves, not for oxygen, and I said, "I don't think I could ever hurt you. Over the last several months I have grown to," I paused, looking for the appropriate word, "to *appreciate* you so much more than feeding my desires. But simply knowing me puts you in danger. The kind of danger that brings the likes of James and Victoria into your life."

She gently pulled her hand from mine, and I watched as her brow furrowed and her pink lips pouted a little. Her expression confused me since it wasn't one of fear or concern. She actually looked hurt. "So what you're saying is that you 'appreciate' me? That's why you've been protecting me?"

I nodded but still perplexed by her behavior. "Of course I appreciate you. Isn't it obvious?" I said perhaps a little defensively. "And I've been protecting you because this is my fault, James and Victoria are after you because of me."

At that, she stood up, quickly moving across the room, stopping at the shelf with the other baseballs, where she picked them up one by one and inhaled their faded scent. The t-shirt was way too big on her, hitting the middle of her thighs, but the sight of her in it made my heart clench. Her heartbeat rose further, and I noticed a faint tint of red creeping up the side of her neck and settling in her cheeks.

I found myself behind her, not touching her, but so close that I was choking back the venom that slid down the back of my throat. Something was pulling her away from me but it wasn't fear.

"Edward, when I ruined your other shirt how come I couldn't find a replacement?" she asked suddenly.

She was still facing away from me and she was fingering some of the other collectables on the shelf.

I had a feeling she knew the answer to the question but I answered her anyway. "It was an original. It can't be replaced." I told her.

She turned around and looked up at me. "So I ruined a collectable Rolling Stones shirt. Possibly one of a kind."

I raised an eyebrow wondering where she was taking this. "Possibly."

She dropped her hands to her side and pulled the shirt she was wearing forward and asked, "And this one, it's the same thing? Real?"

I tilted my head to the side to get a better view of the shirt, reaching out to push Bella's hair over her shoulder. A slight tremor shook through her body at my touch and again her heartbeat fluttered aggressively. "Yes. It's real. I saw her in San Francisco." I elaborated. "I always liked the blue lettering."

She dropped the shirt and ran her hand down her face and groaned. "God I'm such an idiot," she said. "Only I would take revenge on my boss by ruining a priceless piece of history. And then I come back, in an attempt to be clever...I need to take this off before I ruin it."

She turned to leave the room, I assumed to go change in the dressing room, but I stopped her by reaching out for her wrist.

"Don't," I said quietly, pulling her towards me.

She spun around and her eyes searched for mine, and for a minute, I wasn't sure what she wanted. I had just told her my history. I was a vampire who hunted animals instead of people and that her life was in danger due to me and in some strange deflection from the real topic at hand, we stood discussing music and t-shirts, and all I wanted to do was kiss her.

And oddly she looked like all she wanted was for me to kiss her.

I ran my fingers through my hair and my eyes were suddenly transfixed by the fact she was nervously biting down on her lower lip. After we stood there for an eternity, and just as I decided I could do this, I could really, really do this, we were both startled from the moment by a harsh buzzer from the door bell below, as well as the chiming of my phone.

Only one person would do both, and only one person would interrupt me when she knew what was going to happen. In fact, her little voice was shouting at me from downstairs right now, alerting me to the situation at hand. I sighed and opened the phone. "I'll be there in a minute," I said and returned it to my pocket.

"Bella, that's Alice. I'm not sure why she is here but I can only imagine it's important."

She took a small step back. Our moment had passed and now she was fully aware of how close we were. "Okay, yeah, I guess I should go then while you guys work on whatever it is you need to do," she said, and I watched as her face flushed.

"No, please don't leave. In fact, I'm worried about why she is here. Please stay," I said and gave her a small wishful smile.

She returned the smile, but shook her head, casting her eyes down. "I don't know, Edward. I'm not sure I should."

I found my hand tilting her face upwards. Her pulse beat under my palm and I had to focus myself to move slowly and with restraint. "Please stay. Use the guest room down the hall and I will secure the house before I go. It's not safe for you to go home, and I can't leave you if I don't know you're okay," I said, one step from full out begging. A grin turned the corners of my lips and I added, "Plus, you can dig through all my things. And try on all my clothes." I saw her fight a smile.

She put her hand up on mine and guided it away from her face, lacing her fingers through mine. "That is a tempting offer. You know, I had my eye on that locked trunk over there. I'll make you a deal." She smirked and I raised my eyebrows in question. "You give me the key to that and I will stay as long as you want."

Not letting go of her hand, I walked over to the armoire again and opened the doors. I slid back a false panel and retrieved a metal key from the inside. I lifted our clasped hands and flipped hers over placing the key on the middle of her palm.

"Miss Swan, you just made a deal," I said, and squeezed her hand gently shut around the key, and left the room before Alice came up to find me.

Xxx

BPOV

I spent the remainder of the night going through Edward's deep leather trunk. The once smooth sides were scarred and dinged and it was held together with tarnished brass straps and rivets. I ran my hands over the worn leather, fingering the brass lock for a moment before I pushed in the old fashioned key and listened to the latch release. As I pushed the box into two, I was amazed by the contents of the container. The trunk held small drawers and even what was once a hanging rack for clothing. The insides were lined with a faded and yellowing fabric that was still well preserved.

Kneeling in front of the box, I began opening the drawers and cabinets and what I found was neatly organized and completely enthralling. It was a treasure trove of Edward's personal history. Passports and travel documents were neatly stored inside and often affixed with photographs of the same, never changing, hauntingly, beautiful face. As I scanned the paperwork, I found that some had the name Cullen while others carried a different name, Masen, and he appeared to use them interchangeably. I eagerly flipped through the pages and noted that from stamps and writing inside the little leather booklets, it was clear he had seen the world many times over.

And then there were the journals.

Neatly stacked on the bottom of the trunk, I found that Edward had amassed ninety years of journals, documenting his travels and stops along the way. I discovered, in chronological order, pocket sized, leather journals recording each incarnation of his life. Before I opened the first cracked and peeling book, I stopped myself for a moment and wondered if this was for me to read, if Edward was okay with the intrusion. But he had given me the key and he must have known what I would find. He wanted me to know. He wanted me to know him.

Stretching out on the floor with my stomach flat on the carpet, I opened the book and found Edward's familiar, elegant script filling the pages. I pushed my hair over my shoulder and read his words, which were



a retelling of the story from earlier that night, of how Edward woke up in a different world, a vampire, with Carlisle as his guide. It was painful reading them in his fresh, aching voice, but it made things clearer for me. Edward was lonely and missed his family. His memories were vague and he clung to whatever he could in an effort to survive. Reading about the aftermath of his change, learning to hunt and struggle against his inhuman nature, was heartbreaking. But as heart wrenching as it all was, in the process of reading about his early days, I found something else out as well.

Edward can read minds.

This of course explained a lot of things, but it was also absolutely horrifying. I had many inappropriate thoughts about my boss, some possibly flattering and others just embarrassing. I decided not to dwell on this and focus on the fact that Edward. Can. Read. Minds. Or rather from his descriptions, he could hear thoughts and this apparently served him as a blessing and a curse throughout his lifetime.

Over the next several hours, I devoured his writings. I was enthralled by the descriptions of his family and the places they lived. I learned Edward had been to medical school twice and had studied a variety of subjects at prestigious universities across the country. His siblings had been enrolled in local high schools several times in an attempt to fit in with the community so Carlisle could practice medicine.

Besides the writings, Edward's books were filled with sketches of things or people he found interesting and then there were the pages and pages of music compositions interspersed throughout his thoughts. The music surprised me, as I had seen no instruments in the house and he had made no comments of an ability to play. But I was learning by the moment not to underestimate Edward Cullen. I'd compared him to Batman before our date, but now I was leaning towards Superman. I doubted there was anything he couldn't do.

My eyes were growing heavy as I flipped through the pages of the book I was reading, and I realized with surprise that Edward had been gone for hours and the sun would be rising soon. I had no idea if he would burst into flames if the sun touched his skin, but I assumed he would be home sooner than later and I was trying to stay awake. As I was reaching for the journal that came next, I realized I had consumed them all. Confused, I discovered that sometime in the late nineteen eighties Edward's writings came to an abrupt halt. Everything up to that time period had been dated and clearly marked, leaving a distinct history of his movements. All of that came to an end approximately twenty years ago, and I couldn't find a trace of anything in all the paperwork or documents in the trunk. I wondered if this was when he fell out of contact with his family. *Was this when he became a recluse and a workaholic?*

Slowly, I sat up and began putting all the books and notes back into the trunk the way I'd found them. As I organized them, I stopped when my hands picked up a thin black leather book bound tightly with a cord. This was the one journal that intrigued me the most. Edward apparently had a period of rebellion from his family, and went against the wishes and choices of the others. I'd skimmed it earlier, stunned by the sharp contrast of his thoughts and actions. He told me he had murdered before but it was entirely different to read his descriptions. I set it aside while I finished cleaning up. After closing and relocking the trunk, I carried the journal with me over to Edward's couch. Propping a cushion behind my head, I leaned back and began rereading the passages that caught my interest.

Unable to hold off any longer, I felt my eyes sliding shut and I began to doze off to images of Edward and his story filling my head. There was one thing I'd come to determine after tonight. Even though Edward's living age came to end at seventeen, I could now truly see he could not be confined by a number. He had lived more than one life, had seen many wars, and studied under the brightest men and women in academia. He had experienced more than the average human could even imagine, yet at the same time, he was trapped in the body of a young man.

I turned on my side, clutching the book to my chest. Edward had experienced so many things. He was complex and emotionally fragile. But he was also compassionate and underneath his gruff exterior and the

carefully written words in his journals, there was one thing I was sure of. Alice was right. I was the only person he had let into his life in all these years. In his own stunted way, he had shown me more of himself than anyone else. He needed me, and more than that, all Edward truly wanted was to be accepted and loved.

I promised Alice before that I wouldn't leave him, and that I would always be his friend and I came here today thinking I would do just that. But now, after learning so much about him and his past, his thoughts and his ideas, something in me changed. I found that I not only was attracted to Edward as the charming man on my date the other night, I was also fiercely attached to the compelling and complicated vampire I'd discovered since.

I pulled his shirt up over my face and breathed in his unique smell. Without fear or trepidation, I knew now that I was sinking into him, into his world, into his family and I was ready to be swallowed whole.



## Chapter Twenty

**Chapter Song:** [Angels And Airwaves – The Gift](#)

EPOV

From high above we watched the police attend to the crime scene. Emmett was with me and we were standing up on the roof of a tall building behind the coffee shop where James had taken his latest victim, sacrifice style. The discarded and drained woman was lying on her back with her arms to the side. Her skin was torn and the thick, coppery smell filled the air from the congealing pools of blood under the body.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath as the heavy piece of metal snapped off the railing. I aimed at the blank wall of a building in the distance, preparing to throw it at but once it left my hand Emmett stopped it mid-air with his palm and dropped it casually to the ground. I growled in frustration as it landed with a resolved thud on the cement floor.

"Knock it off Edward." Emmett said glancing back towards the crime scene. *I know you're angry but making a bunch of noise will only distract them and not help us.*

I sighed heavily because Emmett was right and I hated it when he was right. Once again we had been tricked. James was playing us and it was getting old. Earlier that night, when Alice called, I knew it must be important. Alice wanted this relationship with Bella almost as much as I did. She wouldn't have interfered if it wasn't an emergency. From upstairs I could already see the vision she had received. The vampires were going to Bella's apartment, and were pictured rummaging through her belongings while Angela was in her room.

It pained me to leave Bella at that moment. We were so close to pushing through this thing, coming out on the other side together. She was accepting me. All of me. My phantom heart was close to bursting at the thought. But I had to make her safe, and surprisingly she agreed to stay. Of course it took a bribe, which I willingly acquiesced to; anything to keep her out of harms way. As I placed the key in her hand, I knew what she would find inside the locked trunk. I wanted her to know. I wanted her to know everything and what better way than through my own words?

Forcing myself to leave her, I found Alice, Jasper, and Emmett waiting on me downstairs and we quickly drove to the apartment. Angela was inside asleep and the others quietly surrounded the building while I

snuck inside. Hours passed and unease settled into my bones as neither James nor Victoria appeared. I slipped out the door and found Jasper, alone, by the edge of the parking lot.

*Something's wrong.*

I nodded in agreement and we searched out Alice and Emmett to reassess our plan.

"Alice, what are we missing?" Jasper asked as he rubbed her back soothingly with his hand. She was visibly distressed but began calming under his powerful touch. Without speaking she began apologizing to me and showing me the darkness of her mind. Her visions were muddled and she felt like she was failing all of us, especially me.

I reached out for her and wrapped my arms around her. "This isn't your fault. We're putting too much pressure on you." She buried her face into my chest and I looked helplessly at Jasper and Emmett.

Alice shuddered violently under me and fell limp and I tightened my arms around her. It only lasted a moment but I could see it all as it flickered through her mind.

*Black hair, russet skin, deep brown eyes, scratching and kicking, tearing, bleeding,*

I saw a flash of neon and wet alley and knew immediately where we were supposed to be. "You need to stay here," I said to the others, releasing Alice into Jasper's arms. "I know where they are, but it could be another ploy. Keep Angela safe and stop them if they show up." Jasper nodded and I ran into the woods behind us.

A moment later I heard footsteps behind me and Emmett's thoughts shouting through the dark. *Wait up Edward! At least tell me where we're going...*

I slowed my pace. Emmett was the biggest of our group, huge for any vampire really, but I was fast and when I was going full speed there was no way he could keep up.

"I told you to stay behind."

*Yeah, and when did I start listening to you? I am not allowing you to go alone into this...*

We were leaving the density of the forest now and could see lights in the distance.

"We are going into town. There is a shop I frequent. Bella does as well. That is where James has found his next victim." I explained.

*So this person is connected to you and Bella...*

"She is," I said as we darted through the edge of the business district. I ducked into an alley and scaled the brick wall of the nearest building, my fingers reached the top, and I leveraged myself over onto the roof. Emmett followed with a heavy thump as his feet hit the top.

We made our way, roof top to roof top, leaping over edges and railings, until we were over the darkened alley I had seen in Alice's mind. The smell hit us before we saw the scene below and I could hear the distraught, frustrated police below.

The girl, the Quileute, was stretched out on the pavement lying in her own blood. Her neck, snapped, jutted at an odd angle but her beauty wasn't lost even in death. Deep crimson splatters patterned across her white apron and her left knee would have bruised from the impact of hitting the ground. I noticed her typically creamy tan skin was already losing color from the loss of blood. My eyes traveled over her lifeless body and settled on her ankle where I could see inked into her skin the primitive outline of an animal.

As if he could read my thoughts Emmett said aloud, "What's on her leg?"

Placing my hands on the metal railing in front of me, feeling the hard metal soften and bend under my pressure, I realized James had stepped into territory he was unequivocally not prepared for. His list of enemies just tripled.

"A wolf."

Xxx

BPOV

Tentatively rolling over, I was surprised when I didn't feel the edge of the couch underneath me. Instead I continued flat onto a smooth, soft cushion. I opened one eye and found myself in the middle of a huge bed surrounded by pillows and covered with a warm blanket. I sat up slowly and got my bearings by looking around the room. It was light outside. Gray, early morning light filled the room, making it easy to see the furniture and décor of the room. It only took me a second to realize I was in Edward's guest room.

The room was painted steel gray, and like the rest of the house, had high ceilings with thick moldings at the top of the walls. The furniture was a dark wood, almost black, and there was a dresser, chest and nightstand as well as the large bed I was currently inhabiting. The light filtering into the room came from a high dormer window that nestled into the wall with a bench seat underneath.

I tried to remember how I got to this bed last night and I couldn't. The last thing I was able to recall was dozing on the couch, waiting for Edward and reading his journal. Confused, I glanced around the room again until my eyes settled onto the small leather journal that had been placed on the nightstand. I picked it up and ran my fingers down the smooth, worn front.

Edward was a vampire.

I found myself at moments over the past week chanting these words. I knew it was true, but I almost had to constantly remind myself, because who really does what I was doing? Who else would fall for someone like this? He was a demon. He had said so and his diaries proved it. But he was also caring and loyal and beautiful.

I sighed to myself and turned on the lamp next to the bed. Throwing the blanket back, I realized I was still in my clothes from last night. Or rather part of my clothes and part of his. I began quickly walking over to the adjoining bathroom when I saw something on top of the dresser. I stopped and realized it was clothing from my house, neatly folded, and waiting for me. Picking them up, I pushed open the bathroom door and walked inside flicking on the lights. I had been in here before of course. In fact I knew it was fully stocked because I was the one who had done it. The cabinets and closet were filled with anything I would need for the day and suddenly I was grateful for Edward and his obsessive nature.

Reaching into the shower, my hands found the brass knobs inside and I twisted them until I reached the right temperature. I stepped under the forceful stream of water, allowing the night to wash from my body and I began preparing myself for what waited for me on the other side of the guest room door.

I needed to know where Edward had gone last night. I wanted to know exactly what he was feeling about me and the journals, and us. Turning off the water I found a plush towel hanging on the wall and as I dried off I felt my chest clench with anticipation. I knew that everything in my life was going to change once I left this room. The barriers were down and Edward and I needed to talk.

Xxx

Still barefoot, I exited the guest room and stepped into the hallway. I assumed Edward was home but I wasn't sure where he was. I paused for a moment and wondered if I would still be invited into his room this morning or should I go back downstairs to the common areas? Before I had the opportunity to decide I heard a loud crack and the sound of splintering wood from the dressing room.

I felt myself jump at the harsh noise and sucked in my breath wondering if James or Victoria were in the house. My heart was hammering and I steadied myself against the wall. Unsure of what to do or where to go, I essentially froze on my spot in the hallway. Only a moment passed before Edward's head popped around the corner of the dressing room and his hard eyes immediately softened as they met mine.

Immediately he was at my side. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," he said and I felt his cool breath wash over me, calming my nerves instantly.

I looked him over, and the shaky fear I felt before quickly turned into something else. His hair was wild and his face was beautiful as always. I was drawn into his deep yellow eyes, brighter than yesterday and although I wasn't afraid, my heart beat quickened further.

Engrossed in his eyes, I swallowed thickly and said defensively, "I wasn't scared."

A small smile tugged on his lips, which drew my attention away from his gaze, and he said, "Really? Your heart tells me otherwise." And still frozen in my spot, I watched as he tilted his head before reaching out and pushing my hair aside, over my shoulder. I held my breath at the contact and reveled in the electricity coming from his touch. His fingers hovered over my shoulder for a moment when his face suddenly became determined and he gently grasped the back of my neck. I felt his thumb stroke lightly along the tender skin before settling in one spot. "Yes. Your pulse is fluttering like a humming bird's wings."

A tremor of fear rushed through me but it wasn't due to his touch. As I remembered what I learned last night about Edward and his abilities I felt my face burn in embarrassment. My attempt to squelch the grimace that formed on my face was futile.

"What?" he asked, but never removed his hand. His hand was cool against my overheated skin and it felt so right. So good. Damn it. Those were the thoughts that he didn't need to know.

"Don't act like you don't know," I told him, and I swear his body was leaning closer into mine. Why did he choose now to get so personal?

Total confusion crossed his face so I continued, "Edward. I read your journals. I know you can read my mind." This came out as a humiliating mumble, as I was horrified to say it out loud, and my brain had turned to simple mush under his touch.

Recognition replaced the confusion and his own face contorted as he said, "No Bella. That is the thing. I can read every other mind, and every other thought of every mundane, immature, ignorant person out there but yours? Yours is closed to me."

He was so close to me now, pulled together like magnets. My hands were on the wall behind me, fingers pressed into the surface, afraid that if I didn't hold onto something that I would crash into him.

His thumb was fixed on my pulse while my eyes were forward, fixed on his smooth, angular jaw.

"Why? Why am I closed to you?" I whispered, confused by this revelation.

He chuckled softly, the hair over my ear ruffling. "I have no idea Bella. But it is a dual version of heaven and hell for me. The peace I feel with you is incomparable. The desire I have to know your mind is consuming. Everything about you is so...conflicted."

We stood for a moment processing this information when I realized I had to say something before I stood here all day, weak in the knees, completely absorbed in this man. "What was that sound then, if not a group of vampires searching your house for me?" I said, attempting to make a joke.

At my words he dropped his hand and distanced himself. His eyes flashed with anger and darkened. It was like I'd slapped him.

"I'm sorry? Too soon for vampire humor?" I asked in a lame attempt to repair the damage.

His face softened but it didn't reach his eyes. "We need to talk," was all he said, and I felt

his cool hand slip into my own before he walked me down the hall toward his rooms. As we entered the dressing room, I noticed the door was off its hinges, the long screws torn from the wood and the door frame

cracked and splinted. My feet stopped as he attempted to gently pull me forward, past it, and I asked, "Is this what made the noise? Did you do this?"

He stopped and sighed, "Yes."

I eyed him suspiciously and he squirmed with guilt.

"Are you the one that pulled out the intercom system downstairs?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He reluctantly nodded and I made a face, "Really? What on earth made you do something like that?"

He looked at me like I should know this answer as well. I had no idea what would cause him to tear up the house. With a deep sigh he said, "You Bella. I ripped up the house because of you."

"Me?" I asked, still several steps behind in his thought process.

We were standing in the middle of the dressing room. He was so much taller than I was, at times it seemed like he towered over me. I looked up at him and when he spoke his voice was low, "Bella you barely survived that night. It was almost the end for you." He paused and cast his eyes down, "It was almost the end for me. It was either the intercom or both of us. I think I chose well."

His words hung in the air. The idea that it all could have gone differently for both of us was staggering. He tightened his grip on my hand and tugged me past the damaged door and into his room. With one last glance towards the broken door he shook his head. "I should have learned my lesson about breaking stuff last time anyway."

I walked over to the couch to sit down. "Lesson? What are you talking about? You know, I can't read minds either." I laughed and settled into the cushion.

He sat down next to me leaving a wide strip of leather between us. I frowned at the distance. He pushed his hair back, "When I broke the intercom system we had to call the electricians, which is how you met Tyler who asked you on a date." He explained. The look on my face must have shown my confusion because he continued. "On your date you met Victoria and well, you know what happened after that..."

"But I don't know. And I need you to tell me exactly what is going on." I told him and I meant it.

He hesitated and I watched his long fingers rub across his cheek as he mentally began editing his words. He opened his mouth to speak but I stopped him. "I need to know all of it Edward. If this," and I gestured between the two of us, "has any chance of working at all you must be completely honest with me."

Edward leaned back in his seat and I heard a quiet groan from his throat. His fingers were back in his hair and he finally said, "Okay. I'm going to tell you everything that I know. But understand this is really hard for me." He scooted a little closer and put one arm on the back of the couch. "It's in my nature to protect you and what you are going to hear is the ugly side of my life. I don't want to scare you off." He admitted, and his amber eyes reflected his emotions.

My hand found his and I said, "That's a choice you have to let me make. But I need all the facts first."

I watched as Edward's lips formed the words to explain the terror James and Victoria had inflicted on the community. He spoke of murders, sacrifice and spilt blood across the city. Bitterly he explained how he found out these losses were due to a vendetta against him and possibly his whole family. That James had been hunting him while he attempted to protect others. I could tell, as he recounted the times he had failed, how much this pained him. How he carried the burden of lives lost in this battle between James and himself. At times during his long story he trembled in anger, rage boiling beneath his skin.

By the time he finished my teeth were clenched and my fists were bound tightly. "So what you're saying is that James is murdering people, turning humans into vampires, and stalking me, in an attempt to get back at you."

Edward nodded and he pried open my fist, smoothing out my fingers one at a time.

"What makes you so important to him?" I asked, not fully understanding, and having a feeling Edward was leaving something out.

Twisting the silver and turquoise ring on my right hand between his fingers he said, "James is convinced I have something that is his. So far we can't figure out what this is."

I wanted to ask more questions. I *had* more questions but Edward was distracting me. I wasn't sure if he knew how much his touch affected me but it did. Just by rubbing my hand I was lost to most levels of coherency.

Once again his fingers found my pulse. Gently inching away from my hand and roaming around my wrist, he zeroed in on the pulsating vein and covered it with his thumb. His head was down and his hair was brushing against my bare arm.

"Why do you keep doing that?" I asked, truly curious.

"Because I like to feel your heartbeat. Your life." He answered, skimming his thumb across my wrist.

I shivered and with his face turned down I could see the faint smile playing across his mouth. "I can hear it, you, through the entire house. Sometimes even outside." He mused, watching to see my reaction. I said nothing, longing to hear more of his confession.

"Your heartbeat has become my compass. At first though, it taunted and provoked me. It betrayed you. But now, I'm at a loss when I can't find it."

His voice was so soft, almost musical. He hypnotized me with the sound of it and the gentle pressure of his touch. I was lost in him and couldn't find the words to speak.

"And your scent, Bella." He pulled my wrist under his nose and inhaled. "It's like nothing you've ever imagined."

This struck me as amusing and laughter escaped my mouth before I could suppress it. Looking through his thick lashes he asked, "Is this funny?"

I shook my head and said, "No. but you're wrong. I *can* imagine."

Edward rolled his eyes at me. "You can, you say? Because Bella, when I catch your scent I am overwhelmed by the desire to find you. To hunt you. I want to consume you. I have never in all my years wanted anything or anyone more than you."

He was challenging me. But he underestimated the feelings and emotions that coursed through my body. I extracted my wrist from his clutch and pulled his hand towards me, resting it on my knee. "So when you say you want me, what you really mean is that you want to eat me, right?"

His eyes narrowed at my crassness but he gave me a short, "Yes," in response.

Picking up his smooth hand I turned on the couch, tucking my knees underneath me, and faced him. "And you don't think I understand this...desire?" I asked.

His eyes were no longer narrow but focused intently, following my every movement. I pulled his hand up to my nose and inhaled, replicating his actions from earlier. "Edward, I haven't lived as long as you, clearly, but I have been around people, other men, and none of them have ever appealed to me the same way you do."

He opened his mouth to protest and I stopped him by holding up my hand and guiding him to place his palm and fingers flat against my own. "Do you feel this between us? The energy? That has nothing to do with me being your dinner. But it has everything to do with me and you."

"You say this...but you don't understand. When I hear your heart beat my mouth fills with venom, in preparation to take you. The nature of my demon is to appeal to you, and attract you. We are all like this. Me, James, Victoria...its how she led you away that first time"

"Jasper and Emmett? Alice?" I prompted.

He nodded solemnly, his fingers folding into mine and once again they laid atop my knees.

"Well, Alice does smell nice I admit. And Jasper and Emmett do have an alluring thing going on...but that really has nothing to do with their scent as much as...well other things." I smirked at his alarmed expression, "You're the one I want Edward, do not misunderstand." I said quietly.

Comprehension flickered across his face and I think he finally caught up. "Some of what you're feeling isn't just blood lust although I accept that is there. But when two people are attracted to one another other things come into play. Chemicals and hormones." I continued. "Don't deny me my feelings."

"I won't." he promised, "But tell me. What *are* your feelings? Not being able to read you is unbearable."

He was right in front of me, this exquisite creature, and he had been so honest with me. I needed to be the same in return. "This terrifies me." I said and he attempted to pull away but I clutched his hand. "Not because you are a vampire, but because I have never felt this way either. I feel like I am ready to jump in this thing head first with you."

His eyes locked with mine, steady with resolve, "Even if it's wrong?"

"Definitely."

Edward lifted my hand to his mouth. With his perfect lips he gently pulled the skin stretched across the back of my hand with his lips and sent shivers down my spine.

"It's wrong." He whispered.

"I know." I replied but I couldn't keep the grin off my face.

Xxx

Over the next several days a new routine replaced the old one. After my first night sleeping at Edward's I went to my apartment with Alice in tow and explained to Angela I had to house sit while Edward was away on business. I encouraged her to pack her own things and move in with Ben if he approved. The apartment wasn't safe for either of us as long as James was still hunting me and Edward assured me that I would be safe in his home.

Edward also told me about Leah, the girl from the coffee shop. Her death stunned and saddened me in an unexpected way. She would have been safe at home, under the traditions and safety of her tribe. She hadn't believed their legends, which had horrific consequences. Befriending me had been the nail in her coffin and I told Edward so.

He'd laughed sarcastically and admitted that I did seem to attract trouble, but that this one was on him and no one else could take the blame. I smiled lamely and pretended to agree, but part of me knew I was responsible.

What he didn't tell me was why his attitude had suddenly shifted about James. He was still focused and determined to find him but the dynamic had changed. He mentioned Carlisle and treaties, which I assumed had to do with the Quileute Tribe, but it wasn't clear. The tension shifted from James and his coven to a broader anxiety including the mysterious residents of La Push.

With the level of stress we were all experiencing I was surprised at how quickly Edward adapted to my presence in his home. Rooms and doors that were formerly off limits were opened and I was eagerly invited in. I discovered he had a full office/safe room off of his bedroom, equipped with security monitors



and computers and he even showed me the stairway to the attic, where he spent much of his time. Edward respected my privacy by never entering my room or asking me to work past my regular hours, although my job description had changed some since I moved in. I resumed my regular work, but Edward accompanied me out of the house if I had business to attend to and we both devoted all our extra time researching possible leads on James and his newborns.

I had spent the morning going over recent breaking and entering reports from the police records Jasper had hacked into. The guys were convinced that James must have a pattern for the homes he was invading, and we were all desperately trying to connect the dots. Regardless of the involvement of the fabled wolf pack, no one wanted any further deaths in the city. Alice's visions were still vague and clearly being manipulated by the others, although we still could not determine how they knew so much about how her gift worked. Unfortunately though, this meant Edward could no longer rely on her for support and had to go back to his basic forms of investigation.

On this sunny day, I had been given a stack of documents to highlight, and upon completion I ran up the stairs as quickly as I could in a denim skirt and flip flops to find Edward in the attic. Breathing heavily I reached the last step and paused at the entrance of the room. Edward had rows of papers lined up across the floor organized in some way that I was unable to decipher. He was standing, tall and lean, over the lines of papers deep in concentration. He knew I was there. I'd come to find how truly amazing his senses really were. He could hear sounds from streets away. Or the ruffle of my sheets as I slept. He easily could see the small print on the papers below him from six feet away. And he could hear my thundering heartbeat at almost any distance.

Edward told me these things at random, like he needed to get them off his chest, and I lapped up every drop and detail like a woman dying of thirst. He was becoming my sustenance, the water and air I breathed.

From the doorway, I absorbed him. His thick, dark hair, the sharp lines of his face. His skin looked smooth as glass and I was dying to run my hands over it, claim it, but I hadn't summoned the courage. Quietly I skirted around the papers and perched myself on the desktop across the room. The large desk was underused as Edward preferred to spread out and see everything at once in an attempt to crack the pattern he was convinced was there.

I'd made this my place in the room. It was out of the way, yet gave me the perfect view of the imperfect man in front of me. The professional in me said I was observing, learning from one of the more powerful men in corporate America. The woman in me knew I was simply ogling him behind his back.

As welcoming as Edward had been, the tension between the two of us was thick and becoming almost unbearable. The moment in his room, when he kissed the back of my hand, was amazing. But I wanted more. And he wanted more but something was holding us back.

I was tired of holding back.

I had decided I was going to have to take the lead here. Falling for a man who lived during the repressed times of the early nineteen hundreds was fascinating. And frustrating. If I waited around for Edward to make a move I could be as old as he is.

Taking the opportunity of an empty house and a distracted Edward I decided to try to make some leeway. Watching him study the papers, I realized he wasn't going to stop working on his own and notice me, so I began to swing my legs from the edge of the desk noisily and let my shoes drop from my feet one by one in an effort to get his attention.

Nothing.

I huffed a little and arranged my hair over my head in a ponytail, knowing the movement would send waves of Bella smell in his direction. I pulled and fluffed and twisted all while running my fingers through my long tresses, hoping to lure him out.

Giving the scent of Bella a moment to travel through the air of the room, I looked at my personal vampire hero. He was wearing a blue button down with a white t-shirt underneath, and light khaki pants that rested gently at the top of his navy sneakers. Pausing my eyes on the back of his legs, I wondered for a moment what he would look like in shorts.

I wrenched myself from my daydreams and realized my efforts to gain his interest were failing. I recognized that if I wanted this man to notice me I was going to have to push harder than that.

Determined I called, "Edward," while still swinging my legs back and forth off the side of the desk.

He turned and looked at me, a smile on his face, eyes soft but distracted, "Yes?"

I returned his smile, "I've been thinking," I hesitated making sure I had his attention, "about your thing here...this side business...you tracking bad guys."

Edward's brow furrowed, "What exactly have you been thinking about?" Although Edward was open and honest with me, I often had to press him for details. I could tell he attempted to protect me from his world.

My fingers wrapped over the edge of the desk nervously, "Well, publically you work for PNT. Doing all those fabulous things you do for the community."

He nodded, his eyes narrowing as he attempted to follow my train of thought. I knew the fact he couldn't read my mind frustrated him, sometimes, though, I was sure he thought I was an imbecile.

I took a deep breath and continued, "But during the rest of the time you research and study looking for people to help, crimes to stop, right?"

I smiled warmly at him and his eyes lit up. "I guess that's kind of what I do. I try to help people. Using my abilities."

Looking around the room I pointed to the huge filing cabinets and bins of papers, the maps on the walls. "But it's more than that, you have a whole process here. And you have Jasper who helps and Alice assists with her visions. It's really incredible."

His eyes followed my hands as I spoke and instantly he was in front of me. "Thank You. I'm trying...it's my attempt to make up for the time before."

I nodded in understanding, and I did understand. We spoke of his rebellion. The early years he left his family to live a different life. It worked for a while, killing murderers and rapists, but in the end it wasn't enough or maybe too much and eventually he returned home.

I was happy he had moved closer to me, but now he was distracted again, this time by the past.

"Edward," I said, and baited him back to present times with my voice. I waved him over and he obliged, stopping inches from my legs.

Better, but still dissatisfied with the distance, I sighed and in a move that caused my face to burn I reached my shaking hands to his hips and pulled him towards me.

I looked at his face, which at this distance was only several inches higher than my own. He had a flawless eyebrow arched in amusement and very willingly allowed himself to be settled against my knees.

"So what I've been thinking is that you really *are* kind of like a superhero." I said, and the amusement dropped quickly from his face and was replaced with a grimace.

But he didn't move.

"No," I said, and I tentatively reached my hands to his face. It was as if he was molded from clay. Perfectly symmetrical, flawlessly aligned. I ran my fingers over every inch of exposed skin, memorizing his features. His eyes fluttered shut at my touch and I ran my fingers across the crease in his forehead and over the faint

purplish smudges under his eyes. With a sigh I let my palm ghost over the length of his jaw, beginning at the wide spot beside his ear all the way to his chin. "Don't let that upset you. You're doing a good thing." I told him as I eyed his Adam's apple bob with a deep swallow. My skin pricked at the sight of him struggling and as much as my body craved more, my instincts were on alert.

With his eyes still shut, his hands found my legs and he trailed his fingers over my skin. "I don't know if that's true. I try or tried, until I met you. But now it is all a mess. James wants you because of me. He killed Leah because of me. Superheroes don't let people die." He breathed and opened his eyes, the pain evident.

I rubbed my finger over his lip as he had done to mine in comfort countless times, and I struggled to remain lucid as his tongue darted out in response. "You are not responsible for his actions. But you and your League of Justice will take care of him. I have faith."

He shifted forward infinitesimally as I let my fingers spread behind his ears and slip into the tangle of hair on his neck. He was close but it was still too far, the void between us was wider than the actual physical distance.

I felt his fingers pressing into my knees as though he was resisting something. Me. I searched his face and the conflict was clear. The want in his eyes was unmistakable but the fear threatened to overpower his desire.

In a moment of pure self consciousness I began second guessing my attempt and I felt the burning heat creep up my neck and face. I loosened my trembling grasp from his hair and began to pull away slowly. Before I could fully extract myself Edward shuddered and exhaled, "God, I want you so much." And my eyes flew to his and I nodded silently, willing him to understand I felt the same. I was giving myself to him. Sacrificing my comfort for the next step with him. I needed him and would take whatever he could give back, even if it had disastrous results.

His hands moved from my knees to my waist and he leaned in so slowly, head tilted, close enough to feel the tension rolling off his body. I licked my lips once and shifted my hips under the weight of his hands. "Don't move," he whispered and I froze under his spell, willing to submit to his every whim. I closed my eyes and I could feel Edward's labored breaths washing over my mouth. I wasn't sure what where his emotions were or where his desire was leading, but I knew I wouldn't stop. He wanted to consume me and I wanted to be consumed.

"Please," I murmured and his lips were on mine. Smooth, cool, and gentle.

Wonderful.

I moved my lips in response, following his pace. It was slow and restrained, burning with an underlying desire. I wanted more but I would take what he would give me. My fingers eagerly tugged the thick strands of his hair, pulling him towards me, and he tenderly pushed my legs apart and pressed my body into the desk. His lips felt like he had run them over with ice while mine were boiling, on fire, melting his as they worked together.

Abruptly he stopped and pulled away, his hands resting on my hips. He dropped his head to my shoulder and let out a deep sigh. Edward's left hand scaled my arm and up my throat, his thumb searching for my pulse.

I stroked his hair, combing it downward with my fingers and I asked, "Are you okay?" into the soft snarl of hair on top of his head.

He nodded into my shirt and tilted his head, running his nose along the skin of my throat, whispering kisses along the way. His lips reached my ear and he said, "All these years I thought I was working towards redemption, preparing myself for enemies against humanity and disciplining myself for the challenges that came with my choices." He lifted his head and focused his darkened yellow eyes on my own. "I was wrong

Isabella. Those days of restraint and self-depravation were in preparation for you and your entrance into my life."

Wide eyed and with a hammering heart, I was captivated by the man in front of me. There was an energy coming from him now that was not present earlier. "That was the hardest thing I've ever done," he said and he leaned in kissing me deeper and more forcefully than before. Confident now, he pulled away with a final tug on my bottom lip and said, "But I now understand, it was all worth it. Every step, every sacrifice, every moment I strived to be better, to be stronger, was worth it."

He wrapped his long arms around my shoulders, enveloping me in his chest, burrowed in, safe, protected for the moment. Squeezing my eyes shut, and my arms tight around Edward's waist, I couldn't help feel relief that another barrier was down and we had made it past another hurdle. The journey ahead of us was destined to be difficult and painful. but now we knew we would be making it together.



## Chapter Twenty-One

*Chapter Song: [No Doubt - Underneath It All](#)*

EPOV

I entered the clearing at full speed. It was a beautiful night, clear with no clouds. I looked up at the full sky of stars and a partial moon. Miles away from civilization, my enhanced vision made the stars that dotted the sky shine like diamonds. Finding our rock, I settled on it waiting for her to arrive. I was faster, typically early, but these moments alone now were not so painful. I had Bella. Truly had her, and for the first time in many years, being alone wasn't so daunting and it was a wonderful feeling to know someone would be waiting for your return.

I'd left Bella at home, Angela had come over and they were going to have dinner and watch some movies. Girl time or something. I had no idea what that meant really, but Bella insisted on maintaining her relationship with her friend, which I fully supported. Her family was far way and their contact minimal. I realized how lucky I was to have access to unconditional support all the time and I wanted her to have the same in whatever manner it came in. Angela was important to her and therefore important to me. So with my head buried in her neck one last time, I kissed the pulsing spot under her chin and left for my meeting.

The thought of Bella caused a false feeling of warmth to spread through my body. The kiss we'd shared that afternoon was still heavy on my mind. I'd wanted her for so long, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea. I was concerned about hurting her and my desire for her blood taking over. I worried it was too fast and not what she wanted, that I was simply pushing my will on her, using my vampiric allure to confuse and sway her. I couldn't remember a time when I couldn't hear a woman or girl's thoughts and know her needs. I had to read Bella like a normal, non-gifted person would, and it was incredibly intimidating and frustrating.

So, I held back and tried to let nature take its course. I distanced myself, using the distraction of work and James as a ploy to put some space between us. But Bella was strong. Mentally and emotionally she knew what she wanted, which I was more grateful for than she could know. In this relationship of ours, it could never be the will of one over the other. We had to bring our strengths to the table and determine who should take the lead. This time it was up to her. I needed her to let me know how she wanted to proceed.

As usual, Bella seemed aware of my hesitation and she tested me, having no idea how I struggled in the attic. I heard her coming up the stairs and as she appeared in the doorway, I watched her peripherally, her

slim legs, and silly shoes. I felt her behind me, balanced on the edge of my desk. I couldn't see her but, I could hear her every movement, the sway of her feet and legs, the shift of her skirt, the soft thuds of her shoes as they hit the hardwood floors. I was assaulted by the smell of her hair as she pulled it away from her face.

My back was to her and she was oblivious to my reaction. I used all my power to keep my feet in place, my knees close to buckling under the strain. Venom dripped lightly down my throat, less now, but still prevalent. My entire body reacted to her presence, like a row of Dominos, and I fell one piece at a time, my hands clenched, the fabric of my pants tightened and my nostrils flared as I inhaled her succulent aroma.

At that moment, she called my name and my final tile fell, tumbling, and with as much composure as possible, I turned to her allowing her to lure me in. I listened and responded when she spoke, but all I could think of was her bare legs and what her skin would feel like under my fingertips. And with every word she spoke, I wanted to shut her lips with my own, using them to speak through me, not to me. With nervous hands, she pulled me close inviting me to connect with her body and I could no longer resist. I breathed her in, and for one moment it was too much, almost too much, and I begged her to remain still so I could steady myself. Her stillness allowed my senses to clear and discern which desire was stronger, and it wasn't the bloodlust, it was the physical lust, so I kissed her and with relief she kissed me in return.

I relived this moment in my head as I heard the approaching footsteps. Out of the dense trees a figure stepped and I was at her side in an instant. Wrapping my arms around her, I lifted her off her feet and swung her around. If Bella was my compass, Esme was my constant. She was honest and forthright, non-judgmental and only wanted the best for those she loved. I was there for her when she woke from death, confused and scared. She was there for me when I returned home the first time, bitter and hollow. We supported one another through it all. I was close to everyone in my family, but Esme and I shared a different kind of bond. We were raised together in this second life and it forged us together unlike all the others. She was who I went to when I needed the truth. And until now I hadn't wanted to hear what she would say.

I planted a firm kiss on her forehead and let her feet hit the ground. "I missed you," I told her and in the darkness I could see her gold eyes studying me.

"I missed you too," she said in return and she reached her hand up to smooth my hair out of my face. I slipped my hand into hers and we walked across the field to the large rock and climbed on top.

This was our place. Mine and Esme's. We didn't come here often, but after I left the family we had difficult times. She wanted to help me, mother me and I had to remind her constantly that she wasn't my mother, if anything I was actually her big brother and I could make it on my own. So now, on prearranged dates, we met here to keep the air clear and our love known.

"Well," she said swatting me across the knee. "Tell me all about her. Everything."

I softly punched her arm back. "No, you first. What have you heard?"

A sly grin crept across her mouth. "Hmmm....Alice is in heaven, but you knew that. Jasper is fascinated by the whole concept of your attraction to Bella since she is human, and Emmett thinks she is too good for you."

I laughed because as usual, Emmett was smarter than I typically gave him credit for. I raised an eyebrow and asked, "What about the others? How do they feel?"

Esme became quiet and I saw her nose crinkle in thought...*Rosalie is worried. Not about Bella but the other vampires. You know she doesn't like disruption in her life.*

I nodded in understanding unsurprised by Rosalie's position. I pushed Esme's wandering thoughts out of my mind and waited for her to speak again.

"Carlisle loves you and he is always proud of your choices."

That last one hung in the air for a minute, and I swelled at her words about Carlisle. I found her hand and I pulled it playfully. "And you?" I asked, fearing what was to come.

"Me?" she asked.

"What do you think?"

I watched as she brushed the back of her hand over my cheek. "I think you look happy. You're brimming with something I never thought you would possess."

I couldn't help but smile because I could feel it too. I was overflowing with it. With Bella.

"The other times I knew things weren't right. Obviously, you and Rosalie were incompatible and I still have no idea how Carlisle thought that would work. And Tanya..." she trailed off and I couldn't help the grimace from settling on my face. "Well, Tanya taught us we all need to be true to ourselves. You can't make things work for other people. Clearly, you've learned this lesson."

She was right. I had learned this lesson and it was why I was willing to fight so hard and risk so much for Bella. I once fought for the wrong things. The wrong person.

"She challenges me. And accepts me. It's more than I could've wished for."

Esme laughed quietly. "It would take a strong woman to keep up with you. Stronger than Alice or Rose." *Have you thought about the future?*

"Not yet. It's too soon, but I know we will have to," I responded, the thought made my insides turn. It was all so new but as odd as it sounded, we didn't have forever.

I bumped my shoulder into hers and we quieted for awhile. Among the crickets and noises of the forest, I listened to the thoughts of her mind. Esme was happily humming the melody of a song I wrote for her, the sound of the notes flitted through her head.

She leaned her head onto mine comfortably as I said, "I'm composing again."

*For her?*

"She inspires me."

Worry passed through her thoughts, the 'what if's' that were bound to come. What if I hurt her? What if James got to her first? What if this wasn't the life she wanted? What if I lost her? What then?

I pushed these thoughts aside, preferring to live my current state of blissful denial. Esme and I spent the remainder of the night sitting on our rock speaking of love and how it changes us. She retold the story of the first time she met Carlisle, when she was human and how it wasn't their time. I wondered if Bella and I had met at another time, under different circumstances how things would have turned out. As the morning light began to creep up behind the trees, we said our goodbyes, embracing tightly and with the promise to bring Bella to meet her soon. My heart was lighter as I watched her disappear into the thick brush of the forest. Once I could no longer hear her footsteps, I ran in the other direction, racing back to Bella.

Xxx

BPOV

"A meat thermometer?" I asked, unwrapping the next item from the pile laid out on the counter in front of me.

Edward's head was inside a large brown box on the kitchen floor and I heard him reply with a muffled, "Sure, why not?"

"Because I don't eat meat?" I said, and studied the stainless steel, digital thermometer in my hand.

He lifted his head out of the box and rested his hands on the edges, his forearms bare and taut. He had a piece of packing foam nestled in his thick bushy hair. Perplexed, he said, "True. Isn't it funny that you don't eat animals but I do?"

"Hysterical. But neither of us needs a meat thermometer," I said and placed it on the 'return' pile on the counter.

Earlier that day, I had been at my desk when the doorbell rang. Edward beat me to the door, quickly signing for several packages and bringing them past me into the kitchen. The look on his face was excitement and I could see a trace of pride in his smirk as he carried the largest box through my office.

Before I even stood up, I could hear him ripping into the boxes, sliding his sharp nails through the packing tape like a razor. Mesmerized as usual by the severe contrast between his graceful movements and his animalistic abilities, I watched in fascination as he began unpacking containers.

"Can I ask what all this is?" I asked, once I pulled my eyes from his hands and located the appropriate words.

He stopped briefly and smiled sheepishly. "It's for you. Kitchen supplies. Now that you live here you should have some tools to help you cook."

I felt the grin spread across my face. It was impossibly sweet. He was impossibly sweet. I walked over to him and stopped his hands from removing the wrapped objects from inside the box. "Thank you," I said and slid my hand around his waist. I looked at him, waiting for approval, which he gave in a minute nod, before pushing up on my toes. My lips found his, cool and slick, and I kissed him gratefully.

He kissed me back and when we parted, his tongue darted over my lips in one final sweep causing my knees to buckle. This had become a pattern. His kisses made me weak, causing me to stutter and stammer when they were over. Edward was convinced it was his vampire charms. I let him believe that but I knew it wasn't true. It was simply him, and his touches captivated me. He owned me body, mind and soul.

I forced myself to wander back to my sorting, but I found myself watching him instead. He was so relaxed, happy. His face had always been smooth and perfect, but I knew now there had been an underlying anger and sadness. But now, since we'd been together, that had washed away. He was busy separating utensils, measuring spoons, and chopsticks ("For the Thai!" he exclaimed with glee). He was glorious and safe. He was exciting and carried the enthusiasm of a child. I felt a pull to Edward like I had never experienced before. And as much as I was content working side by side with him, there were still questions I had and answers I needed.

But I wasn't sure how to approach it. Not exactly. Edward was from another time. He was polite and reserved. I needed to know our limitations personally and realistically. I needed to know the dangers and if he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

An hour later, I was still working on how to ask him when I realized most of the boxes were unpacked. Edward was holding a circular pizza cutter in his hand, spinning the sharp wheel, round and round, letting the edge slice across his finger.

"This is amazing," he said, totally fascinated by the spinning knife. "So you put it on your bread and it rolls across in a straight line. No breaks." I nodded trying to keep the amused expression off my face. For someone who knows so much and has experienced so many things, he could be completely clueless.

I winced as he rolled the cutter down his arm, a faint line appearing for a second but healing immediately. "So your skin just heals?" I asked.

"Yes, see..." and he took a pairing knife out of the block and ran it down his cheek. Instead of a thick stream of blood, there was a pinkish line that quickly disappeared. "And I have to press really hard for it to do that."

I walked over and reached my hand up. He lowered his head and turned his cheek so I could feel it. There was no trace of injury, his skin was as flawless as before. I used my other hand to pluck the foam pieces out of his hair.

"So, you can't be injured, other than being torn to shreds and set on fire. Which can really only be done by another vampire or maybe a werewolf?" I asked.

He nodded and said, "It's a blessing and a curse." The curse he explained, was how once you were changed you were pretty much stuck this way for eternity. There was no easy way out.

"But you can go out in the sun, you just *don't* go out in the sun," I confirmed. This one confused me and I had been thinking of a way to approach it for days. It was sunny today, not a cloud in the sky and I had a plan. "From your journals, you claim you look like a monster in the sun, that it reveals your demonic nature. I don't understand. You weren't very descriptive."

Edward put the knife in the utensil drawer and finished placing the measuring cup in the cabinet. "It's hard to explain. But it keeps us indoors, out of the light. It's why I stay home on sunny days, it's why we live here."

I was leaning on the counter, my elbows propped on either side. I saw the discomfort on his face and I wanted to wash it away. "Show me," I demanded.

He looked pained and said, "I'd rather not. It's just weird."

I pushed off the counter and was back at his side. "Please?" I begged. "I want to know all of you." I tugged on his arm and pulled him towards the back door, the one that took us out to the patio.

It was gloriously sunny outside, so bright it made my eyes hurt for a second due to the glare. I walked past Edward, out into the heat and scowled at him as he hid just inside the door.

"Edward. Come on. It can't be that horrible." I laughed but he still wouldn't budge. "Oh. My. God. It is! Do you get spikes on your face or does your face turn all evil vamp like on the TV?" I was kind of kidding but his hesitancy was concerning me.

I walked back up the short stairway to the door and placed my hand in his. "It's okay. You can show me."

I gently pushed him down the stairs so he was a step below me, the sun grazing the top of his dark hair making the tips glow copper. I leaned down and began placing soft kisses on his face, starting with his forehead and working my way down his cheeks, across his nose until I reached his mouth. My fingers gripped the sides of his shirt, near his waist, and I could hear a faint growl under his breath. Speaking against his lips I said, "Close your eyes." And I felt them flutter shut and I closed my own as I nudged him down one more step, trying to distract him with my mouth and hands.

I could feel the sun beating down on my head and I opened my eyes to find him standing, tall and long, eyes shut, *sparkling* in the sunlight. He looked like he had been rolled in iridescent glitter. He looked like he was covered in diamonds.

I ran my fingers up his arms, gliding them over the shimmery skin. He shuddered under my touch which pleased me. My hands traveled over the fabric of his shirt to his neck where again, I fingered the skin, manipulating the shadows, reveling in the beauty of this man. Tracing the collar of his shirt, I stopped at the button under his throat and said, "May I?" and with eyes shut, he nodded, granting me permission. With confident hands, I unfastened the buttons, painstakingly, one at a time, basking in the glow of his skin as I slowly revealed his chest and then stomach.



Once it was completely unbuttoned, I pushed the material back, over his shoulders, letting it slide down his arms and drop to the ground. His exposed skin, pale and white was glimmering under the afternoon sun. My hands found his abs, chiseled and perfect, and traced the muscles, one by one until I reached his chest. "Are you kidding me?" I wondered aloud, my eyes drawn to the reflective sparkles that glinted off his body and onto my own.

"What? Why?" he asked breaking from the quiet spell he was under.

"You! Acting like you looked horrible or scary." I walked around him and ran my hands over his sculpted and blazing back. He looked like he was coated in sugar. It was all I could do not to lick his skin.

"People don't look like this, Bella. Not normal people," he said wistfully, his voice thick with regret.

I stopped my ogling for a moment and turned him towards me. I wove my fingers in his and led him to the soft cushion of a wide wicker chair across the patio.

"You may not be 'normal,' Edward, but you are beautiful." I trailed a finger down his face and pushed him into the seat. "You have no idea," I said, before settling onto his lap.

Xxx

EPOV

I reached my hand out and brushed back a sticky, sweaty piece of hair from Bella's neck. Her face was flushed from the heat and I could see a bead of sweat rolling down the back of her neck. I drew her to me and pressed my lips against her flesh, tasting her.

We had been sitting on the patio for some time, the sun getting lower, shining only on one corner of the tile floor. Bella's hands were still attached to my bare chest, like they were affixed with adhesive. Outside, I was holding my composure, but inside, I was a quivering mess. Her hands were so soft, moving over my body with care and tenderness and my body coursed with electricity. The closeness was new and exhilarating.

Bella's reactions surprised me as usual. I'd spent a lifetime thinking my exposed self was freakish, but she proved me wrong once again, finding beauty where there was none. She was now resting her head on my shoulder, her fingers documenting my skin. Breaking the stillness. "Edward?" I hummed in response and she continued, "I need to ask you some questions."

"Anything," I replied and ran my nose along the velvet of her ear.

She shivered and I felt a smile next to my chest. "I need to know what exactly we can *do*."

"Do?"

She pressed her sticky forehead into me and her already flushed skin turned redder. I knew what she wanted to know. It was in her heart beat and in the slight shake of her voice. I could smell the adrenaline in her nerves. The idea that she wanted me was thrilling, arousing but this was dampened by the reality of the situation.

"Yeah. There's venom and teeth and all kinds of foreign things I don't understand," she mumbled. The wind blew lightly across the patio cooling us. I could hear the creaking chains from the hanging flower baskets as they swayed on their hooks off the eaves.

I pulled her chin up towards my face. "You really want to know?"

"Of course. Edward, neither of us are children. I've been in relationships before, I assume the same of you."

I nodded feeling a twinge of unfounded jealousy at the thought of Bella with another man. "True, but the men you were involved with were human, and for me she was not."

We let that disclosure settle for a moment and she kissed me quickly on the forehead and said, "Then we are starting on even ground, I guess. We both need to know what is safe and what we are comfortable with."

Her eyes were earnest and she had such faith. This talk was hard for me. Not only because I didn't want to disappoint her but because men and women from my time didn't discuss things of this nature. But this was her time, not mine and I knew I needed to adjust. Nervously, I ran my hand down her leg and let my finger graze the pulsing vein near her ankle, letting the rhythm build my courage.

Shifting in my seat, I sat up a little, moving her with me. "Well, I'm not completely sure. I have no idea if a vampire and a human have had relationships, well, and lived to tell about it."

She stiffened slightly but her hands resumed stroking my chest, so I continued, "We can kiss, and the venom isn't harmful if ingested orally. Even if you had a small cut on your mouth it wouldn't take effect." I grimaced. "But, my teeth are very sharp. It's how we feed and fight. If you cut yourself on them the results would be dire."

Her heartbeat quickened in my ears and under my finger. Swallowing deeply she said, "Explain what you mean by 'results.'"

"If my venom enters your bloodstream, directly, other than in minimal amounts by a bite or cut, you will begin the process of changing."

"Changing... to be like you," she clarified.

Although I could sense her fear, it wasn't enough, which left me with conflicted emotions. "Yes. Like me. Or, I would kill you in the process." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, inhaling her. "If I tasted your blood, Bella, I'm not sure if I could stop myself."

Thoughtfully, she considered, "So, kissing is allowed, even open mouthed but beware of your teeth."

I nodded.

Bella cocked her head. "So, what you're saying is that you've been holding out on me." A look of irritation crossed her face.

"Sorry. I just wasn't sure..."

"Edward. Don't treat me like some kind of fragile doll. I'm not," she said and her lips pouted a little.

I nodded. She was right. "I'm sorry. But you are too important to me to risk your safety in any way. You have to believe any precautions I take are necessary. Okay?"

She dropped her head back to my chest and squeezed me as tight as her human arms could manage. "Okay, I trust you. But don't underestimate me either."

She rolled on her back so I could see her face and I said, "I won't. Is that all of your questions?" I asked this, but I already knew the answer. "Is there anything else you want to know?"

She made a face and said, "You *know* what I want to know."

I did. But the answer wasn't what either of us wanted to hear so I didn't want to be the one to break the news to her. I sighed. "I'm not sure. The situation is unprecedented and therefore dangerous. Since all our fluids are replaced by venom this is a major concern. Unlike kissing, there would be a larger quantity of venom involved. There is no safe way to know if it's possible or not."

Her face fell a little but she seemed to be seriously considering the information I had just given her. "But we can kiss, like really kiss. Right?" she asked. I laughed and said, "Yes," loving the way her eyes lit up at the idea of 'really' kissing me.

Then I watched as her eyes narrowed, the wheels turning in her head. What I would have given to read her thoughts at that very moment. I waited, knowing there was more when she finally said, "I have one more question." And she sat up eyeing me wickedly.

I groaned inwardly. This was not going to be good. "Just one?" I asked, stalling for time.

"For now," she said and hopped off my lap. I eyed her as she adjusted her shorts and suddenly reached out for my waistband, yanking me out of the chair with both hands. I willingly followed her as she dragged me across the patio to the last patch of sunlight where my skin instantly began to glint.

Bella's hands were firmly tucked into the edge of my pants, her fingers softly grazing my skin. "What's this about?" I asked.

Bella blew out her mouth and bit down on her lip, covering me with her scent. "Well, I'm curious about one thing," she said, tugging me a little closer.

"Okay." I'd been honest this whole time, there was no need to stop now.

Again she paused, and bounced on her toes a little, nervously. Impatiently, I cupped her face in my hands and cut off her movements with a firm kiss on her mouth. She responded eagerly, pushing further this time by pressing her tongue to my lips. I couldn't read Bella's mind but I could read her body. This girl was going to end me.

Reluctantly, I ended the kiss and said, "What's your question, Bella?"

She sighed heavily, her eyes hooded from the kiss, and I laughed at her dazed expression. She looked the way I felt. She shook her head, clearing it, and said, "Oh! Yeah, so, ummm...does your whole body sparkle like this?" And she tightened her grip on my pants, causing a slight tremor inside.

My mouth dropped in surprise which only bolstered her courage. "Does *it*? Sparkle?"

She was standing close, her tiny hands clutching my pants, asking taboo questions. I was close to horrified at the thought of the entire subject, but something about the way her foot was tapping made me wonder if she was really as brave as she was acting. I grabbed her hands in mine, pulling them off my waist and said, "Bella, one day I hope you'll find out, but for now that is one mystery I'm keeping to myself." I smiled crookedly hoping she would forgive my evasion. Her grin in return told me she did and standing in the fading afternoon sun, glittering like a diamond, I kissed her, knowing that in that moment it was more than either of us had expected.

Xxx

I was sitting at the piano, a notebook propped in front of me filled with my newest composition. I didn't need the papers, I had it memorized of course, but it was almost like a safety net. There to help me if I faltered. Which was impossible since I never even began. My fingers would pose over the keys and I would run the notes through my head, hearing the music but I couldn't actually play. I was blocked. Bella inspired me to write, but something inside me refused to complete the act. Music was my final connector to humanity. I'd played piano before my death and it was the only real talent I brought with me to the other side. I stopped years ago when I realized I was living a false life. Pretending to live like others when I was farther away than ever. Although I felt I was close, I wasn't completely ready.

Exasperated with myself, I shut the cover, and left the room, walking down the stairs to my rooms. It was late. Bella was asleep in her room and as every other night before, I was aimless. James was eluding me for the moment. I was waiting for Carlisle to solidify information about the wolves and arrange a meeting. There were piles of research waiting for me on my desk, but none of it interested me. Work, studying, learning. None of it mattered anymore. Only one thing held my interest. Bella.

If I thought my obsessive tendencies would wane once she moved into my home and entered into a relationship with me, I was wrong. More than ever I craved her. So on this night, I wandered the house, counting the CDs, cataloguing the books, burying my nose in the blue sweater Bella left on the back of her chair. I ignored the steady thumps from her room, evenly paced, calm, resting. At night, it was the hardest, having her here and letting her have her space. I wanted to be with her all the time, to have her near me. So I took to my old habits, just altered for our new situation.

Every night I tried and failed to stay away, but each time I felt the pull, the compulsion to be near her. Tonight, I had held out longer than most, buoyed on kisses and caresses from our time on the patio. When I felt the urge, I let my mind wander, reliving the hours spent exploring each other, body and soul. But my limit had been reached and I sprinted up the stairs, stopping outside her room, where I hovered outside the door.

As I began my new tradition of waiting and listening, absorbing her sleeping movements, always outside the door, never intruding in her actual space, I was surprised when I heard the click and turn of the knob and came face to face with my fixation, Bella.

"Edward," she said and I my eyes widened at her voice. Her eyes were drooping and half open. Her face had a line down the side from the crease in her pillow. Hair was sticking out everywhere, tufting out of the clip at the top. She was vulnerable and exquisite.

"Yes," I answered, humiliated at being caught, but too desperate for contact to run.

She rubbed her eye lazily with the back of her hand and yawned. "Stop standing in the hallway, come to bed."

Stunned, I nodded and watched as she turned and tumbled back into bed, pulling the cover over herself and rolling on her side.

I stood in the doorway unsure, afraid she was still asleep and I was close to over stepping my bounds. Just when I was about to turn away, erring on the side of caution, she looked up at me and reached her hand out, patting the empty side of the bed, giving me a sleepy grin.

Stepping into the dark room, I carefully slipped off my shoes, one at a time. I eased into the bed and gingerly laid on my back, my head resting on the pillow. Bella snuggled her body close to mine and I felt her hand settle on my chest, spreading her fingers wide. Shifting to my side, I placed my hand on her hip, pulling her gently towards me.

I realized this was the first time I had laid on a bed in decades. I'd had no use, no purpose until now. Bella broke down the walls built up by my demon, forcing the humanity to spill out. She wasn't allowing me to live outside her, watching her. She wanted me to experience life with her. For once, I grasped the concept of living for someone and with someone, and not lurking in the shadows, reading their minds and anticipating their actions.

Leaning over, I kissed her forehead and whispered, "Thank you," and prepared myself for the night as a participant and not an observer.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

BPOV

Stretching my arms out across the cool sheets, I felt emptiness where Edward should have been. He'd kept me company while I slept at night, silent and still, but there all the same. Each morning I would wake to find him next me, possibly holding a book or his journal but more often than not just watching and waiting for me to stir.

My dreams had shifted since I'd moved to his house. No longer about Bree or Victoria, Edward had become the star and I his leading lady. The images were bright and bold, sensual and arousing. Ever since he began spending nights with me I dreamed of us together, feeling the soft skin of his hands on my body and the coolness of his breath on my neck.

More than once I dreamed he fed from me, and although my heart would race it wasn't ever in fear; it was in anticipation. In these visions I wanted to be everything for him, I offered myself like a sacrifice, lying across the bed, presenting my body for him to ravish. And I would watch through hazy eyes as he hesitated but ultimately plunged his teeth into my flesh with a groan of ecstasy.

Each time I would feel a moan of my own building in my chest as I writhed under his imaginary weight and I would wake breathless and agitated, staring into Edward's concerned yet knowing eyes.

But this morning, as my fingers fluttered to my neck to feel the wounds I knew wouldn't be there, Edward was missing, his side of the bed rumpled as though he had just left. I threw back the covers and slid out of bed, pulling at the hem of my tank since it had risen during the night. Figuring he must be in the house, as we had planned to go into his PNT offices together this morning, I wandered down the hall, first checking his dressing room before looking in his rooms.

The front room was empty, exactly as we left it the night before, paperwork and files covering his father's couch and floor. The security room door was closed and I quickly entered the password into the key pad to unlock the system. Twisting the knob in my hand I pushed it open and found Edward sitting behind his desk, with a look of distress on his face that at the sight of me entering the room swung to shock.

"Hey, are you...," I started, concerned, and I felt my eyes widen in surprise at the sight in front of me. "...okay?"

EPOV

Bella was killing me. Slowly. One dream at a time. I wasn't sure of the specifics but her body was signaling what her mind couldn't tell me. Bella was aroused. And by the way she whispered my name I was definitely involved. I could smell it on her skin, see it in the shifting movements under the covers and hear it in the mumbling words under her breath. The first morning it happened I suffered in silence, a grin plastered on my face for my waking angel, while the venom flowed not down my throat but between my legs.

From then on I slipped from the room, as her dream took hold, locking myself in my office and proceeded to relieve the pressure building inside. It was fast and mechanical, and each time I would quickly unfasten my pants, and reach inside, and I manipulated myself while thinking of Bella, asleep and dreaming in her bed.

Today was like all the others except in my haste to leave Bella's room the door clicked as I shut it. Normally I was silent, leaving no trace of my abandonment and always returning before she awoke. Vampire speed helped me make quick work of my needs and my longing for Bella had me on the edge. It only took a few strokes before I succumbed to my fantasies, cleaned up and carried on as nothing had happened.

This was not the case today. Bella must have heard the click of the door because as I sat behind my desk, thinking of the pale, exposed, sliver of skin between her shorts and the god forsaken tight shirt she wore to bed, she entered just as I began to climb to the tip of my orgasm.

Disheveled from sleep she stood in the doorway. I eyed the strip of flesh peeking above her shorts, mocking me as she spoke, as it almost encouraged the venom to project from my body. I have no idea what she said as the words were of little importance due to the terror of the moment. Her jaw went slack and her eyes were huge as she realized the compromised situation she found me in.

"Oh. My. God," she cried, "I'm so sorry." And she ran out of the room, the door banging behind her.

I rested my elbow on the desk in front of me and lowered my head into my palm as I muttered, "Oh dear God."

Xxx

I emerged from my office some time later and proceeded to get dressed and carry on about my day. I literally could not even imagine discussing the situation from earlier with Bella. She was downstairs and I could hear her making breakfast and going about her day.

I must have lingered too long because I heard her climb the steps and approach the dressing room door. "Edward? Are you coming down?" she asked, sweetly pretending she wasn't living with a perverted freak. It was one of the reasons I loved her. She judged me not.

When I didn't respond I heard her knock lightly. "Can I come in?" she asked from behind the door.

"Yes," I croaked, not sure at all if I ever wanted her to see me again.

She tentatively opened the door and gave me a warm smile, which I returned even though my head was ducked and she probably couldn't see it.

"I'm so sorry Bella." I began, "That was terrible. And disgusting. Please forgive me."

Bella's smile widened and she said, "Oh Edward. You are not the first man to be caught doing *that* by his girlfriend."

*That.*

I groaned, leaning back on the dressing table and covering my face with my hands. I felt her small, warm fingers wrap around my wrists as she pulled my hands away. "Edward, its okay. Please don't be embarrassed and we will never, ever talk about this again, okay?"

I nodded, doubting she could ever look at me the same. On her tip toes she gave me a quick kiss and said, "I like your suit. You look very handsome which means the women at your office or going to hate me just a little bit more today." She laughed. "Are you ready to go?"

Standing I said, "Yes," and let her lead me, as was our custom, towards better things.

Xxx

Forcing myself to move on from my humiliating experience that morning I was now marveling at Bella who sat across the desk from me with her new lap top open. She had pulled a chair up and her face was creased with concentration as she tried to learn the features of the computer. We were at PNT, sharing my office, unwilling for the last several days to separate. Part of this was out of necessity and concern over the danger with James, the rest was due to the fact I was addicted to her and couldn't bear to have her out of my presence.

*Mine.*

The word rumbled through my chest as I was watching her, memorizing how her face looked tense and focused. She twisted a long strand of hair around her index finger and her teeth were pressing into her top lip as all of her attention was directed on the task in front of her.

I cleared my throat and said, "I put you on the network here so you will receive all inter-office correspondence."

Without looking up Bella nodded while her finger manipulated the mouse on the keyboard. "And I had the IT people connect your calendar with Joyce's so you two are always aware of the others schedule."

This time she looked up and gave me a distracted smile, "Thank you."

There was a knock and I looked up to see one of my employees waiting by the door. His thoughts told me he was here to discuss some recent grant submissions but when his eyes laid on Bella his attention swung to her.

*One day I'm going to have a personal assistant and she will look that that...I wonder what kind of benefits she provides other than picking up dry cleaning...*

"Michael, do you need something?" I said in a calm yet strained voice once his thoughts turned more graphic. His eyes snapped away from Bella and shifted towards me.

"Umm..yes, I needed to give you these applications for final review. The numbers look good and I placed them in order of strongest to weakest." He said nervously, his eyes darting between my own and Bella, who was now paying close attention to our exchange. "So, here...they...are." He stammered, shuffling his feet a little and running his fingers through his hair.

*He looks pissed...I didn't do anything... she's looking at me...I wonder...*

Rage simmered under my skin and I was close to snapping his neck, and apparently Michael's Spidey senses were working today because thoughts of escape ran through his mind and he quickly handed over the files before he made his excuses and left.

I watched him leave, almost running down the hall to his office. Pushing back in my chair I glanced over at Bella who looked wary. She eyed me suspiciously and asked, "What was he thinking?"

"Just work related things." I hedged.

"Work related? You looked like you were going take his head off." She accused, closing her lap top so she could see me better.

Astonished by her accuracy I countered weakly, "I did not."

She rolled her beautiful eyes at me and laughed. "Yes you did. What was he thinking? Corporate espionage? Stealing pens from the supply closet? Extra bagel from the snack room?"

She was utterly ridiculous and knew it, which made it all the more endearing. I had no idea why I couldn't lie to this woman, but looking at her mischievous grin and bright eyes I was pretty sure it was because I couldn't deny her anything. I sighed walked around the desk, pushing the computer to the side and propping myself on the table top in front of her. "He was thinking about you."

Bewilderment appeared on her face. "Me? Why?"

I laughed at her naivety, "You really don't know do you?"

Bella sat in front of me perfect and confused. She shook her head making her brown locks shiver over her back, indicating that she really didn't understand what Michael could see in her. I knew not only from his mind but because others saw it too. I saw it. He saw the pale skin that was tinted pink in all the right places and her legs, long, smooth and taunting as they stretched out from under her skirt. He desired her hands to run over his chest, tugging in his hair. He wanted her fleshy lips to be on his, he wanted everything that I had and the thought of it made my chest swell with a mixture of pride and anger.

I reached out and grazed her neck with my finger, sliding it over her pulse, smiling at her, "He thinks you're beautiful and wishes he was lucky enough to have a woman like you by his side," I edited. "This also makes him jealous of me and he hates me a little more than usual."

Bella made a face at my compliment, "Whatever Edward. If you don't want to tell me just say so." But she wasn't really mad because she hopped out of her seat and planted a quick kiss on my lips as she walked out of my office.

I watched her as she left, admiring her from behind and more than a bit stunned at how fortunate I was to have Bella in my life. Pushing off the desk I realized more than one of my employees was staring at me through the transparent walls with open mouths and wide eyes. Shutting their thoughts out of my head I ran my fingers through my hair and tried to force the normal stony expression on my face and stiffen my demeanor. I was distracted by the sound of Bella's laughter from across the building and a smile settled on my face instead.

Xxx

BPOV

"Nancy, did you find your dress for the auction?" A girl with short blonde hair asked the girl sitting across the table from her. Maggie? Mary? Melissa?

"Yes, I found the most beautiful gown downtown last week. It cost half my paycheck but it will be so worth it." Nancy responded peeling off the top of her yogurt. "Plus I bought these amazing shoes at that little shop on Maple."

I was making a cup of tea in the microwave and wondered if Edward had ever used one before. I suspected not unless it was for an experiment or something. I had stopped on my way to the small kitchen to joke with Joyce that between the two of us we could possibly keep Edward on task now with our new coordinated calendars. This of course was a joke because he was *always* obsessively on task.

Watching my cup spin around in the microwave I heard the timer beep and I quickly opened the door. Tentatively I touched the handle for heat before removing my cup and placing the bag of tea inside. "Bella," I heard my name called and saw it was the M named girl, "have you found a dress yet?"

I stood by the shiny stainless steel counter dipping my tea bag in and out wondering what in the world this woman was talking about. I plastered a confident grin on my face and said, "Ummm...no? Should I have?"

"The event is next week. You really don't have much time left." The blonde said in response.

I picked a spoon out of the utensil container and began stirring my tea. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about." I confessed.

The two girls exchanged glances and carried on some type of non-verbal, female communication via head jerks and raised eyebrows. Finally Nancy said with a condescending pout, "Oh. I just assumed you would go with Mr. Cullen, but I must have misinterpreted the situation."

M nodded her head like a puppet from the other side of the table and said, "I guess it would be inappropriate for him to take an employee to the annual hospital fundraiser. It's the biggest social event of the year. An invite is one of the perks of working here."

At that Nancy began giggling and I heard her say, "One of..." under her breath and they both collapsed with laughter.

The laughter was bad enough but the patronizing tone made it worse. In one innocent conversation these two women had managed to hit my weak spot when it came to Edward. How could someone like him ever want to be with someone like me? I couldn't even imagine attending an event like this with him.



I stifled the desire to pour my hot tea over their heads and I forced myself to causally shrug as I walked out of the kitchen area, away from their hushed voices and giggles, and back towards Edward's office.

I stopped just around the corner from his glass walled office. Taking a deep breath I chastised myself for being stupid. And acting like a girl. A stupid girl who was upset that her 'boyfriend' hadn't asked her to a dance. I was having horrific flashbacks to senior year and going to the prom. I wasn't even sure if Edward was my 'boyfriend' or why he didn't want me to go with him to this party.

Sucking back my emotional breakdown I turned the corner and found him busy at his desk, looking flawless with his gorgeous cheekbones and carefully planned bed head. His tie was straight as an arrow, the alternating blue stripes matching his blue-gray suit perfectly. He heard me coming of course and as I walked in the doorway and turned to shut the door he greeted me with a brilliant grin, which began to falter as soon as he registered the distress on my face.

Edward leapt to his feet pushing his chair back with force and was at my side quickly. Not vampire fast but fast enough. "What's wrong?" he asked reaching for my hand.

I shook my fingers from his touch and said, "Nothing."

He pushed his fingers back into mine and brushed his thumb down my cheek, "Something happened. Did someone say something to you? They are all very intrigued by our relationship, you know. I've been ignoring their comments all morning."

I sighed, "It's just those girls, Nancy and M. I let them get under my skin."

Hurt and clearly baffled he said, "M? Who's M? And what did they say? I don't understand."

"It's nothing. I mean, going out in public doesn't make sense anyway, technically I am your assistant and that's just weird." I rambled on feeling the sting of tears in my eyes. I was such an idiot. "Plus, it's not like I have anything to wear..." I forced myself to stop because Edward's brows were so furrowed they met in the middle.

I allowed the outside of my hand to un-dramatically wipe under my eye while Edward continued to scrutinize me. After a minute he dropped my hand and walked past me to open the door. He stood perfectly still for a moment which caused his employees to walk cautiously around him until he stepped back in the office and closed the door and pressed his back to the deep brown wood.

"M' is Margie. And she and Nancy are going to be lucky if they have their jobs after today." He said bitterly, his golden eyes flashing.

I said, "Don't blame them for this. They were just being nice, well for a minute anyway. You're the one who doesn't want to take me to the fundraiser."

Edward's mouth gaped as he struggled with my accusation. It was clear he didn't want to go with me, but his behavior was making it all worse. Just then his desk phone rang and he almost leapt over his desk, clearly wanting to avoid furthering this conversation.

I stared at him as he picked up the phone and said, "Edward Cullen," in his annoyingly charming voice. He listened for a minute, his eyes widening and a look of horror replacing the earlier look of frustration. I couldn't hear the voice on the other side but whoever it was had his full attention and eventually he said, "You're right. I know....I will." And he cradled the receiver without even saying goodbye.

Sighing deeply he said, "Bella...I have an emergency meeting I have to go to...can we talk about this later?"

Giving him my best evil eye I said, "Sure. I'm taking the car" and began gathering my things. Without delay he was at my side, packing up my computer and holding the straps of my bag towards me.

"Let me walk you down," he said as if to appease me.

"No. I'm fine." I said childishly as I balanced the computer bag, my purse and everything else.

He followed me to the elevator anyway and pressed the button when we reached the large metal doors. We stood in an uncomfortable silence while we waited and when the doors opened I couldn't get inside fast enough. Once inside I turned and pressed the down button and watched Edward's sad face disappear behind the closing doors. Just before they touched I saw his fingers slip between the thick metal slabs and Edward easily pushed the two huge doors apart. Arms spread, holding the doors at bay, he fixed me with a sharp stare and said, "Wait for me at home okay?"

I nodded in agreement and he took a step back, letting the doors close between us.

Xxx

I wasn't surprised when Alice's bright yellow car swooped in behind me once I opened the garage. There was no way Edward would have let me come home alone if someone wasn't keeping an eye on me.

Irritated at the constant intrusion I gathered my things and slammed the door to the Volvo behind me. Alice beat me to the door holding it open for me and I glared at her as I passed and stepped into the kitchen.

Placing my bag and computer on the counter I continued to ignore Alice who was now sitting calmly at the kitchen table. I busied myself making lunch, opening the refrigerator and cabinets. I felt childish and silly for being upset over a dress and a party. I knew she was here to talk about it and I didn't want to. I wanted to feel sorry for myself and move on.

Luckily she kept her mouth shut for awhile and the only sound in the room was from the knife on the cutting board or the clank of a utensil on the counter. I knew my hope that Alice would take the hint and leave was futile so instead I sat down across from her and pulled a magazine out of my bag to read while I ate. She wasn't deterred by my behavior and while I skimmed an article about Hollywood's 100 Hottest Actors she began to speak.

"What's your favorite thing to eat?"

I put my fork down and wiped my mouth with my napkin, "What?"

Alice was sitting with her back straight and her eyes focused on my plate. Her spiky hair was perfectly arranged and as usual she looked like she was one of Hollywood's Hottest Actors.

In her small voice she said, "If you had to pick one food to eat forever what would it be?"

Even though I had no idea where this was going I played along, "Probably, cheese."

"Cheese..." she said and let the word trail off.

"Yeah, cheese. Any kind will do. In stuff, on stuff, stuffed in stuff. Cheese is awesome." I told her, annoyed with the fact I couldn't just ignore her and instead was rambling on about cheese like an idiot.

Alice sighed, "I don't remember cheese. Or any food really."

She was baiting me. The Cullen's and their history was completely fascinating and I couldn't get enough of the small details of their lives, pre and post change. I rolled my eyes, more at myself than her and said, "Nothing? Not even chocolate?"

"No, nothing. Most of us have hazy memories of our lives before we turned but I can't remember anything. It's just a black hole." Alice had her eyes closed and her face was completely smooth, revealing no emotion. "No matter how I look, nothing comes back."

"Irony," I said dryly.

Nodding her little head she agreed, "It is isn't it."

"What do you remember?" I asked.

Her mouth turned down and her eyes became sad. "Nothing. One day I was just me. I had my visions which eventually lead me to Jasper and then both of us to Carlisle."

This was surprising information. The total opposite of Edward and his heirlooms, notes, and journals. "Who changed you?"

Alice was fingering the beads on her bracelet, spinning them around. "I have no idea."

"I'm so sorry Alice," I said in an attempt to comfort her. "I can't imagine losing an entire history."

She smiled. "It's okay. Everything worked out. I found Jasper who was my soul mate and then we found the family. I suspect I may be happier in this life than in the last."

The tension lifted and with out warning I blurted, "Your brother is an ass," before I slapped my hand over my mouth.

Alice started to giggle. "Yeah he totally is."

"Did you see that coming?"

"No not really. Not until those girls asked you about your dress. I didn't have time to warn him." She admitted.

My temper flared suddenly, my palms banging down on the table. "Don't you dare warn him about things like this. I don't want him taking me places or doing things because you told him to."

Alice's hands clenched into tiny balls on top of the table, "Fine. But prepare yourself. He is completely socially delayed. Bella, he is over a hundred years old, and has no experience in this area at all."

I frowned at this, not completely sure if she wasn't just making excuses for him. "He told me he had at least one other woman in his life Alice. He had to have learned a thing or two."

I watched as she clenched her jaw. "He told you about her?"

"Only that there was a 'her'." I said smug with the knowledge I knew something she didn't.

"Don't get your hopes up, because that situation was entirely different. First of all she was a vampire and it was long before he entered human life and activities. Second, he could read her mind, which made it pretty easy for him to know the right thing to do." She said these things with an edge in her voice. "Bella, you two are in uncharted territory. He is totally clueless."

I considered this for a moment and I knew it had to be true. I'd read his journals. There was no mention of this at all. Even when he wrote of Esme, Alice or Rose and the kind things their husbands did for them he seemed perplexed by it, not understanding the emotion behind the action.

Propping my elbow on the table I dropped my head into my hand. "Oh God, what have I gotten myself into?"

Moving from her seat Alice squatted on the floor under me and reached for both of my hands, "You have gotten yourself into something wonderful. And he really is worth it Bella. I told you before you must be patient with him and don't be afraid to teach him." Her eyes were bright but sincere. I nodded my willingness to do this and she flashed me an ultra white grin, "Plus, he's a very efficient learner."

Xxx

EPOV

Jasper breezed in the door about ten minutes after Bella left the office and proceeded to sit in the chair across from me without invitation.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked going straight to the topic at hand.

Flustered I said, "Me? I didn't *do* anything."

He brushed his hair back and said, "Exactly."

He put his shoes up on the edge of the desk and leaned on the two back legs of the chair and I eyed them with irritation. "I'm not having this conversation with you."

"You are because Alice will know if I don't at least bring it up." he replied calmly.

We stared at one another for a minute over the desk, neither of us wanting the wrath of Alice. "Fine. I totally messed up. I'll fix it." I confessed, hoping to end this.

Jasper began bouncing his feet on the lip of my desk, making the chair creak under his weight. "You better. Look Edward, I know you haven't been around a lot of women but really, did you never pay attention to the ones you lived with?"

He was right and I knew it. I was self absorbed and never totally paid attention to the lives of my family when it came to things like this. But Bella was different. She wasn't like Rose or Alice. Even though they went to school and had other minor interactions with humans their lives were pretty much isolated and they didn't merge into society like I did.

I looked over my desk at Jasper. He was tall and confident. His hair overgrown for the today's style but I could hear the women in the office discussing his looks and features. They found him attractive and mysterious. Much like how they viewed me up until recently when Bella began to soften my image.

"When was the last time you asked a girl on a date Jasper?" I asked with sincerity.

"A date?" He repeated and his feet stopped moving. "Well, when I was eighteen I asked this girl from my town to the Founder's Day picnic."

I raised my eyebrows at him daring him to challenge me further. "I haven't even thought of something like this since I was a teenager. Opening doors. Buying flowers, not to mention the possibility of rejection. It's terrifying."

He nodded in agreement; he was clearly feeling the waves of insecurity rolling off me. "But Bella won't reject you. She loves you for some reason." He smirked at my surprised expression from him telling me of Bella's love. "She does. I can feel it. Just like you love her."

Sighing I said, "I know."

"But really, it's only a matter of time before she turns tail and runs. Have you shown her all your secret camera footage?" He laughed. "There is no way you are surviving that confession."

I stretched over the desk and with one quick swipe I knocked his feet down to the ground with a thud.

"Alice said you had a message from Carlisle." I said in an attempt to change the subject before we came to blows in the middle of PNT.

"He needs you to come to Forks tomorrow. There's a meeting planned with the dogs." His nose crinkled as if he smelled something foul.

My interest was peaked, "Really. They're cooperating?"

"Yes, they had been following the killings just like we had but the murder of one of their own has set them on edge. The young pups are ready to leave the reservation and hunt James down. The elders want to wait and find out more about the information we have." He explained.

I considered this information for a minute, "Has there been any tension between Carlisle and the Alpha?"

Jasper picked up the brass plate on the front of my desk and began flipping it in his hands. "No, they have kept the lines of communication open for some time. Neither of the sides have violated the treaty in all these years so I think a level of trust has been formed. Although this situation is going to push it."

"I'll call him on my way home and find out the details. Are you planning on coming?" I asked referring to him and Emmett.

Jasper shook his head, "No, the Alpha just wants it to be the two of you for now. You have the most information, especially since you came into contact with James and the Quileute girl at some point."

I sighed and leaned back in the leather chair, "For some reason I don't have a good feeling about any of this."

Jasper made a face at my admission and said, "I can tell."

Xxx

I opened the back door and entered the kitchen. I loosened my tie and took off my jacket, laying it on the table. Assuming Bella wasn't in bed yet, since it wasn't late, I listened to the sounds of the house trying to locate her. I could hear the faint sounds of talking and realized she was in the library watching TV. I was definitely apprehensive about seeing her after our altercation earlier in the day. I needed to apologize but this was all so new. I had no idea how to make this right.

Approaching the doorway. I found her curled up on the brown upholstered couch, her head resting against the cushion at the end, facing the flat screen TV I'd had mounted behind a large painting that was now pushed aside. The room was dark, but I could still see Bella's long brown hair splayed over the pillow and that she had taken off her work clothes and was now wearing a pair of gray shorts and a white t-shirt. Her eyes were glued to the screen, shifting back and forth with the blinking images.

I leaned against the doorway and watched her for a moment before she realized I was standing there. Without moving she said, "Hey," and shifted her gaze back to the TV. I would be crushed at her behavior, the aloofness of seeing me, her apparent nonchalance, except for one thing. Her heart was beating with anticipation and I could smell the shift in her scent, from its natural perfume to heady want. Even if her mind told her differently her body still wanted me.

Encouraged by this I stepped into the room and sat on the couch next to her. Silently she straightened her legs and beckoned me to her with her index finger. With relief I crawled up her body, snaking my hands around her waist and settled my weight on her spread legs. I looked up at her face and she gave me a resigned smile and began running her fingers through my hair before pressing gently for me to rest my head on her stomach.

I inhaled a deep breath of flowers and said, "I'm sorry."

I could feel her small fingers weaving through the tangle of my hair and she said, "I know."

We sat in the flickering blue light of the television for a while and eventually I said, "Once, when I was 14 or so, I was fond of this girl on my block. I was too shy to talk to her and I was getting to the age where you didn't speak to girls in a friendly manner anymore, so I would follow her around the neighborhood hoping she would speak to me first."

"What was her name?" Bella asked as she paused the television with the remote control.

"I have no idea." I mused, and considered the oddity of my memory. "There was this event at our church, a social of sorts and it was common to ask a girl to go with you. It was all very supervised, of course. I followed her around for weeks trying to muster the courage to ask her to go with me."

Bella's fingers pushed the hair off my forehead and she was trying to see my eyes, "Did you?"

"No, an older boy asked her first." I said and tried to remember the faces of these children I was speaking of, they were lost to time as so many other things were.

Bella was quiet and the only sound in the room was the television across the room. "Bella, other than me asking you to the museum the other night, I ever even considered asking a girl, much less a woman, on a date before."

"Edward, you are so entirely stunted sometimes." She said, her shoulders shaking slightly with laughter.

I rolled over on my back so I was facing up, lying on my back between her legs. "It's horrible I know. I've been to this charity event or others like it before and I always went alone. I smiled and shook hands. I spoke when necessary. I wrote the requisite big check and had my photo taken for the newspaper and hoped no one noticed I looked exactly the same as last year." I let my hands wander up Bella's arms, grazing over her collar bones and reaching up in her hair behind her neck. "But I didn't care. I never did, until this afternoon when you came in the room humiliated and heartbroken. Anything that is important to you is important to me. Remember that and always tell me what those things are."

"I will," she promised and her fingers left my hair and began unknotting my tie, pulling it slowly from around my neck and dropping it on the floor next the couch.

I turned again, pulling myself up to meet her dark eyes. "Can I kiss you?" I asked, knowing I would anyway.

She nodded, closing her eyes in anticipation. I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers softly but Bella eagerly responded, pushing her mouth into mine. We kissed for a moment, the intensity growing when she pulled back and ran her fingers down the edge of my jaw. Breathing heavily she asked, "You know what's important to me?"

I gave her a quick 'no' as I basked in her touch. "This..." and she placed kisses just above my neck, "part of your body. It makes me insane." I felt her tongue flick out and she sucked her way from my chin to my earlobe.

Her hands had moved to my pants and she tugged my shirt free, working her fingers and my shirt upward. She had touched these places before but never with such fervor. Bella's fingers prodded and her nails strained as they scraped down my chest. Her heart was beating madly, filling my ears with its violent thudding and without thought my hands began moving on her bare thighs, my thumbs pushing the fabric of her shorts upwards. I wanted more skin, more flesh to stroke.

*Mine.*

Came the primal scream from my head and although I had kept the venom back, working with desire for Bella, not for her blood, suddenly the line blurred. My possessive nature, combined with the feeling of Bella's supple body as she arched beneath me, forced me to hiss in warning.

Scrambling, I pulled away until I was across the couch from her, while Bella, recognizing the danger, sat up quickly, pulling her knees to her chest.

"I'm sorry." I gasped, choking back the poison that was flooding down my throat.

She shook her head in forgiveness, her voice quivering with distress. "No, that was my fault. I pushed it. I pushed you too far."

We sat across from one another, Bella attempting to calm her heart and lungs while I made every effort to regain control over my desires.

"Distract me." I said, using Bella's words from another night. I needed something to focus on other than the sweetness of Bella's scent and the lure of her aroused state.

With eyes wide she grabbed the remote and turned back on the show she had been watching before. I followed her eyes to the screen and was perplexed by the images in front of me. "Why is that blonde girl beating up all those weird looking guys?" I asked, attention successfully diverted.

Keeping her eyes trained ahead she said, "That's Buffy," as though that explained everything.

I sat for a moment absorbing the action on the screen before I tried again, "Who's Buffy?"

Bella looked over at me this time, incredulous and said, "You're kidding right?" Before rolling her eyes and turning back to the television.

I laughed nervously as this moment was only revealing again how different our lives were. "I don't really watch much television." I said in my defense.

With a glint in her eye Bella began telling me about her show, "The blonde is Buffy. She's the vampire slayer, you know the 'Chosen One'"

I shook my head slowly, "No, I'm not aware of any of this. A vampire slayer? That little girl?"

"She has superpowers. Like Alice who is also little but she's very strong."

"True," I agreed, trying to keep my amusement at Hollywood's version of vampires controlled. "I'm assuming she uses a variety of the staples...holy water, crosses and wooden stakes?"

"Yes. That's exactly what she does." She huffed a little at my tone. I loved to see Bella passionately angry as long as it wasn't at me. Her face had reddened a little and she continued, "Anyway, Buffy slays vampires, *but*, in an ironic twist of fate she falls in love with one."

I considered this twist for a second, "Does he love her in return?"

She sighed and said, "Of course. But their relationship is doomed from the beginning. It's all very tragic."

I quirked an eyebrow at her and slid my hand up her warm calf to reach her hand dangling over the top of her knee. Half serious I asked her, "Do you think we're doomed as well?"

She allowed my fingers to thread through hers and the minute we touched her heartbeat went from a sound in my ears to vibrating through her hand to my own. Her eyes were steady against mine and she said, "Honestly I don't know. It seems likely though."

"Yes it does." I agreed. "Does that bother you?"

Bella pulled my hand to her lips and she kissed the top, parting her lips and pressing down on my skin with her tongue, which caused a jolt of electricity to run through my body and a huge grin to spread across my face.

Laughing at my reaction Bella scooted closer to me and said, "Not enough to stop."



## Chapter Twenty-Three

BPOV

We were in the SUV as it was a non-work day. Edward was driving us to Forks to meet with his father about the James situation, and I was going to spend the afternoon with Alice.

He was taking me to meet his family. It was a big step in any couple's life, but even more-so for Edward, who had never 'brought' a girl home before. I was nervous- which Edward could sense- so he would reach out and touch my hand or arm or leg or hair in an attempt to soothe my anxiety. These little touches only made me want to crawl over the middle console and straddle his lap so I could kiss him a big fat thank you. These thoughts of course made me blush, which would cause Edward glance at the flushed skin on my neck in a way that made me feel like I was the vampire equivalent of a piece of gooey chocolate cake.

It was a vicious cycle.

I sighed and picked up the iPod and scrolled down the endless lists of music. Edward's eyes were on me, tensing as I manhandled his player. I was testing him by touching his music, but so far he was behaving and wasn't about to crawl out of his obsessive-compulsive skin because I may possibly leave finger smudges on the screen. I shot him a quick smile as I made my selection and pressed play.

He raised his perfectly arched right eyebrow, and I just sat back with my eyes closed, enjoying messing with him and using it to distract me.

"So, are you sure you're okay with me leaving you with Alice while I go to my meeting?" Edward asked over the music.

"Why not? I've spent time alone with Alice before. She's going to loan me a dress for the charity event." I added, opening one eye to glare, "since I didn't have time to look for one myself."

He sighed and furrowed his brow. "Alice can get a little over excited about clothes sometimes. You've seen my closet."

I laughed at his silliness, "I think I can handle trying on some dresses, Edward."

A smug grin crept over his face. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Warning heard." I said and slid my fingers though his as they rested on the gear shift. "Tell me about this meeting you have this evening."

Edward didn't turn, keeping his eyes focused on the road. "We are talking to some of the members of the Quileute tribe. They have some questions about Leah's murder."

"Oh." I said feeling the rush of sorrow for the girl. "So is this wolf stuff real?"

This time he stole a look at my face, "It's real."

"So they're wolves? Or people? I don't understand."

I noticed Edward's eyes tighten, and with a swipe through his hair he explained, "They are men or older boys, and they transform from boys to werewolf on instinct. As they age I think they gain more control over it. Their entire purpose is to fight vampires and protect their tribe. We keep our distance obviously."

"But Carlisle has a relationship with them?" I asked trying to wrap my head around the mystical life of my vampire boyfriend.

"Carlisle is special. He is a peacekeeper and truly looks only for the good in others. This includes the wolves. He's maintained communication with them for some time in an effort to become allies instead of enemies." He chuckled with amusement, "As usual, he was right. This could have turned out quite differently if he hadn't made the effort."

I twisted in my seat, sliding my foot underneath my body and asked, "Do you think he'll like me? Carlisle?"

"He already likes you," he told me, the corner of his mouth turning upwards.

I rolled my eyes. "He hasn't met me yet. And clearly I've caused your family all kinds of trouble. He may hold it against me."



Edward's hand squeezed mine, "You most certainly have not caused trouble for us. If anyone has it's me. And Carlisle doesn't judge." He pulled my hand to his lips, "Trust me. You don't need to worry about Carlisle."

Shivering a little under his cool mouth I considered his words. Carlisle sounded like a wonderful person, but there was something else gnawing at me. An implication of sorts. "If I don't need to worry about your father, who do I need to worry about?"

"No one. If anything I'm the one who should worry. They love to have fun at my expense, *you* are a fresh audience," he said with a grimace.

"Awww...it can't be that bad..." I reassured, but flashes of Emmett's wicked grin came to mind forcing me to reconsider. "Right?"

"You'll see," was all he said as he made a sudden turn off the highway onto a nearly hidden road. Not really a road- as it wasn't paved- but well worn and scattered with gravel. Edward never slowed, twisting through the tree lined path in his SUV until a large white house with a wide front porch came into view.

"Is this it?" I asked surprised for some reason at the gorgeous home in front of me.

He pulled me to him and gave me a quick kiss on the lips, settling the growing bundle of nerves in my stomach. He looked at the house and back at me and said, "This is it."

EPOV

With the sun setting, Carlisle and I entered the forest behind the house. We were to meet the Alpha at a designated, neutral spot between our territories. I could still hear Alice from her room trying to get Bella to choose from an array of outfits and accessories she had picked out. I couldn't read her mind of course, but I could hear the confidence wavering in her voice as she witnessed Alice in full force.

"I think that went well, don't you?" Carlisle asked laughing just a bit, I assume at the distress on my face. I tried to warn her.

"Better than expected, I'll admit." And it had. Everyone knew this was an enormous step for me. Over the last two decades I barely came home at all, never on my own volition, and typically just so the family could discuss their concern about my behavior and actions and make futile attempts to get me to reconsider. The fact that I came now, with a guest, a *female* at that, was almost beyond comprehension.

When we reached the porch, and I'd procured one last kiss from Bella for courage, I pushed open the front door with hesitation. Bella entered first, only to be welcomed by an excited Alice in the front hallway. We took her through the ground floor where Jasper and Emmett nodded from their game of chess in the sitting room, too involved to get up, and Esme welcomed Bella like a long lost child.

*She's beautiful...and your smile tells me all I need to know...* was all she said as she tentatively gave her a hug. Bella, ridiculously fearless, hugged her back tightly, and Esme smiled at me over her shoulder giving me her approval.

Even Rosalie was pleasant enough. She was in the living room when we walked in, flipping through a magazine. Before I could make introductions Emmett was quickly at her side, apparently paying more attention than I suspected. I could see the look of intimidation on Bella's face as they were introduced, and I wasn't surprised. Rosalie was gorgeous. I'd seen the minds of thousands of women as they crossed her path and every single one felt the same way. Rosalie Hale was the most beautiful woman they had ever encountered. And she was scary. So for Bella to stand in front of her and offer her hand, I was impressed.

*Rosalie behaved...* Carlisle thought as we walked briskly through the woods, not quite a run.

"Yes, she did. I wondered if something or someone was behind that?" I mused aloud, knowing full well that she had been given some form of lecture before we arrived.

*Esme reminded everyone of their manners....but I think she likes her anyway. Emmett does and that is half the battle to Rosalie...*

This was true. People outside our home would easily be under the impression Rosalie was in charge of that relationship, but we all knew better. They were devoted to one another, and Emmett healed Rosalie in a way I never would have been able to. If Emmett placed his trust and admiration in someone, Rosalie would notice.

The sun had set, but the moon was still low, hiding behind the mountains. Carlisle and I were near the clearing, and I slowed my pace so I could ask, "Exactly what should I expect here? You said the Alpha and another. Will they be in wolf form?"

Carlisle stopped completely, his feet shifting on the fallen leaves, "No I think they will come in human form although these wolves are very practiced. They can transform in a mere second, so don't feel over confident. From what I understand they want to know what your plans are and how you intend to stop James. The tribe wants revenge for the girl's death, but I really think it would be best for everyone if they stayed here and away from the city. I can only keep the Volturi out of it for so long, and if they hear of the wolves they are sure to visit." He said, adding in his head, *and I don't think you or Bella want to entertain that idea...*

I nodded in agreement. Our kind had rules of their own, the primary one being not to disclose our nature to humans. Clearly I had broken this, thus putting Bella in mortal danger. We definitely needed to get the wolves under control before they caused further damage.

As soon as we broke the tree line surrounding the field, I was assaulted by their strong dog-like odor. My nose burned as I scanned the darkness for them. Finally, I made contact with two enormous wolf shaped shadows across the field, hovering in the trees.

"Over there," I whispered and gestured to the shapes. Carlisle nodded and took the lead, marching across the field to the middle of the clearing. Once there, we stood still- waiting for the men to join us.

Before my eyes, they transformed from wolf to human and quickly dressed beneath the heavy cover of trees. The men were huge. I could tell as they walked in our direction that they would tower over both of us. Their shirtless forms made the lean muscles of their torsos obvious, and as they came closer, I noted with interest that their feet were bare as they walked across the rocky field.

I listened to their internal chatter as they walked. They were both confident, but cautious, neither trusting us. I heard the term 'blood sucker' used to describe our kind, and it was followed by imagery of disgust. I saw flashes of other wolves, back at home: ready and on alert to be here at a moment's notice. I wasn't surprised by this. Emmett and Jasper were ready as well. This meeting was risky and dangerous for us all. I glanced at Carlisle warily. I wasn't sure how this was going to turn out.

We stood across from one another, the stars shining bright over our heads and the sounds of the forest at night surrounding us. I was bombarded by their thoughts, and it became clear that the men's names were Sam and Jacob. Sam was older by several years; there were lines of maturity on his face. His hair was very closely shaved to his head, military style. He stood with authority and a strong sense of control. His temper was even, and it seemed he was truly here for information. I could feel a deep sense of loss coming from him when he thought of Leah.

Jacob, on the other hand, was huge- several inches taller than Sam. His hair was short on the sides but longer on top, more rebellious. His russet colored arms were massive, close to the size of Emmett's, and I wondered briefly if their physical condition was purely part of the super-naturalness of being a wolf or if they trained as well. I realized with surprise that Jacob, the younger of the two, was actually the Alpha of the group. In their minds Sam was definitely deferring to him. I questioned this hierarchy as Jacob's thoughts were more scattered, and his hostility was evident- not only in his thoughts but in his demeanor

as well. I realized that they were waiting for us to speak first and show who was the 'Alpha' of our own pack.

Carlisle stepped forward, and introductions were made between us and the wolves. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he said, the sincerity genuine in his voice.

Jacob was angry about the loss of Leah to their community. Although we had to try, I could see it was going to be difficult to convince him not to take action right away. In hopes of breaking the thick tension, I told them how I had been tracking James for some time, how I had successfully killed three members of his army, and that I permanently injured him in a fight. I explained that we were close to catching him but that it seemed this was a well thought-out game to James, and he was proving to be a worthy opponent.

"I actually met Leah at her job, and my assistant became friendly with her as well. She truly was a wonderful, caring person. I don't know if James knew he was killing a member of your tribe. I suspect not." I paused allowing them to absorb this information. "I think he's targeting people near me in an effort to draw me out."

Jacob snorted, "Then let him draw you out. Be a man or whatever you are. Why let him kill innocents while you wait?"

His accusation stung. After all, I had considered this as well. Before I could speak, Carlisle touched my arm and said, "Edward is working in the city to keep predators like James away. If he sacrifices himself then it would open the door to a variety of dangers, leaving the citizens unprotected. This is exactly what James wants. He knows that if Edward acts rashly they can take him out, and then they can have free reign in the city."

Jacob still seemed skeptical but Sam nodded in understanding. "So it's like a game of cat and mouse?" he asked.

"Yes," I responded. "But I am refusing to be the mouse. I would rather be the cat."

"Tell us then, what is your plan?" Sam asked.

I sighed, "Right now we are still gathering information. He has two main goals. His primary goal is to eliminate me. The secondary one is to injure or hurt people close to me, in an attempt to make me reckless."

Jacob narrowed his eyes at me, "Other than Leah, who has he attempted to hurt that has a connection to you?"

I stole a look at Carlisle who nodded sharply. "My assistant. She's human, and we are close. He has made several attempts on her life already. James appears determined to add her to his army." I skirted over this issue hoping they would move on. I was encouraged to realize Sam had become thoughtful and was considering my words. A million questions swirled around his head, and he finally settled on one. "Why does he kill some of his victims and turn others?"

The answer to this was unbelievably frustrating, as it once again placed the blame on me for James' murderous assault on the city. "It's our opinion that he began murdering people, in a ritualistic manner, to gain my attention- as well as that of the authorities. Although it was clear to me from the beginning the killings were committed by a vampire, the police are clueless. And they are so wrapped up in what they are thinking is a serial killer they are unable to concentrate as closely on the abductions and home invasions. James was ultimately trying to get my attention, by spreading my attention with the chaos he is causing."

Jacob was quiet, and I tried to determine what he was thinking. He finally formed a clear idea, and internally I groaned. My assistant. "Tell me more about your assistant. The bloodsucker wants her... Why not let him have her?"

Rage boiled under my skin, and I took a step in his direction before Carlisle grabbed my shoulder. Even Sam looked disturbed at the comment, but it was too late to hide my reaction from Jacob's notice. "This woman. She means something to you correct? She knows about you."

I nodded curtly, unable to speak to the moronic dog in front of me.

"Why not use her as bait?" he said with a smug grin, his thick arms crossed over his chest. "Let her draw the bloodsucker to you."

Carlisle spoke before I had to. "Absolutely not. We won't endanger the life of an innocent this way."

"But you are risking others' lives everyday. If you had taken action months ago, Leah would still be here." Sam argued while thoughts of a young, smiling Leah passed through his head. He loved her once. Not now, but once.

I clenched my teeth at the thought of these dogs attempting to take my Isabella away or put her in any form of danger. This was not an option. "This discussion is over." I told them looking them both in the eye. "Any strategy dealing with my assistant is off the table. We are here to help and to provide you with information. I assure you that I am working on this situation to the best of my ability." I paused, trying to control my anger, and took a deep, unnecessary breath. "I am going to ask you now if you will agree to patrol between here and King county. If he over-steps that line, you're welcome to do whatever you want to him or any of his followers. Otherwise, leave them to me."

Jacob stared at me for some time, curious about my defensiveness over Bella. Carlisle pushed the conversation forward, and both men agreed reluctantly to my terms. They were agitated at my stubbornness, but in some ways they were no different from James. They wanted to toy and play with people's lives, using their power to manipulate. I'd spent years cultivating a controlled, disciplined system. I knew rational thought was the only way to take care of James; playing games would only get more people hurt.

With a final word, and an arrangement on how to communicate in the future, we watched as the men transformed into wolves in front of our eyes. Once they were gone, galloping through the forest, I turned to Carlisle and said, "Regardless of what happened here tonight I want two things clear. One, Bella is never to be used as a pawn in this battle. And two, that wolf thing...when they transform? That's pretty awesome."

Xxx

Carlisle and I walked in the back door, entering the house through the kitchen. I heard the girls' laughter upstairs, and we took a moment to confer with Jasper and Emmett about the meeting. When I informed them of Jacob's ridiculous plan to endanger Bella's life, I immediately heard the wheels turning in Jasper's head.

"No." I told him with a hard look, unwilling to entertain this subject further.

*It's a solid plan. At least consider it as an option. We have nothing else...*

"Absolutely not," I said again. The anger from before was returning. This was my worst fear: the people in my life not appreciating how fragile Bella was. As Jasper and I stared at one another, I stifled my rage and trained my ear for her heartbeat, zeroing in on the rhythm that soothed me. With a glare in Emmett's direction, I walked out of the room. But it was too late. Jasper's military-trained mind was at work, formulating plans on how to use Bella as bait to lure James.

I climbed the stairs, four at a time, and stopped outside Alice's room. In her mind I caught a glimpse of Bella, wrapped in blue, and my stomach clenched with longing. Alice sensed me outside the door and quickly wiped her mind clean. I raised my hand to knock, and she cracked the door before I made contact. "Stop looking, you cheater," she hissed.

"You're done. Send her out." I said simply, because I needed to see Bella. I was tense and close to a full melt-down, and I needed her.

"I'll let her know you're here. And she can come out when *she* is ready," she replied bitterly. I rolled my eyes and waved her off. I needed Bella.

I leaned back against the wall prepared to wait, but thankfully Bella seemed to miss me as well and quickly came into the hall. The anger declined at the sight of her messy hair, slightly disheveled from changing clothes. Then I saw the light in her eyes, and calmed further.

"What's wrong?" she asked, and I pulled her towards me. I slipped my finger up the hem of her shirt, seeking a pulse point on the small of her back. Grazing her skin with my fingers, I found one and felt a wave of calm rush over me. Bella had no idea the effect she had on me.

"I missed you," I admitted, although it was a half truth.

She pushed up on her toes and gave my chin a kiss. She glanced over her shoulder, toward Alice's room and whispered, "Why didn't you tell me how crazy she is?"

I couldn't suppress the smile that spread across my face. "I told you. In the car."

"You didn't tell me *that* was going to happen." She said through clenched teeth. "It was like a tornado in there."

"You know she can hear you, right?" I laughed.

Bella's face turned red at the realization that there were no secrets in a vampire's house, and it was all I could do to not pick her up and hide her in the next room for my own pleasure. But sadly, there *are* no secrets in this house; so even if I attempted to tuck Bella away, everyone would find us anyway.

I sighed at the idea of being alone with her, wishing we were back home, *alone*. But my desires were dampened by the reminder of our situation from the other night. Pleasure, sexual at least, had proven to be dangerous. I had been close to losing control, and I was struggling with the balance between my lust and bloodlust. I looked at her now, blushing and beautiful, the conflict ever present.

"Do you want me to show you the rest of the house?" I asked, trying to change the subject and calm the flow of blood from Bella's extremities- and quell the venom pooling in my mouth.

She smiled in relief and nodded, "Please. It really is beautiful, how long have they lived here?"

I walked down the hall, pointing out the different rooms, Emmett and Rose's, Carlisle and Esme's, the studies and offices. "This time they have been here almost seven years." I noted this with regret. Their time here was definitely coming to an end. Carlisle had even mentioned this to me briefly in the forest, listing off the places they had considered moving. It was part of their life. My life. But, suddenly the idea of displacement unnerved me.

Bella stopped to study a painting on the wall. It was Italian, from Carlisle's days abroad. The colors had faded with time but the intent was still visible. "This time?" she asked.

"We lived here before, it was in my journals."

Her brow creased, "Oh, I didn't make the connection. So you lived here too?"

"Before," I replied, realizing we were close to the issue of me not living with them now.

"Which room was yours?"

"Upstairs. On the third floor, in the attic. It's empty now. They don't use it- in case I want to come back," I confessed. No one says this out loud, but I know their intentions.

"They love you very much. I can tell," she said, as though I needed the assurance.

We were at the top of the stairs, on the wide landing where a huge chandelier hung from the tall ceiling. "They do. And I love them. But I can't live here."

Bella slid her arms around my waist and buried her face in my chest. "I'm glad you don't live here. They love you, but you don't fit here. Not anymore."

I rested my chin on her head, "Really? Why do you think that?" I was definitely intrigued. I'd spent the last twenty years trying to convince these people and myself of that very idea.

Bella pulled away a little so she could see my face. "You grew up Edward. And left home. I know it's unconventional in your family, but it's what 'normal' people do. It just took you longer than most. Like sixty years longer." She smirked at her own joke. "If you hadn't taken those steps, you and I never would have happened. You're not the same person you were before you left home, but that doesn't make it a bad thing."

I stared at this woman whose tiny hands were clutching my hips and who looked at me with such concern. I had no idea how long Isabella Swan would be in my life, but I knew I needed to make the most of my time with her.

"Bella, I'd really like to show you something." I pulled her down the stairs with me and took her through the room where Jasper and Emmett were still involved in their eternal chess match: eight boards across, all games played concurrently.

I watched Emmett's eyebrow lift in understanding of our destination. I ignored him, continuing through the room with Bella at my heels until I reached the music room that held the piano. Standing over it for a moment, I felt Bella stroke my arm, giving me the strength to pull out the bench and sit down before I lost my nerve. I slid over and patted the bench, offering Bella the seat next to me.

As she slid onto the polished wood, relief washed over me. Because Edward Cullen could fight vampires, and help lost souls, and protect damsels in distress- but he couldn't fight his inner demons alone. Bella provided me with the key to my soul and an awareness of my humanity. And my connection to music had always been the closest thing I had to humanity.

Rolling the dark wood lid back softly, I flexed my fingers over the keys and realized that the house had gone completely silent. It had been quiet before; Bella probably had no idea where everyone was. But I knew. We all knew where the others were at all times. But now it was still.

Bella must have noticed my hesitation because her hand ran down my leg and rested on my knee. She smiled. "Show me," she said quietly under her breath.

I nodded, focusing on her heartbeat, on the rhythm of her breath and everything else that made this woman bring me to life.

Xxx

BPOV

Edward's fingers rested on the keys of the piano while the vibration of the notes still hummed through my body. He had just finished playing a song for me- one he said he wrote for me. It was flattering and overwhelming all at once.

"That was wonderful," I said with absolute sincerity. "Thank you for sharing that with me." I wasn't sure why Edward had this fear of his piano. I had seen it pulled out in the attic at home, the cover thrown back and messy scribbled notes on composition paper laying on top. Even though it was out and he was visibly working on something I never heard a note come from the sleek, brown instrument. Something had held him back, and I realized now that the obstacle had been removed.

Our shoulders were touching, and his right arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me even closer to him on the bench. Running his nose up the sensitive skin of my ear he said, "You're welcome. Thank you for the inspiration."

I shivered, and he ran his hand up and down my arm for warmth. Edward's legs were long, and he had the bench pushed back to allow room. He was so relaxed behind the piano; a totally different side of him emerged while playing. All the tension and stress he had been carrying earlier slipped away as his fingers stroked the keys. I was learning that this man would never fail to surprise me. As if he could read my mind, I felt myself plucked from my spot on the bench and repositioned facing Edward, straddled across his lap.

Nice.

"Hey," I said to his very close face. I found my hands traveling over his cheeks- marveling for the millionth time at the way his skin stretched over his perfectly formed bones.

"Hi," he murmured in return. His eyes were closed and he wore a look of peace on his face as he basked in my touch.

"I enjoyed today. Alice and the dresses. Meeting Esme and Rosalie. It was nice." I told him as I kissed him softly by the ear.

"They like you too," he replied turning his head, allowing me better access.

My feet were behind him, hanging over the edge of the piano bench, and it was when I shifted my weight to gain some balance that I felt it. Or rather: him.

His eyes popped open at my movement, and I could see the discomfort running through them as he quickly diverted his gaze. I quirked an eyebrow at his embarrassed yet eternally pale face. "Really?" I asked, ecstatic at the power I held over the intensity of his arousal.

Refocusing on my eyes he mirrored my expression with his own perfectly arched brow, but he said nothing, refusing to discuss what I'm sure he thought was inappropriate conversation for us to have.

He sighed and laughed bitterly, "It's been quite a while, Isabella." His honesty shocked me.

"What exactly do you mean by 'a while'?" I questioned while running my hands down the front of his chest, feeling the sharp curves and outlines of his muscles beneath the soft cloth.

Instead of answering Edward leaned toward my face and pressed his lips against my own. I responded eagerly. Nothing made me as happy as having Edward's lips on mine. He ran his fingers up my sides which caused me to laugh and squirm on his lap.

Oh yeah. Ouch. That thing is *hard*.

I pulled my lips off his quickly, which had an effect similar to ripping off a band aid, painful but necessary, and asked again, "What *exactly* do you mean by 'a while'?"

He scowled at my question and eyed my mouth greedily, but I wasn't giving in. I waited stubbornly for his response

Sighing, he rested his forehead on my own. "I don't know, Bella. Sometimes the past should stay that way," he argued.

I shook my head and pushed my hands over his shoulders and curled my fingers into his hair. "No secrets," I said.

I leaned back a little, and Edward wrapped his arms around me, holding me up while shielding me from the sharp edges of the piano.

"You read my journals. I was alone for all those years. I managed for the most part, but when it became too much, living in a house of lovers, I would leave for a while- traveling or studying away from the family." He paused and took a moment to place a soft kiss on my jaw. It felt like gratitude for filling that role in his life. I smiled and nodded in encouragement for him to continue.

He grimaced at my persistence, but I could see the subtle lifting of his lips which proved he wasn't as frustrated as he was insinuating. "My family heard of another coven, a large one, living in Alaska. They too were 'vegetarians', and we were interested to spend time with others like ourselves."

"Really?" I asked. "So the lifestyle you've chosen really is that rare?"

His eyes tightened at my question. I knew sharing his vampire nature with me was difficult. He wanted to shield me from the reality of their make up. "Our entire lifestyle is rare. The fact we live in homes and are educated is almost unheard of. The seven of us living together peacefully is extremely unusual. The fact that we found another coven close to our size that also didn't feed from humans was astonishing. We were all very intrigued."

He hesitated, and I could see the worry in his eyes. "Edward, I'm not going to judge you. We both had lives before we met the other. And I'm happy to tell you mine if you want, but yours is much more fascinating," I said with a grin, "Tell me more. Tell me what happened."

He groaned low under his breath. "The Denali coven is made of three sisters. Tanya, Irina, and Kate. They also live with two other vampires, Carmen and Eleazar. The three sisters are the fulfillment of the myth of the succubus."

My mouth dropped. "A succubus, the kind who prey on men?"

"Yes, they are very powerful and gifted in the art of seduction. But as vampires, succubi prey on human men and normally kill their victims. The Denali coven broke from this tradition and chose to live on animal blood instead. We moved there, and it was nice. We had other people to spend our time with for the first time in years. We hunted and played games. It was really a wonderful time. For once I wasn't the odd man out, and it was comfortable."

I smiled at his words. I loved the image of a happy Edward. I played with the buttons on his black shirt, allowing my fingers to dip in between and brush against his hard chest. I asked the inevitable question, "So did one of the women use their powers on you? Were you seduced?"

He rolled his eyes at me and laughed, "No, but they tried. The mind reading thing kind of messes up their games. But I became very close to Tanya, and we developed a relationship while I was there."

"Tanya?" I asked. "Let me guess, tall, blonde and gorgeous?" I didn't want to be jealous, but I was all the same.

"Hmmm..." he mused. "I wouldn't know. Once I met you, all other women pale in comparison. It's really quite sad for them." And his mouth rearranged into his most stunning and adorable grin.

This time I rolled my eyes and pushed his chest, "Whatever, Edward. Stop trying to distract me..."

"Tanya and I got along very well. She was smart and fun, and my family wanted us to be together. They were positive this was the person I had waited for during all those long years. And for some reason I convinced myself that I could do it. That I could fake my way with Tanya and make everyone happy. I wanted what they had, love and partnership."

"Why didn't it work? Why were you faking?" I asked.

Edward dropped his head, hiding his eyes again and said softly, "I didn't love her- which wasn't fair because she did love me. I felt like I was using her."



I leaned into him and wrapped my arms around his body. Squeezing me back tightly, he said over my shoulder, "Bella, I'm not going to give you all the details, but imagine being in a relationship with someone who could read your mind. I knew for a fact she loved me and that she wanted me in a way I could never want her in return."

"Wow, that would be really hard," I agreed. "And completely devastating."

"Tanya was the only woman I had been with, intimately. But it was wrong. I was privy to her thoughts and feelings all the time. It was an intrusion."

I knew this feeling. I'd experienced it briefly myself after I read about Edward's gift in his journals. I remembered the humiliation and the discomfort I felt when I saw him for the first time after I found out.

"You could hear her thoughts *all* the time?" I asked, absorbed by the horror of this idea.

"Yes," he replied and pulled away from my embrace so he could see my face. "Relationships are hard, but should be fun and interesting. Tanya had no secrets from me. I knew her thoughts, her desires, and even her criticisms of me. It complicated things quite a bit."

I considered this situation. I thought back to my own experiences of finding new loves, the worries of being enough, the embarrassing thoughts of infatuation, but also wondering if I was attractive enough, experienced enough. I thought back to the bad times: when I was going through the motions, yet had fallen out of love. I thought about Edward and how my feelings for him were so intense, how I day-dreamed about his hands, his long graceful fingers, and my intense longing for his touch. My neck grew warm, and I cursed the tell tale redness that flamed up my body.

Edward ran his thumbs slowly down my sides, again causing me to shiver. "See, like right now, I have no idea what you're thinking," he mused. "It's very provoking."

I smiled. He was so darn cute, I couldn't help myself. "Good. The only way you're going to find out what's on my mind is if I show you."

"Show me?" he asked, but he could read me better than he claimed. Once again I could feel his interest under the thin layer of my shorts. "I'm not sure that's a good idea...after last night."

I raked my nails down his chest- *hard*, wanting him to feel some pressure, and reveling in his shuddering response.

"I think it's a fine idea. Even though it's been a while for me too," I said, shifting my weight again- not to be arousing, but for comfort. "I don't recall them being quite so *hard*." I said with a grimace. I had been around men before. Naked men. Not a lot, but enough. Even buffered between the fabric of my shorts and Edwards pants, I could tell he was different.

His face fell, and he spoke in a rush, "Bella I'm sorry. I told you we had to be careful. This isn't a good idea." But I knew he didn't mean it as his lips were instantly on my neck and his hands were tickling my sides- which he knew by now would cause me to squirm in his lap.

"Where's your family?" I breathed as he kissed my lips, carefully, always carefully, and I twisted the buttons of his shirt under my fingers, slipping them out of their holes.

"Gone," he said from against my flesh. I felt my body lifted and heard the piano bench clattering to the floor underneath us. In the next moment I was being crushed against the soft cushions of the chaise lounge across the room. He had my left arm pinned over my head, and I could feel his body pressing down on me, pushing me into the padding. Closing my eyes, my hips rose to meet his.

I heard a low whimper, and my eyes snapped open, focusing on the anguished scowl on Edward's hovering face. His pupils were dilated, and the amber of his eyes was wild. I realized the noise had come from him. He was struggling like the other time.

"Are you okay?" I whispered, fear flooding my senses. But instead of escaping, I found my hand reaching out to stroke his hair and face, in an effort to calm him.

"Yes... no...yes," he stuttered and he crumbled, dropping his head onto my heaving chest in defeat. We lay together, stacked on the couch for some time, Edward turning his head so his ear was directly over my heart. He had released my wrist from his grasp and ran his thumb down to my pulse as he regained his composure. I continued my ministrations, weaving my fingers in his thick, soft hair until he was ready.

Without lifting his head Edward finally spoke. "Bella, that was...." He didn't complete his thought, but I knew where he was going.

Terrible? Horrible? Dangerous? Pick one or all three.

"Progress?" I dared. "Last time you bolted clear across the couch; this time you stayed. Things are better." He looked at me skeptically but didn't move, which I took as a sign of encouragement.

We stayed this way for a while longer before I pushed Edward up, making him move his body away from mine. I slithered out from underneath him and stood. I motioned for him to roll over, and I crawled on top, effectively reversing our positions. "Is this alright?" I asked and was relieved when he nodded.

He had one long leg on the sofa and one balanced on the floor. His shirt was still open, and I could see the hardened beauty of his stomach. Distress was still evident on his face, his eyes dark and flashing. "I'm sorry. The line between my blood lust and physical lust is marginal. Things were blurry for a second." He paused. "I don't really know how to say this, but when I was with Tanya, things were very, well, we let our basic instincts take over. This is not possible with you, and I'm not sure how to balance this."

Jealousy burned in my stomach at his confession- at the thought of him with another woman that way, in a way we couldn't be. He must have realized this, and his hand reached to cup my face and he said, "I shouldn't have said that."

"No. You should have," I told him squelching the envy. "You and I aren't the same as you and Tanya. No couple is the same; you can't compare. We have to figure out what works for us."

As I said this, I considered the fact he was sitting below me with his hair in full sexy disarray, half-undressed, and taunting me. I decided not to let this moment pass us. I couldn't suppress the smile forming on my lips as I asked, "Edward, do you trust me?"

"Of course," he replied without hesitation.

"I mean, really trust me. As in, I want to do something and you have to let go of the control, and have faith in me." I said this slowly, unsure if he could actually do it.

He nodded, swallowing lightly as if he was repressing his need for power over everything. I ran my fingers down his chest lightly and said, "Good. Let me set the pace...and let me know if it's too much. I promise to stay within the boundaries."

As I began my decent on his body, Edward was frozen into place, his hands clutching the side of the chaise. I ignored his apprehension, instead using his still form as my playground to explore. My lips connected with his solid body, licking and sucking from his neck down to his hip. The pressure of his erection was distracting, causing my body to react, seeking friction on the spot where he met the seam of my shorts. Straightening for a moment, but still rocking gently against him, I peeled off my t-shirt and dropped it to the floor.

Edward's eyes widened at the sight of my bra-covered chest, and my eyes followed his to see the slight swell of my breasts restrained in black silk. Reaching for his hands, I found they were still grasping the edge of the chair with such force he had dug into the sides of the wood. "Edward, let go..." I prodded, and he reluctantly released the sofa from his grip. Guiding his hands to each side of my breasts, I gasped when his

thumbs grazed my nipples through the fabric. He was hesitant. I could feel it in his touch and see it in his eyes. "Edward, touch me..." I commanded in a whisper and with relief his hands began moving over my body.

The quiet of the house had been replaced by my labored breaths and the hushed sounds of our hands exploring one another. I leaned over and placed my hands over his shoulders, bracing myself on the back of the cushion in an attempt to desperately seek a steady rhythm as I slowly began thrusting myself on Edward's erection. Every time his cock made contact with the right spot, my body felt the bursts of pleasure- even through the barrier of the material.

Edward groaned beneath me, and I refused to look in his eyes. If I saw anguish or pain I would stop, and I didn't want to stop. With my chin up and eyes closed, he began rocking with force while his palms massaged my breasts, pulling on my bra until he'd freed them. I shrieked with surprise when he touched my nipple with his cool tongue, causing electricity to run straight down my body, and into my pants.

For a moment everything fell into place. We were in sync, working together, no pasts, no future- just two bodies in motion, craving the same release. Through my pleased grin, I felt my breaths quicken across my lips. I pressed my body into his, close to the edge and I began quivering with pleasure as I spiraled past the feeling of coherency. Overcome by weakness, I hung onto the edge of the cushion in an attempt to remain upright. Sensitive and raw, I was relieved when Edward finally shuddered beneath me- hissing deep in his throat- his body jerking with spasms of pleasure under the cover of his pants.

Aware that I had survived the encounter, I opened one eye to assess his mood and found him with his head back, peacefully watching me with a lazy grin on his face. His hands found the straps of my bra and slipped them back over my shoulders and straightened the cups, putting everything back in its proper order.

Smiling back I pressed my damp forehead to his and he kissed me softly on the lips. I was ecstatic that we had surpassed this hurdle. I wasn't sure how much further we could push it, but at least we knew this much.

"I think I ruined Esme's chair," he said, breaking the quiet and running his hands over my bare back.

I giggled in response to the fact this is what he would bring up after *that*. "Possibly two," I concurred, nodding in the direction of the piano bench upturned on the hardwoods.

"It was worth it," he said, pulling me into his body where I willingly surrendered into chest and arms.

"Definitely. Worth it." Relief passed through me, not from what had just transpired but from the fact Edward was moving forward and leaving his past where it belonged.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

EPOV

I looked up from my computer monitor to see Jasper coming in my office. I'd heard him enter downstairs, his mind focused on tonight's strategy. Fortunately, he was not still considering using Bella for a trap with James. At least not now.

He was dressed to fight. I noticed his clothing was black and his pants were military style, lined with deep pockets. "Are you ready?" I asked foolishly. Jasper was always ready. And prepared. I think he missed his calling as a Boy Scout.

Jasper eased into the chair across from me, stretching out his long legs. "Yes. Everyone is arranged for tonight. We each have our positions between the aquarium and where the dogs take over. Basically we have this entire area of the state of Washington covered. You and Bella should be able to attend the event without concern."

Jasper revealed the plan mentally, showing me how they would approach the night. The family was travelling individually, but also within a distance they could easily reach one another if necessary. Each person had a method to get in contact with their partner or with one of the others in case of an emergency. No one was taking this situation lightly. During the charity event Emmett and Rose would stick close to the aquarium and the surrounding urban areas. Jasper and Alice would patrol the suburban neighborhoods, which left the desolate stretch between Seattle and Forks to Carlisle, Esme and the wolves.

I nodded my approval. I felt horrible about leaving burden on them. The situation with James was my fault and I should be the one to take care of it. But the others had insisted I needed to maintain my position as the CEO of Pacific Northwest Trust and attend our annual hospital charity event. We all felt this was the perfect opportunity for James or Victoria to make an attempt for Bella and instead of running away we decided to face it straight on.

Bella was at her apartment today. Alice had insisted that Bella get ready with her and Angela, explaining the idea of "girl bonding" or something. All I knew was I missed her being near me and I was itching to get back in her presence. I consoled myself with the idea we would have the entire night together and I would get to see her in the blue dress I had snatched a vision of from Alice's mind.

*Are you ready?* He thought. Something about his 'tone' made me look up from my work on the desk. Yes, his eyebrow was quirked and he looked at me expectantly. I narrowed my eyes at Jasper trying to figure out what he was thinking about but he blocked my efforts.

I sighed, fearful of whatever he was going to bring up. "Go ahead. Just say it." I told him unable to contain my exasperation.

"You and Bella tainted the music room, you know." This was said with a smirk and his eyebrow stayed lifted.

"My brain is contaminated from fifty years of you and Alice. I think we're far from even." I shot back. "Not to mention you're thinking about her right now and I really would prefer *not* to think about my sister like that."

The image disappeared from his mind and Jasper shifted uncomfortably in his seat, crossing one of his legs over the other before continuing his harassment. "Esme had to repair both chairs. Although I admit, she wasn't nearly as angry as I expected."

"Because I'm her favorite." I declared and felt a grin tug at my mouth at the thought of me, Bella, and the music room.

Bella had changed me that day in Forks. She helped me realize so many things were possible. I had a life, and a woman who I adored- who adored me in return. My family and I were separate and this was a good thing. A normal thing. We could exist apart and together all the same. That is how a normal family worked. I spent all those years running from everyone and everything. Pushing them away and isolating myself. I had behaved like a child and therefore they treated me like one in return.

That night, on the chaise lounge in my family home, Bella taught me that I could overcome anything. That I could work through my fears, and with her caring and patience all things were possible.

I brought my attention back to Jasper, who still had the trace of an annoying smirk on his face. There had to be more to his comment than talking about me and Bella breaking chairs. I saw him swiftly reach into his pocket and he flung something in my direction. My hand instinctively popped up and caught the soft, square package in the air. Flipping my hand over I looked at what he had thrown.

"A condom, Jasper?" I rolled my eyes in an attempt to hide my discomfort. This was useless of course, since I was trying to hide it from our resident empath. "Are you trying to get me to kick your ass?"

"Maybe." He answered, cockily, always looking for a match. "But Carlisle asked me to give that to you."

"Carlisle?"

Jasper nodded. "He said it should work. And, he wanted me to tell you to be safe." He stood up and pulled a long strip of the shiny gold packets out of his pocket and tossed them on the desk.

If I could blush, I'm sure I would have been the color of tomatoes, but this didn't matter as Jasper gave me a sympathetic glance. "Thanks. I guess? I mean...venom isn't my only concern." I stuttered.

"I know." He said sincerely. "I feel it. You love her. And you desire her. But there is the little part inside that wants to drain her. It's a balance you are struggling to maintain and right now you're winning."

I pushed back in my seat, rubbing a hand over my face. "I know. But my thirst can be so strong. It's in constant battle."

*I can only imagine. You truly are stronger than the rest of us, Edward.*

"Alice hasn't seen anything has she?" I asked, wondering if this was really a forewarning of some kind.

"No. She's consumed with James and the fact they can block her. Other than watching for Bella's safety, she's leaving you alone-like you asked."

Relieved I gathered the condoms off the desk and shoved them in a drawer. "Okay, I need to get dressed. You need to leave," I directed, and stood up from my chair.

*Alice said to wear the Armani.* He thought as he lifted himself out of the chair.

Again I rolled my eyes, but I knew she loved me. This was how she showed it.

"Please be careful tonight. This is not a game." I warned, still worried about not being there to assist. "James is serious."

*We know. Do your job, take care of Bella and we'll handle the rest.*

Playfully I shoved him in the head with a wide grin. I suspected this was going to be a big night for all of us.

Xxx

BPOV

A waft of steam evaporated from the back of my head. Angela stood behind me, styling wand in her hand, meticulously straightening each strand of my hair.

"Angela, I smell burnt hair." I complained as I tried to catch her eye in the bathroom mirror. "Are you burning it?"

"No," she sighed in response. I wasn't being completely cooperative and Angela and Alice were getting tired of my behavior. It had been a long day and I had hours to go before it was all over.

When I woke up this morning, my nose was pressed to Edward's firm chest, which caused me to smile before I even opened my eyes. I briefly wondered how long we had been this way, exactly when I burrowed my way into his arms. I'd decided this was the best way to wake up in the morning and planned to continue it for as long as possible.

Realizing I was awake, Edward began tracing patterns down the backs of my arms and allowed his fingers to hover near the hem of my shirt, occasionally grazing my warm skin with his fingers. Arching my back like a cat, I stretched and finally opened my eyes.

"Good morning," I whispered, my voice cracking with sleep.

"It is," he replied, blessing me with a smile so gorgeous if I had been standing my knees would have gone weak.

He was perfect. And I was perfectly ready to show him how I felt about him when the door bell began buzzing and in seconds Alice was outside the bedroom door. Before we could protest she was pulling a shirtless, positively horrified Edward out of the bed, and dragging me out of the house to get ready for the night.

We were now at my apartment, which was currently unused by me or Angela. She was still staying at Ben's, while I was at Edwards, but it was nice for one day to be back at our house. Sitting in a chair in the bathroom I was scrubbed, plucked, tweezed, and painted, hair and clothing were the only things left.

"Bella," Alice said, swooping into the bathroom, "I laid out your dress and your shoes. I also ..." she stopped, her eyes widening at the scowl on my face. "What is that about?" She asked.

"Nothing," I mumbled, pushing the thought of half naked Edward out of my head and bringing my focus back on the present.

Alice ignored my mood swings and continued, "I also put the most beautiful cashmere wrap on the bed and I found this gorgeous beaded bag for you to carry."

"You didn't have to do all this Alice-the dress was enough." I told her, embarrassed by the attention. Angela rolled her eyes behind me and continued fussing with my hair now that she was finished straightening it.

Alice was a tornado of movement. She flitted from place to place, adjusting makeup and hair pins or running to the other room to make sure my outfit was in order. "I do have to do this. Not only are you representing Pacific Northwest Trust tonight you are representing my brother, who has never been seen publically in the company of a woman before." She paused and leaned on the bathroom counter. "Trust me, people are going to notice and I want you to look amazing." I nodded, pretending to understand the world of high society, but acknowledging the reality of her statement. I noticed a sharp grin on her face and she said, "Plus, I want to make sure you rub it in those girl's faces from the office."

I smiled in return, "True. I hate them."

Angela began laughing at my immaturity, which caused me and Alice to join in. "Stop laughing or you'll ruin your makeup" Angela said, blotting tears from my cheeks. I promised to behave and after we composed ourselves, I noticed Alice had slipped from the room. Angela must have seen this too and she hesitantly cleared her throat before saying, "So, tell me about you and your boss. How is it going? Does he make you call him Mr. Cullen when you're 'together'?"

"Angela! No!" I shouted, laughter attempting to escape again. "He's sweet. Leave him alone."

She smiled wickedly, "Come on Bella. A guy that looks like that has to be more than sweet. What is really going on with him?" she pulled out a bottle of hairspray and began assaulting my head with it. "He totally has this mysterious thing going on. Which works by the way."

I smiled and sighed inwardly. I wished I could tell her about Edward. Who he really was. But I couldn't, in fact it was dangerous enough that I even knew. Instead I confessed, "I really like him Angela. He treats me like a queen. I spend every moment of the day wishing I could be closer to him even when I'm with him. I can't get enough."

I saw Angela's eyes flick towards the door, looking for Alice. She had no idea, of course, that Alice could not only hear our entire conversation, but probably had seen it coming, which was why she left the room in the first place. "Do you love him?" she asked in a hushed voice.

Before I answered, I looked at my best friend in the mirror. She was so genuine and supportive. There was never a doubt she had my best interest at heart. I caught her eye and nodded, speaking quietly in return, "I do. God, Angela, I had no idea what I was missing before he came in my life."

She raised an eyebrow and asked, "Does he love you?"

I felt the blush run up my neck. Did Edward love me? He hadn't said so but I knew he did. He had risked himself over and over for my life. He showed me his past, including the pain. He revealed himself in so many ways, in his touch and gestures. I knew he loved me. I said the only thing I could, "I think so."

"Really?" she asked, a wide smile gracing her face. "So he's the one then?"

I felt my smile falter just a little. "Yes, he's the one. But there are complications. I'm not sure if it will last."

Her happiness fell with mine and was replaced with concern. "What do you mean? Because he's rich? Because you're not?"

"No, I can't explain it but I just feel like I just need to be thankful for him while I have him." I said the words I had been thinking for some time and instead of relief it felt like a knife twisting in my chest.

She was confused and I could tell she didn't know how to respond to my statement so she simply said, "He needs to be thankful for everyday *you* are in his life."

"Don't worry. He is. More than you both could know." Alice said from behind us, making us both jump in surprise. She gave me a quick smile. "Now, let's get you dressed."

I stood and walked into the bedroom, seeing the beautiful blue dress lying across the bed. It was knee length with a low v in the front and a deeper one in the back. Wispy fabric formed straps over the shoulders. I grabbed Alice and gave her hard, tiny body a quick hug. I leaned into her ear and said in a low voice, "Thank you. For everything."

"Bella, You're going to knock them out. And I know you're worried but I have a feeling things will work out in the end." She said cryptically. I looked at her questioningly, wondering what she knew, if she had seen something, but the moment was lost and she had turned and was talking to Angela and shoving clothing in my hands.

I stood in the middle of the room, clutching the expensive bra and panty set Alice had just given me and let her words sink in. It made me wonder, not for the first time, if there were other options out there for me and Edward. So far we had met every challenge we had faced. I wondered if there were choices that I should possibly consider and if Edward had considered them as well. Frozen in the middle of my room, I thought about my dream, the one where I sacrificed myself for him and how it felt so right. I wondered if presented with the opportunity what would I do?

"Bella, are you okay?"

I nodded, shaking the image from my head, realizing, despite the fact I had things to think about, I *was* okay.

Xxx

I felt a cool finger running up the slit in my dress. Smiling, I halted it with my hand and hissed, "Stop."

He stopped, but didn't remove it. Instead his actions moved to his lips and I felt them run over my neck, giving me goose bumps. "Edward! Emmett can hear you. Us. Stop!"

"I told him if he listened to us I would tell Rosalie how he brags that he could actually fix the carburetor on his Jeep faster than she can. He's not. I promise." He gave me a sly smile before returning to my neck.

We were sitting in the back of a long, sleek limousine. I opened the door to reveal the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on. Black suit, crisp shirt, dark tie. He was beautiful but he looked at me like nothing else existed. This man possessed me. I was hopeless in his presence and once again the idea of sacrificing it all for him didn't seem unreasonable. We had climbed down the stairs at my apartment, arms linked, and I was shocked to find the extravagant car idling by the curb. Edward laughed at my expression and explained that a limo was customary for this type of event but that he didn't trust anyone to drive us, so Emmett had the honors.

Once we were settled inside and Edward had closed the partition for privacy, I found myself alone with one very handsy vampire.

"Edward, you know he's listening. At least a little." But he only shook his head and let his fingers wander further up my skirt. My heart skipped a beat at his continued touch, as if daring him to proceed. I caught his eye and smiled. It was a warm gold today as he was well fed, but there was a darkness rimming the edge.

Desire.

This time though, instead of stopping him I let him continue, his fingers slipping up my thigh. I reached for his face and found his lips, smashing my own to his. "Okay, fine, if you say so..." I breathed, letting my hands wander across his starched shirt.

He stopped suddenly and groaned, "You're right we need to stop. But not because of Emmett. Because if we walk out of this car wrinkled and half-dressed, and if it is on the cover of the paper tomorrow, Alice will never forgive me." He kissed me once more, softer, smoothing out my hair and dress as he did it.

I stared at him as he adjusted his shirt and tie. "You can't just do that, Edward."

"Do what?"

"Come on to me, put your hand up my skirt, and then stop." I pouted. "It's really not fair."

He shook his head at my outrage. "What isn't fair is *you* being so tempting. You look absolutely stunning."

I felt the tale tell blush creeping across my skin. "You look very handsome too. But you're right, we should behave." And I straightened his tie.

Edward and I were on equal ground here when it came to wanting one another and we were going to have to fight the longing together. Linking our hands, and sliding apart some, we settled into our seats more appropriately.

"What should I expect tonight?" I asked him. Never having been to an event like this I had no idea what to expect.

"Eating, drinking, dancing...that kind of thing." He replied casually, stroking the inside of my palm.

"You don't eat or drink." I challenged.

"I'm excellent at pretending." He smirked.

"I'm sure...but, ummm...about the dancing? Is this mandatory?" *Dear God, please do not make Bella dance in front of this gorgeous man and his employees. Amen.* I prayed silently.

"It is if you're with me."

I swallowed hard. "I don't really like to dance." Images of me at prom and formals flashed in my head. I once again was relieved Edward couldn't read my mind.



He cocked his head at me, and ran his finger up to my wrist, feeling the beat. "You're nervous." He lifted my hand to his lips, "Trust me, you'll love dancing. With me. You just haven't had a good partner."

"And *you're* a good partner?"

"Yes." He said with finality. I rolled my eyes and decided to change the subject, asking who would be there, how long did we have to stay, would he get angry if I hid in the bathroom?

I heard a soft tap on the partition and Emmett's head appeared as it slid between the seats. "We're almost there." He said, "I'm dropping you off and parking the car. Then I'll meet Rosalie. Call me when you're ready to get picked up."

Edward agreed and I saw the traces of a silent conversation carried on between them. Strategy of some kind, I was sure. Edward wasn't giving me a lot of information on James and Victoria and I was actually glad. Something was going on tonight. The Cullen's were all on alert, prepared to patrol the area while Edward and I went to the event. Butterflies lit in my stomach as I thought about James. I felt confident, though, that he wouldn't try anything in such a public area. But, I forced myself to push those thoughts out of my head and focus on getting through the night.

The car slowed and I looked out the window, there was a small crowd milling around, gorgeously dressed, going in and out of the party. Smiling at Edward, I gathered my purse and wrap. He stopped me before I got out of the car, brushed my hair aside and gave me a shivering kiss under my ear.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded and gave him my biggest, fake smile. Emmett opened the door and helped me out, leaned in and said, "He's right. You do look stunning." I gaped up at his face, my fingers trapped in his large hand. He had heard everything. Giving me a cocky, dimpled smile he added, "And he's not lying, he really is an excellent dancer."

Xxx

Once inside, Edward kept a firm, yet gentle grasp on my elbow. The event was beautiful. The hospital had chosen the Seattle Aquarium for the event and as we walked through the atrium toward the ballroom.

"I haven't been here before, have you?" I asked, looking around at the huge tanks filled with exotic fish. The lighting was low, causing the room to reflect the water throughout the room. Edward's skin almost glimmered in the light.

"For other events." He responded, his eyes were assessing the room.

We mingled for a while with the other guests and eventually sat down for dinner. I was fairly interested in watching Edward 'eat' in front of a full table of people. To the outsider he appeared to enjoy his meal, but I could see the flashes of speed as he removed food from his plate and folded it neatly in his napkin.

After dinner we excused ourselves and after getting a drink for me to consume and one for Edward to hold we watched the crowd from a quiet spot near the large tank. Occasionally, people stopped to talk to us. After a while I noticed he knew everyone's name and position. He never flinched.

"How do you remember everyone? I'm impressed." I said as I sipped my drink from the bar. I watched the huge sharks swim silently through the tanks, captivated by their smooth, fluid movements.

He leaned in low and whispered, "Photographic memory. And, I can read their minds. They usually give everything away."

I felt stupid for forgetting such a simple fact about him but he just laughed quietly and said, "Occasionally, the mind reading thing does have its benefits. But then," he stopped and shot a furious look over his shoulder at the bartender, "there are times it's very hard to manage."

I peered around his body, and looked at the dark haired, smarmy man tending bar. "Why, what's he thinking?"

Edward sighed and put his hands on my hips, pulling me closer, "You don't want to know. Trust me."

I looked again and this time the guy gave me a skeevy smile and winked. "Oh! Ugh, yeah no thanks. I don't need to read minds to know I don't want any part of that."

Edward's hands were still firmly placed on my hips and he was towering over me, his hair dipping in his eyes as he looked down. My hand instinctively reached up to trace along his jaw. This man was a danger to me and my good sense. I felt his hand brush up my bare back and rest under my hair.

"Can we leave?" I asked quietly, my eyes completely enraptured by his. "Now? Can we? I want to go." I was close to begging.

His lips curved into what wasn't quite a smile, almost a snarl, but not of threat, more like, hunger. Edward's animalistic tendencies were always lying in wait under the surface and I found myself yearning to expose them.

"Soon."

"Fine. Go shake hands and schmooze or whatever you need to do so we can go." And I waved him off.

"Come with me?" he asked.

"No thanks, I'm good over here looking at these fish. Thanks anyway." I said and flashed him a smile.

Edward gave me a crooked little grin that made my heart flutter and turned and walked away, towards a group of doctors from the hospital.

Watching the shimmery fish swim in the tank, I was startled to hear my name called. "Bella! Your dress is gorgeous." And, I turned to find myself face to face with Margie and Nancy from Edward's office. Margie was beyond excited and perhaps a bit drunk. Wobbling a little, she slurred, "You acted like you had no idea about the party, but really, you were hiding that fabulous dress from us!" I felt my brow furrow in confusion at the idea I would pretend I didn't know about this event.

"Hi girls," I said warily, forcing a smile on my face. At least they were being nice.

Nancy leaned in too close to my face and said, "So Bella, Margie and I were just talking, and we noticed how Mr. Cullen has really changed since he met you."

Raising an eyebrow and wishing desperately for another drink, I responded with a non-committal, "Has he?" and shrugged.

The two girls began nodding excitedly. "Oh yeah, he is totally different." Nancy agreed, her eyes looking around the room and stopping on Edward, who had his back to us. His head was tilted slightly to the side; an indication I had come to learn meant he was listening. I attempted to squelch the smile inching across my mouth and feigned interest in the women.

"Last year, he came to this party with a scowl on his face and barely spoke to anyone. He walked near me at the dessert table, and I ran away." Margie said. "I was terrified. But this year, he actually nodded in my direction and I smiled back!"

I remembered how gruff and socially awkward Edward had been when we met. Intrigued, I asked, "He's that different?"

Both girls laughed and Nancy said, "Bella, before he began seeing you, we were not only convinced he was gay; we were sure he had a personality disorder."

"I'm sure he was just in a bad mood or something. I doubt it had much to do with me." I replied, skeptically.

The women exchanged another look. "Oh, it has everything to do with you. He never takes his eyes off of you, and he constantly has one of those amazing hands touching you. Mr. Cullen is completely fixated on you. You're like a gazelle, and he's the lion. I wouldn't want to be the one to get between the two of you."

They began laughing in that 'had too much to drink' kind of way. I watched as Margie ran a finger under her eye to wipe away tears from laughing before it messed up her makeup. Across the room, Edward shifted just a little, so he could give me a seductive smile. I felt the heat burning on my cheeks, and Margie, looking at Edward as well, said, "All I know is that I would give anything to be on the receiving end of one of those smiles."

Nancy muttered a low, "Or those hands," which I pretended not to hear.

I chuckled nervously, trying to figure out how to get away from these women and back to my man before I let them know *exactly* what it was like to have his hands on my body.

Xxx

EPOV

I felt Bella's heartbeat as she returned to the ballroom. It was fainter than normal, due to the music and crowds, and I had to push the voices away to even attempt to remain sane. So instead I focused on her heart, the life that ran through her fragile body.

I excused myself from the group of men I was talking to, all of them relieved I was leaving, as my presence intimidated and brought discomfort. They all felt horrible for their unease but they didn't realize it was just their bodies telling them to run like hell from the wolf in sheep's clothing that stood before them.

Bella paused in the doorway to speak to Joyce, my secretary, and I took the opportunity to watch her. She stood elegant and poised, the dress Alice chose for her fitting perfectly on her body. I had known Alice would accentuate Bella's beauty, but when Bella opened her apartment door, I had an epiphany of sorts. There was no doubt Bella was a beautiful woman. But for years I would watch other men regard their lovers and I never fully grasped the emotion behind their thoughts. They believed their wife had perfect lips, or pretty eyes, or stunning legs, and even though I agreed on occasion that the women were attractive, these men truly believed they were more than others. The women in their lives were perfect, pretty and stunning. I now realized these ideas were fueled by love. When you love someone you truly see past any flaw or fault. You see the one you love and she, Bella in my case, was exquisite.

I caught Bella's eye and I met her in the middle of the room. "Can I take you somewhere?" I asked.

"Anywhere." She replied.

I grasped her hand and we walked by the edge of the giant tank, and I led her to a door in a darkened corner of the room.

Bella stopped, "Edward, I don't think we're supposed to go in here."

I simply grinned, and twisted the knob, pulling her through the door with me. Once inside, away from observers I leaned in and gave her a firm kiss. She returned it eagerly, carefully licking the edge of my mouth with her tongue.

I pulled her towards a staircase around the back of the huge tank, and I picked her up, and tossed her over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" she giggled, keeping her voice low.

"I'm taking you somewhere, and you walk too slow."

"Okay, but as long as you know this is as close to dancing that I'm going to get."

She playfully beat her hands on my back until I reached the top of the stairway and dropped her to her feet. We were standing above the tank and could see the underwater life from a different perspective. From our vantage point, we could not only watch the fish but we could see the guests and hear the music from the ballroom.

Bella leaned over the railing, watching the aquarium with interest. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed into her body. Pushing her hair aside, to reveal her smooth skin, I kissed her lightly.

"Stop," she said, and wiggled under my grasp. "That tickles."

"Oh," I mused, "Then I'll have to be more gentle." And began placing feather light kisses over the goose bumped flesh.

Bella watched the scene below, and I watched her for some time before she spoke. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

She rested her head on my chest. "Why exactly did you leave your family? I mean, I know about Tanya and the pressure but why couldn't you just return to the way you lived before. They clearly didn't want you to leave."

Ahhh. *The question.*

I rested my chin on top of her head. "After I ended things with Tanya, I was forced to explain to my family why I wouldn't be taking her as my mate. They didn't understand. Not really. I do think they realized we were not a solid match but I don't think they comprehended how so many of my choices and decisions had been about what the family wanted and not what I wanted."

Bella linked her fingers in mine, twisting them into a knot, but she didn't speak so I continued. "They wanted it so badly for me. For me to have what they had and it just wasn't possible." I extracted my fingers and turned Bella so she could face me. "Until now. Until you."

I picked Bella up and sat her on the smooth metal railing, placing her at eye level. Wrapping her legs around mine, she tightened her grip on my shoulders, glancing nervously at the enormous tank below. Giving me a quick smile she leaned in to kiss me, soft and gentle. Every kiss from Bella was different, each one better than the one before.

Pulling away, and wiping my bottom lip with her thumb she said, "How does that work? The mate thing? Victoria said that in the woods that night. That you wanted me for your mate."

I had hoped we could avoid this conversation, but as usual she was observant. I didn't want to scare her off with our nature. Sighing, I said, "It's how we consider our partners or spouses. Sometimes we are more like animals, Bella. When we find the person we connect to the bond it is unbreakable. We mate for life or not at all."

"So your bond to me is unbreakable?" I swear I saw hope in her eyes.

I moved my hands from her waist to her face and looked in her dark brown eyes. They were so inviting, so warm. Everything about Bella felt like home. "It's hard to explain without sounding a little...possessive...but, no matter how long I have you, for me there will never be anyone else."

Her eyes steeled at my words. "For me either."

My dormant heart fluttered inappropriately. It was one thing for me to bind myself to her, it was another all together for her to do the same thing, but I wanted it, her, so badly.

Before I could respond I saw her dip her eyes and press her teeth down on her lip. She took a deep breath and whispered, "I love you, Edward."

I brushed my nose to hers and then kissed her. Hard. With as much force as I could risk. Pulling back I said, "If you only knew how much those words mean to me. I love you too."

Pushing her legs further apart, straining the fabric of her dress, and pushed against her. "Can I wrinkle your dress now?" I asked before plunging my lips to her throat.

She moaned lightly and breathed, "Please..."

I felt her fingers tugging at my shirt, trying to free it from my pants. I flashed to the square packet in my pocket, and considered telling Bella about the new options available for us. As I pulled my mouth away from hers to suggest going home, I felt a sudden vibration from my jacket.

I groaned and muttered, "Alice..." into Bella's mouth.

She laughed, "She does seem to have really bad timing."

Reaching for the phone I kept one hand on Bella's back to keep her safe on the railing. "It's Emmet." I noted, curious as to why he would call.

Bella's hand continued working to release my shirt, her fingers struggling with the buttons.

"Emmett?" I said into the receiver, my eyes focused on the way the material on Bella's chest strained now that she was breathing heavier. She was perfect. And mine.

"She's gone." Emmett said and I could hear the trace of panic in his voice.

"Who? What?" I said into the phone and rested my hand on Bella's to make her stop.

"Alice." He said and began speaking quickly, telling me what he knew. Bella's eyes grew concerned in front of me and she clutched my hand tightly.

"Pick us up now. We'll meet you out front." I ordered and disconnected.

"What happened?" Bella asked.

I looked at my angel, beautifully wrapped in blue, lipstick smudged from my hungry lips, thinking of how to tell her what was going on without scaring her. "It's Alice. Jasper can't find her. Neither can anyone else."

"She's probably hunting or sidetracked...right?" she asked, fear creeping into her eyes.

I shook my head slowly. "The wolves and James' coven had an altercation. The other's went to back up the wolves, but Alice never showed." I explained. "She's gone."



## Chapter Twenty-Five

**Chapter Song:** [Dave Matthews Band – Crash Into Me](#)

BPOV

It took about an hour for everyone to converge in Edward's home. It was late by the time we all arrived, but I, of course, was the only one remotely tired. I stifled a yawn threatening to betray my humanity amongst the others.

After we'd received the phone call, Edward and I had rushed out of the party, barely saying goodbye. We found Rosalie waiting by the curb with the limo. Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, Edward gave me a quick kiss on the lips and whispered, "I love you," before disappearing into the night.

"He'll meet us later," she assured as I entered the car, consumed by fear, closing my eyes and dreaming of Edward's hands on my skin.

Rosalie pulled into the alley that paralleled Edward's house, and we slipped in the back door to wait inside for the others in the living room. Emmett arrived first, his eyes wild until they finally settled on Rosalie. He pulled her into a tight embrace and whispered into her ear, forcing me to turn my head in a weak attempt at granting them privacy.

It made me long for the feel of Edward's arms even more.

Several minutes later, Esme came through the door, alone. She too was dressed in black, mud thick on her boots. Noticing her lack of company, Rosalie asked, "Where are Jasper and Carlisle?"

I watched as Esme removed her jacket and hung it neatly by the door. She ran a hand through her caramel colored hair and sighed anxiously. "Carlisle called. He and Edward are going to help Jasper."

"I should go too. I can catch up..." Emmett responded hastily, gracefully lifting himself off the loveseat he and Rosalie were now sharing.

"Sit down. Edward wanted you here." Rosalie ordered, pulling him down by his shoulder with a soft expression. He complied, but still appeared restless and agitated.

Esme sank next to me on the sofa, tentatively wrapping her strong arms around my shoulders. She had the comforting, maternal touch, and I instinctively rested my head wearily on her shoulder. Exhaustion was enveloping me, but I refused to sleep before I had some answers.

"Can someone please tell me what happened?" I pleaded, looking between Emmett and Rosalie expectantly.

Rosalie answered first. "We were patrolling our assigned areas. Emmett and I were in the city, sticking close to the aquarium. Alice and Jasper covered the suburbs, and Carlisle and Esme the outskirts of the city. Each couple was separated as well. For example, Emmett and I don't patrol together, we just pass each other at certain points."

I nodded, having already understood they were involved in some kind of protective mission that evening. I was surprised to find they separated themselves from their mates while working.

Emmett interjected before Rosalie could continue. "Everything was calm, and there were no signs of James or any other vamps. We checked-in every thirty minutes by phone and everyone was having the same situation. Quiet and calm." He picked up Rosalie's hand and continued in a grim voice, "Until around midnight."

"What happened?" I wondered.

Esme's comforting hand rubbed my arm soothingly as she explained, "We received a call from Jasper, who said he may have found an abandoned house with suspected activity. Carlisle and Emmett agreed to go meet him while the rest of us held our positions. In the event he was wrong, we wanted to keep everything covered." She paused and I nodded in understanding, willing her to continue. "Eventually, Carlisle called and confirmed that they had indeed found the nest for the coven. Jasper and Emmett were able to identify James' scent as well as that of some of the others. At this point, I'd already been in contact with Jacob and Sam and informed them of the situation. They left their pack and traveled to the nest."

Furrowing my brow in confusion, I asked, "Why would you include the men from the tribe? Isn't that dangerous?"

Emmett answered, "They need to know the scent of the vampires we're hunting. Bella, the men from the tribe are unreal. They're more like giant tracking dogs. We wanted to make sure they knew exactly who we're looking for." He sighed. "It's a good thing they came."

Edward had told me about the men from La Push that literally transformed from man to wolf in mere seconds. I was shocked by the awe in which he described their abilities. Apparently, they were fast, strong, and could be vicious. It worried me.

"Why?"

"Once we were all at the house, we searched for any clues to help us locate James or Victoria. Unfortunately, they found us first." Emmett's expression turned to one of fury as he continued. "We weren't totally taken by surprise. Alice actually tipped us off and called just before we heard them coming. The wolves sniffed them out before they got to the house. It was a pretty big fight." I watched as Rosalie tightened her fingers with Emmett's, the concern on her face evident as he continued "They were newborns, erratic and rash. Between the five of us we had no real problem taking down the eight of them."

Finding my voice, I breathed a sigh of relief. "So you killed James and Victoria?"

Emmett's face became grave. "No. That's the problem. While we were fighting the newborns, James and Victoria seemed to have had other plans. I called Rosalie, concerned that they were possibly making a move on the aquarium, for you. But no one showed downtown."

Rosalie spoke up then, an uncharacteristic frown tugging at her flawless lips, "I called Esme, and alerted her to the situation. I tried to call Alice, but... she never responded."

My heart sank at what they were suggesting. James and Victoria weren't dead. Even worse, Alice was missing.

Emmett spoke, "Alice did call Jasper. Apparently, she had a vision of the attack. She also had another of a house with an injured child. She wanted to check it out."

Rosalie's perfect brow furrowed as she asked, "She went alone?"

"I'm not sure," Emmett murmured with a minute shake of his head. "Jasper asked her to wait, but he was distracted, the newborns had just shown themselves. Once we finished fighting, Alice didn't answer her phone. Jasper took off, I called Edward, and he instructed me to come here," he finished with a defeated shrug.

"Maybe she's helping that child, the one she saw?" I said wishfully.

Emmett shook his head. "We have procedures. She would have contacted one of us."

"Where did Edward go?" I asked, but suspected I already knew.

"Edward went to meet up with Jasper. The Quileute are also looking for Alice," Esme clarified.

Emmett attempted to stand again, growling in frustration, "I should go."

This time Esme spoke up. "Emmett, no. There are more wolves than us, and their tracking skills are extraordinary. Plus, we don't need to wander around the forest if not necessary. We don't know what James has in mind." It was almost a scolding and Emmett accepted it with a ducked head.

I felt Esme smoothing my hair and it was making me sleepy. Yawning, I asked, "So what do we do now?"

Rosalie's brilliant, gold eyes met my sleepy gaze as she answered dejectedly, "We wait."

Xxx

EPOV

Pushing through the dense brush of the forest, I finally caught Jasper's scent in the soft breeze of the night. Scanning the woods, I saw a faint light up ahead and traveled towards it, hoping it was the correct house. I'd called him earlier, asking him to wait at the house for me. I couldn't bear the agony of searching for *two* vanished siblings. Hesitantly, he had agreed. Luckily, his military nature prevailed and he was able to see the logic behind my request.

I reached the yard surrounding the house and could hear the frantic ramblings of his mind. He was distraught and singularly focused on Alice and his failure to keep her safe. I steadied myself and prepared for the onslaught of his overpowering guilt. Sniffing, I noted the faint trace of Alice and Victoria lingering around the house but no other inhabitants, I called, "Jasper!" to alert him of my whereabouts.

Approaching the small, illuminated house, I found the front door and jerked it open easily. Jasper was standing inside the front room, distress plain on his face. "Hey," I called, trying to get his attention. "Are you okay?"

*No.* His eyes darted about the room anxiously, fists clenching, unsure of his next move.

"Carlisle is on his way. Can you tell me what happened?" I asked calmly, in an attempt to distract him from the thoughts that were currently racing through his mind.

*She was here. Inside and out. So was Victoria and maybe a couple others.* "I told her to wait," he said aloud, his voice tight.

"She must have had a reason," I argued lightly.

He nodded at me with miserable eyes, guilty, responsible. I changed the direction of the conversation. "Have you had the chance to see which way they went?"

*No. I followed their trail to the main road, but after that, it's gone. They must have had a car...*

As an empath, Jasper felt the emotions of those around him. He also reflected back those same feelings to anyone in his proximity. I was desperately trying to fight off the waves of pain and anger he was emitting, while also trying to decipher the flurry of his mind's words. The anguish was almost suffocating. I caught glimpses of the fight with the newborns and his calls from Alice. The pieces were fitting together. We spent some time investigating the house, scouring it closely for any trace of Alice while we waited for Carlisle. Jasper was getting anxious to go, to look for her, but I hoped I could keep him here without a fight.

Just as his thoughts grew impossibly more anxious, I heard Carlisle on the driveway. "Carlisle's here," I informed him, just to have something to say.

Between the emotions he was producing, and the thoughts in his head, I realized Jasper was dangerously close to experiencing whatever the vampire-equivalent of a meltdown was. His love for Alice was intense and this was the first time I truly understood the loss of a loved one, a partner and lover. A mate. Never before had I sincerely been able to comprehend this level of fear and sorrow. Not before Bella.

Carlisle entered the house, his face and thoughts were filled with concern for Jasper and Alice. Glancing in my direction, he asked silently, *How's he holding up?*

I shook my head the tiniest bit to let him know things were not well. That Jasper was taking the situation exactly as well he would, were it him and Esme in this position. He walked further into the room and pulled Jasper into a tight hug, as though he could soak up Jasper's pain. When Carlisle finally released him, we proceeded to update him with the scant amount of information we had to offer. Once I finished speaking, Carlisle informed us of the wolves' involvement in the search for Alice.

Jasper's eyes became stony and his hands clenched. "If they hurt her—" he hissed.

Carlisle interrupted evenly, "They're on our side. They won't hurt her. But in many ways, with the skills they have, they're our best chance at finding her."



*Edward what's our plan?* Carlisle asked.

Scanning the room, I spotted a framed family photo on a table. A man, woman and a young boy. "Jasper, is the owner's body in the house?" I asked, aware of the faint scent of decaying flesh.

"In the back room." And he jerked his thumb towards the rear of the house.

"We need to get out of here and call the authorities. Put this family to rest."

Absently, Jasper corrected, "Man and woman. Not a family."

Carlisle and I looked at one another. The child in the photo was young, less than ten perhaps? I quickly walked down the hallway and checked in the back bedroom. Lying on the floor were the bodies of a man and woman, but no boy.

Had he escaped? Was this the child Alice had envisioned?

Walking back into the room I suggested, "Let's go back home. I'll call the police once we leave."

Both men nodded and followed me out the front door into the darkened yard where the sky was barely beginning to lighten. Jasper suddenly shuddered, sending a wave of anxiety and fear towards us. Before I could ask, I heard a voice in the woods. Inhaling deeply, I recognized the scent as decidedly vampire.

Jasper growled heavily in his chest, emotions boiling over from the events of the night. The voice in the dark was jumbled, the thoughts unclear. I couldn't grasp the flow of their mind. It was stunted and rash. Suddenly, I caught a thread and whispered, "Don't move," to the others.

*What is it?* Carlisle asked.

"You can come out," I announced to the darkness and put a hand on Jasper's arm to restrain him. We immediately heard the rustling of leaves as the vampire walked onto the lawn. I heard a sharp intake of air as Carlisle gasped next to me. Jasper merely looked ill at the sight unfolding in front of us.

*How old is he?*

I shrugged and sighed dreadfully, "Too young."

It was the child from the photo, but red-eyed and feral. Leaves and grass were embedded into his fine hair, his clothes dirtied and torn. It was an abomination. The deepest sin our kind could commit was the transformation of a child.

Carlisle took a step forward and the child hissed, lunging in offense. He was too young and too stupid to understand that challenging three vampires whose collective ages surpassed six hundred years would result in certain death.

"Son, you need to stop before you get hurt," I heard Carlisle begin, and, to his credit, the boy pulled back. I fought the urge to roll my eyes at my father and mentor. Always the optimist, but this situation required more than a kind voice. Before I could speak, Jasper leapt from his position next to me and pinned the boy to the ground.

"*Where's my wife.*" He spat at the struggling newborn underneath him. I listened intently, hoping to catch some stray thoughts as he rambled incoherently.

"Jasper, let him up," Carlisle ordered, to no avail. Jasper was holding him tightly to the ground, the leaves crinkling under the pressure of his body.

"Where is she? What did he do with her?" he demanded. Jasper's blonde hair was hanging in his eyes, but I could read his murderous thoughts. He was right however; this kid possibly possessed information, and we needed to get it out of him.

"Jasper..." I started but was cut off by the boy himself.

In a tiny but venomous voice he declared, "She belongs to him."

Carlisle and I felt the rage explode through Jasper and he mentally shouted, *Tackle him!*

I dove across the grass, flinging Jasper through the air, and landed on top of him with a thud. Surprisingly, he didn't struggle, instead dropped his head into his hands in frustration. I heard Carlisle calmly begin interrogating the boy across the lawn.

"She belongs to whom?" he asked, crouching slightly.

"The leader. He said she was his," The boy answered, slowly lifting himself from his horizontal position.

"Who is 'she?'" Carlisle asked in his most soothing voice.

"The little vampire, the one he waited for and tricked into coming here." I saw an image of Alice, recognition flickering across her eyes, in his mind.

"How did he trick her?"

"I'm hungry." The boy whimpered, and for a fleeting moment, he looked like the fragile child he should have been.

"I know," Carlisle, as he attempted to appease the little monster on the ground. "You can eat when we're finished. How did he trick her?"

The boy appeared dubious, but relented, "He said she could 'see him,' that he was letting her 'see him.' But she wasn't here so... I don't know *how* she saw him." The boy's expression transformed into one of confusion before swiftly returning to its previous feral state.

Carlisle and I shared a knowing look, realizing James had made some solid decisions that had led Alice here—alone.

"What happened when she arrived at the house?" Carlisle continued, nodding in encouragement.

"He told me to call out for help, and she came in the house looking for me. They were waiting for her inside." The child explained, flashing an image of Victoria.

"Victoria was here," I said, loud enough for Carlisle to hear.

"Is the girl they tricked okay? Was she harmed?" Carlisle persisted with a hint of urgency.

"No," the boy answered. "But they said something about... 'if she ever wanted to see her mate again she needed to come willingly,' and she got this really weird look on her face before leaving with them."

James had used Jasper to lure Alice away. Several pieces of the puzzle began clicking at once. At the boy's words, Jasper took off, choking on his rage and unable to bear this situation any further. His thoughts were of distress, but I knew he would stay close to find out what else this child had to say.

"Where did they go?" I asked, approaching them carefully. He shrugged in response and I could see this was true from his thoughts.

"Did he say anything else to Alice? *Anything?*" I inquired in desperation.

"He said it had been a long time, and that he missed her. And then he said something about justice, but I didn't understand the words. Can I eat now?" he asked wistfully.

Carlisle and I shared another look. This wasn't going to be pleasant. Killing a vampire never was, but a child? *Heartbreaking.*

"Before you eat," I stalled, feeling a trace of guilt for lying, "tell me why they left you here."

Without hesitation, he said aloofly, "He told me you would come."

"Who would come?" I asked, probing for more, and hoping it would be enough.

He looked at me and Carlisle, his red eyes shifting between the two of us. Red rested on gold as he replied, with certainty, "You."

Xxx

I entered the back door of my house and directly ascended the stairs, pausing only to peel off the filthy smoke-filled clothes I wore before tossing them in the trash. I stepped into the shower, allowing the water to wash away the grime of the night, which I knew would only work for the dirt, not for the loss we were grappling with.

When I finished, I turned the knobs and grabbed the towel hanging outside the door. While drying off, I heard Emmett in the opposing room. "We're leaving, okay?"

"Yes. I'll see you tomorrow. I need to deal with some things here," I explained. My heart was heavy with thoughts of Alice, Jasper and now, Bella.

"She's tough, Edward, more than you think," he said, always knowing me all-too-well.

"Possibly. But it's mine to worry about," I replied, almost choking on the word 'mine' as I struggled to push it from my mouth.

I heard Emmett and the others leave, and went to my closet, pulling on a t-shirt and a pair of pants before heading to Bella's room. I could hear the steady rhythm of her heart and soft breathing from the hallway. I was dreading the talk I knew we must have, every silent step of my feet bringing me that much closer to her.

As was usual, she didn't awaken when I entered. I quietly lowered myself to the chair facing the bed and observed her in a heavy silence. Watching Bella sleep was as close to sleeping as I'd ever had in this life. My body slowed to her pacing, and I found myself matching my breaths to her steady, lulling rhythms.

I loved this woman so entirely, with every fiber of my being, and finally knew the joy of having it returned with certainty. Her declaration over the aquarium had filled every hole in my century-old soul, mending the scars and vacancies that I hadn't even known to exist. I felt hope, standing over the water, swimming for once instead of drowning. All that changed with one phone call.

But now, the love that had filled me was beginning to ache painfully. Again, I had experienced loss through the eyes of others, but never like this. Not the intense feelings Jasper was emitting. Not having my own love when a life hung in the balance. I'd been foolish to think I could have her. That I could simply grasp that possibility and believe she had any chance of remaining safe. If Alice couldn't protect herself and Jasper couldn't shield her, there was little hope for Bella in this madman's game.

There was no way I could risk losing her to James, I decided. I realized now I had to cut her free before all of my inhuman truths caught up to us and dragged her to hell with the rest of us. We had spent all this time locking her away under the guise of safety, but in reality, we were only delaying the inevitable. As long as she was with me, her life was at risk, in constant danger.

This was no longer an option.

I heard Bella shift beneath the sheets, sighing lightly, and I found myself at the edge of the bed, lowering myself next to her fragile form. Her bottom lip quivered and released a tight sob. My heart ached for her pain, wanting to jump into her dream and save her from her nightmares. I stroked her arm lightly, barely making contact, but she whispered a hushed, "Edward," knowing even in her sleep that I was close. My heart skipped a false beat at the sound of my name murmured off her lips. I placed my thumb across the

dark pink flesh, rubbing it gently as I had all those times before in an effort to calm her. I wanted my mouth on hers, I wanted her delicate body in my arms forever, and I wanted to hear every single beat of her heart.

And I realized, with anger and frustration, there was no way I could have it.

Xxx

BPOV

In my dream, I was with Edward. We searched for Alice, desperate, searching shadowy corners and hidden alcoves, but it was futile. She was gone. I turned to him, my angel, my prince, and begged, "Save her."

I sought his rich, golden eyes that pierced through the darkness and pulled his face towards mine. I waited for him to do it. To save her.

"I can't," he choked, his pain apparent.

"You can. You can do anything," I insisted, believing the truth of my words.

"I can't, but you can," he replied softly.

"How? I'll do anything. She's my friend..." but his face abruptly transformed into an expression of anger.

He moved even closer, his finger pressing against my lip as my body instinctively sought the coolness of his own. "Edward..." I said, aware, even half asleep, that his name escapes me in the form of a moan.

I awoke with a start, confused, but certain that Edward lingered here with me, concealed in the dark. It's his hand on my face, I realized. Lifting my hand to his, I looped his finger with mine and led it to my lap. My idle hand searched for his face in the dark, groping until I made contact with his smooth, solid skin.

"Are you okay?" I asked, afraid of his answer.

"We know a little more, but we haven't located her yet," he answered, sadness lacing his words.

My lips found his and kissed him softly, longing for to be the ointment that would ease his pain. His reaction was unexpectedly hesitant. I trailed my hand down his face and reached for the light on the bedside table, needing to see his face. With a single twist, the room was illuminated, glowing yellow, and I could see him, tense and anguished on the edge of the bed.

"Tell me what's going on." I weaved my fingers through his hair, still damp from the shower. My hand traveled down his body, smoothing the shoulders of his t-shirt, which was fitted over his hard arms.

His eyes focused just to the left of mine as he confessed, "Jasper is heartbroken. I've never felt such pain."

I nodded, only barely capable of imagining how Jasper must feel. *How I would feel.*

"They left a message. James took Alice. He tricked her into going to this house, and then later into willingly leaving with them," he continued in a flat, toneless voice.

"Why would she do that?" I asked, confused.

"He manipulated her visions and threatened her with the most important thing. Jasper. She would do anything for him," he said, this time locking his eyes with mine. "Bella, I'm not going to let this happen to us," he insisted resolutely.

"What do you mean?" I breathed.

"I mean, I'm not going to allow you to be a pawn any longer between me and James." His voice was firm, but his eyes were wavering. He dropped his gaze from mine and confessed in a strangled voice, "It's a sin for me to love you. To covet you so intensely."

My mouth was agape as I sat motionless on the bed, my heart shattering with his every word. "No," was all I could manage.

"This whole relationship is wrong. It isn't fair or realistic. It has to stop," he insisted, his downcast eyes hidden beneath his thicket of hair.

"No."

"Yes."

I watched him through narrowed eyes, sitting like an angel before me. He was afraid and wanted to run. I could see the fear etched into his perfect face, the tightening around the edges of his eyes, and the relenting grip of his hand in mine. Unfortunately for Edward, I wasn't some child he could boss around.

"No, Edward." I raised my chin and determined, "You don't get to decide this on your own."

"But I do," he said decisively. "I'm going to live forever and you're not. It's unnatural and wrong. I pretend to be Batman. Helping those in need, fighting the bad guy. Philanthropist by day, crusader by night. But, Bella, you must realize superheroes never have girlfriends." He laughed darkly. "Because it doesn't work. The bad guys use it for leverage."

"You think I'm leverage?" I spat, annoyed with his childish comparison.

"I know you are." He raised his eyes to mine, unapologetic and fleetingly angered. "You and I were rungs on a ladder that reached directly to Alice. I haven't figured out why, but I do know I can't protect you and find her. I have to make a choice."

"No, I'm the one with a choice," I replied, tossing the words into the air foolishly.

Edward cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm not afraid."

His brow narrowed. "Of James? Bella, he took Alice. I know she's small, but she's a fighter."

"I'm not afraid of any of it. James, Victoria, death. The only thing I'm afraid of losing is you," I said with conviction.

"What do you know of death?" he asked bitterly, removing his hand from mine in one, fluid motion.

Reaching out to him, I touched his glorious, eternal face. "I know it claimed you and then gave you to me. Without death there is no 'you and me,'" I deduced.

He exhaled deeply, leaping off the bed, and began pacing the room with erratic, inhuman steps. "You're right. Without death there is no 'you and me.' Not now, not in the future, not ever."

He was more adamant now, bolstered by his argument. I felt my own fear trickling through my veins, cold like his touch. "I'm willing to risk it. Whatever it takes. For you. For us."

Edward shook his head slowly, defiantly. "No, you don't mean that."

I rose to my knees and traveled across the bed until I was face to face with him, close enough to smell his familiar scent and feel the common desire to lift my palm to his skin. Hastily, I promised, "Edward, I do. If the time comes and you have to make a choice, understand, my choice has been made. Every time. It comes back to you." I willed him to understand. To hear the sincerity of my words.

Slowly closing his eyes, he pressed his forehead to mine, his oversized hands gripping my hips. Quietly, he whispered, "You can't love me that much."

I wound my arms around his neck, tugging him impossibly closer as I assured. "I love you more than that." He winced at my words and weakly attempted to push me away.

"I don't know if I can inflict this life on someone else. I'm sorry, Bella. It's because I love you so much that I have to do this."

I lifted his face and forced his gaze to mine. His eyes were despondent and cold. His hair was wild, like his moods, and everything about him was painfully, devastatingly beautiful. He was truly the most exquisite creature I'd ever laid eyes on. And until this night, I had held him in my grasp. Finding the last bit of conviction I could manage, I challenged, "If you love me. Show me." I watched in horror as he began to shake his head, which made my pulse race, betraying my emotions. "You can leave me, but not before you show me you love me," I begged, desperation consuming my words and every rational thought.

Comprehending, he insisted. "It's wrong. It's not safe."

"Fuck wrong. Fuck safe." I threw myself at him, gripping the thin, worn material of his shirt. His eyes had grown fierce at my challenge and I felt myself slipping, clinging to him like my hands to the fabric covering his chest. Lacing my fingers in his thick bronze hair, I pulled his head towards me and breathed lowly in his ear, "Fuck. Me."

The deep rumble that echoed through his chest shook me, but I kept my fingers tucked in his hair, refusing to surrender.

Edward's eyes widened at the vulgarity of my words. I felt heat run up my ears, but I refused to back down. I was willing to play dirty, and obviously so was he, I realized, wincing as his hands tightened around my hips, his thumbs digging deeper into my soft flesh.

Fearing I may have pushed him too far, I braved a final attempt. "Love me, like I know you do. I'm a woman and can make my own choices. If you won't consider eternity with me, consider right now."

My words hung in the air, our bodies already connected with fire, warming in the friction between our skin. Despite the conflict that was evident in his eyes and expression, he lowered his face to my neck and inhaled deeply. He spread his nimble fingers across my back, slipping them under the hem of my shirt and caressing the skin there. I shuddered at the sensations of his cool fingertips pressing lightly into my heated flesh. I scraped my teeth down his neck, stopping at his collarbone to suck his flawless skin. He could deny our future, destiny, or fate but he couldn't deny the fact his *body* wanted me. Every part was charged and ready, fueled by the pain and desperation of the night, except his mind. His mind wouldn't let go.

"I love you," I promised, licking his pursed lips once before scooting backwards and inching towards the headboard. He remained rigid for a moment, his eyes closed...struggling. I waited patiently, and with a heavy sigh he relented, following me like I'd hoped, crawling over the rumpled bedding and floating over my legs uncertainly. Reaching my upper body, he hovered, holding his weight from pressing into me.

"I love you," I murmured as he began tentatively blessing my face with butterfly kisses, peppered over every inch of my skin. Craving the feel of him, I pushed my hips upward, rising in the air and seeking him.

I heard and felt the deeper rumble that vibrated in his chest as he let his fingers wander over my threadbare nightshirt. Sinking back into the pillow beneath me, I relaxed and willed him to take me. I cupped his face in my hands and repeated, "I love you," one more time to the man I truly and purely loved.

It was as if a switch suddenly flipped and decision overrode all of his other emotions. His eyes darkened, his jaw locked, and his hands became responsive, eager. I watched as Edward swiftly pulled off his shirt and allowed me to do the same. As we exposed our flesh, we quickly covered one another's bodies with hands and mouths. The air was filled with smacks and wet kisses. Edward allowed the occasional hiss to escape his clenched teeth as he battled his lust.

Rolling us over, I felt the steel hardness of his arousal, pressing forcefully into my body. Breaking away from our kisses he worried aloud, "I don't want to hurt you." I smiled wistfully down at him, believing it

was too late, because he'd already hurt me with his attempt at abandoning *this*. Abandoning me and the love we shared. However, I assumed this was not what he was referring to.

"You won't," I guaranteed, having a blind, yet absolute faith that he wouldn't – not physically.

I reached down and slid my shorts off my legs, straddling him bare, feeling the strain of his length as his body sought to connect to mine. I fumbled with the button of his pants, unsure how to proceed. I hadn't lied earlier. I was all in, but we were close to risking it all right here, right now, and I couldn't be certain if *he* was really, truly ready.

"Ready?" I breathed shakily, distracted by the feeling of his hands as they traced the curves of my breasts. His fingers felt like satin rushing over my skin.

"No," he said, and in a flash he was gone from under me, my heart on the verge of splitting into a million, unrecognizable pieces. But before I could fully process his absence, he returned, sliding under me, his pants removed.

"Ready," he breathed, unaware of my near-meltdown. Then, with a level of speed I was unable to comprehend, Edward wrapped his erection in latex.

"Oh," I choked, my face flushing with humiliation. I raised my eyebrow in approval before running my hand over the covered surface reverently. I immediately regretted that I would never touch him, *there*, skin to skin.

"Tell me, if it's too much," he requested, and flinched as my fingers eagerly molded around his shaft.

I nodded, willing to agree to anything. "You tell *me* if it's too much." Bending to press my lips to his, I crushed my body to his chest, eager and humming with anticipation. "Edward, I love you," I assured him one more time, wanting him to know that no matter what came from this night, I loved him and desired this.

Edward ran his cool hands down the sides of my body, floating over my skin with a delicate and tender touch. When he reached my hips, he lifted me like a feather over his upright erection. Our eyes met and I fell deep into amber, swallowed by the desire and love that they held. Slowly, too slow for me, but just right for him, he lowered me, inch by inch, until he filled the space inside. I closed my eyes, reveling in the connection, adjusting to him being *in* me with deep breaths. He was big and hard –really hard– but he felt like he should: Perfect.

"Okay?" I heard and glanced down, catching the intense gaze of the angel beneath me.

"More than," I confirmed and rocked my hips ever so gently, feeling him inch deeper inside of me.

Edward's hands dropped from my hips and fisted the sheets, tearing them. "You have to do it. I can't judge..." he grunted.

I nodded, and shifted my weight, thrusting my hips into his, slowly, fluidly, while running my nails over his abs. I watched as his tongue darted out of his mouth, and his brow furrowed in concentration. His hand left the bedding, and reached into my hair, pulling out the tie that held it back. Long brown strands spilled over my shoulders, pooling onto his chest when I kissed his lips.

"Oh!" I gasped, when I felt his icy touch ghost over the hot nerves between my legs. My body lurched involuntarily, causing him to slip from me and removing the pressure and friction I'd already begun to crave like a drug. Edward's other hand gripped my shoulder, bringing me down harder, pushing me back into place. He drove himself into me with a solid, breathtaking thrust. I steadied him, guiding his movements with my own while carefully watching his expression, his eyes, the bobbing of his Adam's apple as he swallowed back the venom. His eyes only reflected back love, and his motions...they were worshipful.

His thrusts quickened instinctively, and I closed my eyes, focusing on the feeling of this *man* inside me, on his fingers coaxing me into submission, on relishing the moment I may never have again. Edward's breaths came quick and fast, mimicking his body. I whispered his name, luring him over the edge and quickly realizing I would topple first. My stomach clenched, like a tightly wound thread, which began to unravel, loop by loop. The heat spread, pulsating through my body as I grit my teeth in ecstasy. My nails dug into Edward's granite chest, sweat slippery on my hands.

Abruptly, he emitted a feral sound as he responded to my body tightening around him. My eyes flew open at the noise, and I found him no longer below me, but at my chest, running his tongue from the edge of my nipple and stopping its cold path just below my ear. My heart began pounding, thundering rapidly in my chest as I felt his icy breath caress my neck. Goosebumps erupted over my flesh when the cool air hit the slick, wet surface left by his tongue.

"Stop," I croaked, dazed from the high of my orgasm. When he didn't move I pulled his head by his hair, jerking him so he'd meet my gaze. Without words, I gave him a look, understanding but firm, and pulled him back to me, to the moment we were sharing. His eyes gradually adjusted and returned their focus to mine, to my body. Alarming, his slip hadn't decreased his arousal, but quite the opposite, and I could feel him swelling inside. With a final thrust of his hips, he groaned, releasing everything he had into my willing body, and dropped his head onto my shoulder, burrowing his face in my hair.

Pushing his languid body back on the pillows, I crawled over him, curling up against his side in a ball. He lifted his hand and ran his finger over my chest, resting his palm against the warm spot over my heart. We rested together, the minutes ticking by as my heart slowed, calming from the exhilaration of our lovemaking. I squeezed my eyes shut, hiding from his scrutiny and whatever expression his face held. I couldn't bear to look at him and was too afraid to speak.

He'd done what I asked. He'd proved his love to me in the most intimate, difficult way. And now it was time for me to face *my* fears.

Sitting up, I leaned over him, placing my lips on his chest and kissed him over the place his heart should beat. I gathered my courage one, final time. Running my fingers over his sharp jaw, I whispered gratefully, "Thank you," before sliding my body to the edge of the bed. He'd fulfilled my request, and I could now do the same for him. But instead of letting him leave me, I was prepared to walk first, before I fell on my knees and begged him for mercy.

A thick, pathetic sob built in my throat and stole my breaths, trapping them in my chest. I glanced around the room, searching the space for my clothes and the fastest possible route of escape. Before I could fully rise from the bed, I felt it give beneath me, bouncing me upward slightly. Suddenly, Edward was no longer lying by my side, but kneeling on the ground, his face buried in the soft flesh of my belly.

"Don't," he croaked, a muffled plea against my skin.

"I have to," I replied in a strangled whisper, blinking back the tears. "I promised." I fisted my hands in his hair as he wrapped his arms around my thighs, anchoring us to one another.

"It's too late," he responded, tightening his grip on my legs painfully.

I shook my head, overwhelmed by what I was going to do. "Just let me go, Edward."

"I can't. Not now. Not ever."

My heart, which had stopped beating moments before, suddenly flickered to life at the unwavering tone with which he promised. "Never?" I ventured, sitting back on the bed, and feeling Edward rest his head on my lap.

"I thought I knew," he whispered, his eyes wide and full of wonder. "I thought I had an idea of love, and connection. I see it in the minds of those around me everyday." His hair poked me in the stomach, tickling



as he spoke. "I'd even said the words, spoken them in my mind, professed them to my family, but now, after that, I know."

Confused by his ramblings and intrigued by his words, I questioned aloud, "What do you mean?"

Edward lifted his head and blessed me by meeting my confused, yet hopeful eyes, with his determined, "You're mine, Isabella Swan, and nothing can tear me away from you."



## Chapter Twenty-Six

EPOV

I brushed my hands over the darkened purple spots on Bella's hips.

Bruises.

One on each side, in the shape of my thumb. Perfect, oval blemishes documenting my fingers' trespass on her body. I stared at the dots and let the wave of conflicting emotions run through me as I tentatively touched my cool fingers to the heated contusion. Her skin was tender and inflamed-damaged by my eagerness-tarnished by my lust and lack of control. I stared at them, unblinking, as anger flashed through me, followed by disgust for harming her, even in the smallest way. Inexplicably, in my chest, a greater, more disturbing feeling churned. Pride. I'd marked her as my own. Physically, emotionally, and connectively. I'd made her my mate. I'd *mated* with her. The thought made my stomach twist with happiness.

The flip side of my emotions was what Bella had done to me. She hadn't physically left her mark on me, but she branded my heart and whatever remnants of my soul she could find. She called my bluff, stood her ground, whispered dirty words to me and lured me into her possession. For everything I had done to her, she gave back to me, in her own, specific, heartfelt way.

I propped my elbow on the bed, and rested my cheek in my palm so I could see her better. Bella was stretched out on the bed, one elbow bent as her hand buried behind her head. She slept heavily, her even breaths signaling the deepness of her slumber. Her hair, a tangled mess, fanned across the pillow like a chaotic halo. I ran my fingers, gently, down her side, porcelain white, satin smooth, and stopped again at the bruises just above the elastic of her underwear. Ignoring the bruises, I allowed my eyes to travel back up her body and found a wayward strand of Bella's hair, plastered to her arm, and picked it up. In less time than it would take to blink, I counted the pieces of hair in my hand. Eighty-four. I was obsessed with knowing every detail of this woman who claimed my heart. As she laid, unaware, I mapped her entire body, and with my eyes closed I challenged myself to place each freckle or mole or scar. I paused and listened. Sixty-eight. The average beat of her resting heart, per minute. Forty-six. The number of eyelashes on her left eye. Fifty-two, the number on her right. I could tell Bella every single, minute detail about her body but I wasn't convinced I could protect her from James.

She shifted in the bed, her toes blindly seeking my legs, and relaxed on contact. Her hand lay open between us and I pushed my nose to it, breathing in the taste of her skin. I thought about those hands, rushing over my body, slick with her sweat. Her sharp, polished nails scratching down my skin, wanting me to *feel* her. Bella never had to fear my granite skin was unfeeling. It was the opposite; my skin was sensitive to her touch. Every caress, every accidental touch, shot straight through my body like a strike of lightning.

Now, as she slept, unhindered by dreams, her face was smooth, the lines that creased her forehead in fear during our argument were invisible. It was hard to picture this girl, peaceful and serene, as the same from last night. When we made love she'd commanded me, owned me, took me to the edge, *both edges*, and yanked me back from one, only to shove me willingly over the other.

I thought about that moment, when we crossed the final line, when she accepted me in her body, working with me, carefully, reverently. These thoughts now made me eager... aroused, but I sighed, and pushed the urges aside, as I'm disciplined to do, and waited quietly by her side for her to wake. Because once she did, this new day would begin. When we began looking for Alice. When we hunted James to the death. And I had to figure out how to keep my *mate* safe in the building storm.

Xxx

Emmett was sitting at my desk, hovering over my computer, jabbing his enormous fingers at the keyboard, trying to make it do something he didn't now how to make it do. Rosalie and Bella were downstairs talking, I surmised, from the voices that carried from below. I closed my mind of them, allowing them privacy. Emmett and I were trying to research and do what we could, while we rode out the good weather and waited for nightfall.

"Stop. You're going to break it." I told him. I had a stack of newspapers I was preparing to spread out and read. I was looking for something to go on. *Anything*.

"Jasper knows how to do all of this." He muttered, stabbing his thick forefinger at the return key, as if that would make it work. It was the equivalent of hitting the side of a television. Useless.

"He does. But he can't be here now and you know it." I retorted, feeling guilty. Jasper couldn't be here because of me. And Bella.

Emmett's face was grim, but there was an internal struggle going on in his mind. He knew about us-what we had done. I'd read it in his mind the moment he walked in the house. Rosalie too. They knew we had been together, intimately, and they both knew me well enough to understand the result of the situation.

*Only you would decide to consummate a relationship in the middle of a war...* he thought as he strolled into the room. His thoughts were accusatory, irritable, as they should have been. Bella and I had chosen a selfish time to make our declarations.

I wanted to be angry, roll my eyes and tell him to shut up, but he was exactly right. Only I would do something so moronic.

*Was it worth it?* He asked, from behind the desk, unable to keep it in any longer.

I nodded curtly. A lump formed in my throat at the thought of being with Bella. On Bella. Inside Bella.

*Was it difficult? You know...*

I swallowed the lump, so I could speak. "I almost killed her." I confessed, my eyes locking with his, daring him to admonish me. He never would.

"Almost?" He questioned verbally. His eyes were wide, concerned but interested.

"I did. It was just so intense. And her emotions were so high. The blood pumping through her body-it overwhelmed me. You can't imagine." I said honestly.

He shook his head and grimaced, "No. I can't. Thank God." He paused for a minute, his mind deciding where to go next. "How did you stop? What made you stop?"

I ran my hand over the back of my head, feeling the spot where she had yanked me back into submission. "She stopped me. Just like you said, she's stronger than I thought."

We stood quietly for a minute, Emmett thinking about Bella, how brave and powerful she was even though she was human and fragile. An enigma. That is what Bella was to all of us.

I dropped the pile of newspapers on the ground and began sorting them, while Emmett returned to assaulting my keyboard. His mind was rumbling with thoughts. They were erratic and blurry. Images of Alice and the information we had jumbled together even though he was struggling to make sense. I tried my best to ignore him and focus on the task before me.

I heard his chair squeak as he pushed his large frame into the leather. "Edward, how were we so wrong about this? How was this about Alice when we thought it was about you or Bella?" He wondered, picking up the stapler I had on the desk and tossing it into the air, absently.

I was on the ground, kneeling, flipping through the papers. "You mean, how was *I* so wrong about this?" I corrected. "I have no idea. It seemed I was the target all along, and Bella by association."

Emmett rolled his eyes at my, *typical*, self-hatred. Which caused him to sigh in irritation. "Okay, let's back up. Tell me again exactly what happened when you and James fought."

I sat on the floor and began to recount the events of the night at the paper mill. We had been over it countless times in the last couple months, but I suppose we were looking at it from a different angle now. I described the mill and the damp, marshy air that filled the night. I told him about the security guard, how his fingers fumbled uselessly with his gun and how we were too late. I reminded him of Laurent and the newborn Riley, who tore his flesh to shreds, leaving him oozing blood on the cement. I left out no detail.

Emmett's eyes grew wide with my retelling, like a child listening to an adventure story and as I illustrated the fight between Jasper and Riley I saw the images form in his own mind. "Jasper wanted Riley alone so he ran off, luring him away from the rest of us, which worked easily on his immature mind. Alice lingered-" I began and stopped cold, frozen as my efforts to push my memory deeper revealed. "Emmett, wait." I breathed, "Before Alice followed Jasper I noticed James was... watching Alice. In fact, looking back, he sort of... licked his lips and for the briefest moment he *leered* at her." I finished in equal parts disgust, incredulity, and confusion.

I glanced at Emmett and his face became suddenly animated, "He looked her? Like he knew her?"

"Like he *wanted* her." I clarified, reeling from the thought. He'd shown me his desire and I'd missed it. I wanted to punch the wall.

"Then what happened?" he asked, pulling me away from my anger. He looked eager, as though he didn't already know, word for word, what was coming.

"He taunted me, and the family. He said he had been watching me. Us. He disapproved of our lifestyle choices, the way we mingle with humans and helped them. He seemed especially disgusted with me and Carlisle, referring to him as a masochist." I conveyed, balling my fists as my emotions boiled just thinking about it. I wished I'd done more than rip his arm off that day. My failure was now his gain.

"Did he say anything else about Alice?" Emmett prompted, trying to keep me focused.

"Just that he had been tracking me for some time and that he knew all about my 'work'. He said, '*Oh yes, I know all about your family. Some of them more than others in fact.*' And he raised one of his disgusting eyebrows at me tauntingly and sent an image of a dark room, with rows of beds against the walls." I kicked the edge of the desk, jarring the contents on top. "But the image held no connection for me. I still have no idea what it means." I muttered, angrily.

"He was giving you clues all along." Emmett declared. "He basically told you he knew Alice from before. We just need to figure out how and where."

I considered this as a possibility. "You may be right. But what about me and Bella? There has to be some kind of correlation. Include the Quileute's death, and it all stacks back to me. Before we fought he told me clearly, *'All of this, the murders, the kidnappings, it has all been to bring you to me. All of these deaths were to lure you into my game. To teach you a lesson about playing God.'*

"Sounds to me like he has an inferiority complex." He said with a pained grin. "It's almost like someone pissed him off, and he couldn't find them, so instead he is placing all his anger on you. On the 'Mythological Vigilante Vampire,' and everything you stand for-which happens to be *exactly* what he opposes.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose in utter frustration. "This guy is pulling a major mindfuck on me and it's completely working. There has to be something else. Something we're missing." I said. I was completely exasperated. I knew he had been playing with me all along but this was too much. It had been there all along. There was probably more and I was too blind to see it. He was good. I just hoped in the end he wasn't better than me.

Emmett sat forward, placing his hands on the table and stood up excited for the first time by the new lead. With confidence he declared, "If it's here we'll find it. Then we will kick his ass and get our girl back."

Xxx

BPOV

Rosalie and I sat across from one another at the kitchen table. Edward's kitchen table. *Our kitchen table?* I had a cup of tea in front of me, which I used in an attempt to make my hands less idle. We sat awkwardly, while Emmett and Edward worked upstairs, plotting and planning their next move. As though the gods were mocking the Cullens, the day broke blue skied and sunny. Perfect for humans. Not so much for vampires needing to find a loved one. They were trapped in the house until night fall, so the boys set up shop in Edward's office. Jasper was in Forks with Carlisle and Esme. Everyone was completely frustrated with the lack of leads.

Then there was the situation with me and Edward. We were inappropriately giddy for the circumstances. When Emmett and Rosalie arrived we kept our distance but the tension in the air was thick. We were each stressed and anxious about Alice but after last night, of course, Edward and I were unable to keep our hands away from one another. I finally left the room to research on my own at my desk. Rosalie followed soon after and I suspected Edward sent her down here to keep me company, which really wasn't necessary. I planned on reminding him of this later, when we were alone.

I was really bad at small talk. Especially with a model-like, blonde goddess that made me feel inferior and boring. *I suppose when telling your vampire boyfriend you wanted him for eternity this included his family,* I thought bitterly.

"Have you heard from Carlisle?" I asked, perfectly aware that she had not.

"No." she responded coolly. Not rudely, just coolly.

I opened my mouth to say something inane about the weather when Rosalie cut me off abruptly, "You and Edward slept together."

It wasn't a question.

I'm quite sure my mouth hung in the air, while hers was pressed into a thin, smug line, her perfect, flaxen hair, waved over her shoulders. She arched an eyebrow and waited.

"Ummm...I'm not sure..." I mumbled, groping for words, "....private...between us..." God. If I could have vampire speed right now I would use it to run from the room and hide.

Rosalie reached across the table and rested her hand on mine. In a softer voice she said, "Its okay, Bella. You need to understand though, there is no such thing as 'private' in this family."

I laughed a little too loud at this, understanding for the first time Edward's desire to move away from his wonderful, unique and very, overbearing family. I felt the crease form between my eyes. "Did he tell you? You don't have some super ability he failed to mention do you?"

She laughed this time, her yellow eyes dancing a little, "No. No 'super abilities', other than the vampire ones. Not to be too graphic but I can smell him on you."

"Oh," I said and slowly pushed my chair back, walking to the refrigerator for something, anything, to do except look her in the face. I opened the door and pushed my head inside, letting the air cool my warmed face. I stood up and turned. "God...really?" I asked.

She nodded from the table, thankfully not moving closer. I watched her nose flare lightly and her big, gold eyes narrowed. "You're bruised. Are you okay?"

My hand reflexively went to my hip, touching the spot I knew was underneath my clothing. Edward pointed it out to me the minute I woke up, apologetic, pressing his lips to it like a cold compress. I'd lifted his head and told him, not to worry, it was a learning curve and we had plenty of time to make sure it never happened again. I buried my face in his chest and I pretended I hadn't seen the look in his eyes. The one saying we didn't have time. The one that said he loved me. The one that worried about Alice.

"No, it's not so bad," and for some reason I lifted my shirt and pulled down my jeans to show her the dark purple blemish. She nodded again, confirming that she saw it and I returned to the refrigerator grabbing a cup of yogurt, then a spoon from a drawer before sitting back down.

She watched me as I peeled off the foil lid and stirred the contents inside, mixing it up, slowly. "Are you aware of what this means to him?" She asked, in a surprisingly kind voice.

I felt tears spring to my eyes, because I *did* know what this meant to him. And to myself. "I do. I'm not sure what you know about me Rosalie, but I love Edward."

"I can tell. Honestly, anyone who can put up with my insufferable brother must love him." She laughed. "But, I can tell this time he loves you in return. And for our kind, for Edward, this level of intimacy has deeper meaning."

I dropped my eyes, blinking back the moisture before I completely lost it. In a strangled voice I whispered, "I'm his mate."

Peeking sideways I saw her eyes widen at my choice of words. She sat for a moment while I distracted myself from the discomfort of this conversation by shoving heaping spoonfuls of the tart yogurt in my mouth. Her hands were flat on the table and she lightly tapped her surprisingly, short, but perfect nails on the table. "Are you prepared for that, for what it could mean?"

I sighed and licked the remaining yogurt off my spoon and took it over to the sink, washed it thoroughly, and returned it to the drawer. "Rosalie, I don't exactly know what you want but yes, I'm prepared. I love him. I willingly *mated*, as you call it, with him. I'm ready to take this to the next level, if and when, it is necessary."

"You're prepared to die." She said bluntly.

I had to give it to her. No beating around the bush. I decided to do the same. "I've been prepared to die since the first night I ran into Victoria. Do I want to? No, not yet. I need more time. I want to see my friends and go back to school. I want to eat Thai food, and sleep, and have sex with my boyfriend and fall asleep in his arms." The tears I'd held back before dripped down my face, "I need to see my mom, hug my dad, and go to my class reunions. There are so many things I want to do in this life. But." And I said the word with conviction, "Above all of those things I want Edward. And if it comes down to it I choose him over every other option. I can't go back." I said this with my head up, my eyes locked on her crystal clear gold ones, pushing every word across my tongue with force. I hated justifying myself to her or anyone else.

Rosalie watched my tirade with definite interest. I'd surprised her I think. I'm sure most people were intimidated by her and I was too, but we didn't have the luxury anymore to feel one another out the way people do in 'normal relationships. She leaned back in her chair, and stretched a little, her neck long and regal. "I envy you." She said finally.

Stunned, I snapped my eyes to hers, looking for humor in her expression. There was none. "Excuse me?"

"I do" she answered, the sincerity evident in her voice. "I didn't have a choice. Nor did Edward or the rest of us. I can't imagine being in your position."

I had no response. I couldn't comprehend her revelation. I wondered aloud, "Would you do it again, if you had the opportunity?"

She seemed to consider my words seriously before answering. "Back then? No. I never would have chosen this life. But now? Give up what I have? I couldn't leave Emmett. Ever." Her voice was firm, determined, but I heard the smallest hint of nostalgia in her words.

I nodded and realized we now sat with a level of ease. Knowing better where the other stood on certain matters. It would be presumptuous to say I could understand lifetime of marriage, but who could at the beginning of a relationship. Did time make one relationship more important than the other?

"You're lucky to have Emmett. He's really great." I said, attempting to move past the heaviness of our conversation.

She smiled, "He is. And well, Edward's kind of an ass but honestly, if you make him happy after all this time, who am I to interfere?"

I laughed because it was true, all of it. Edward was kind of an ass, but he made me happy and thinking of our advancements last night I *knew* I made him happy, even through the anger and fear and desperation. "Rosalie," I said, giving her a rueful grin, "I think, if we make it through this 'alive', you and I will be friends."

Xxx

Later, Rosalie and I climbed the back stairs, and found the boys at the computer. Edward gave me a tense grin as we entered and hopped up to greet me with a kiss at the door. "I missed you," he whispered. It was gruff and I could feel the distress as it gripped his body. His hair was matted from constantly touching it and he had black newsprint ink on the bridge of his nose. The situation was taking its toll. I wanted to smile on his lips and bury myself in him to take away our mutual pain, but it wasn't right. Instead, he hugged me a little longer and I felt his hand slip down the edge of my pants, brushing his fingers coolly against the softness of my bruise.

I refused to let him dwell on my injury and ignored his apologetic touch. Instead, I asked, "Any progress?" loud enough to include Emmett in the conversation.

Emmett was sitting behind the desk, in Edward's chair, while Rosalie had positioned herself in one of the leather chairs across from him. He looked tired, and strained. His normal, bigger than life persona had vanished, over taken by the serious version of Emmett in front of me. "Waiting for the blasted sun to go down. Looking for a direction to go on. We have nothing more than yesterday." He declared with darkened eyes. I'd never seen Emmett upset. He turned from the sweet, goofy, big brother to a scary giant quickly. I felt tiny and weak in his presence. Like he could snap me with a twist of his wrist, which I assumed he could.

Realizing how angry he'd become he relaxed a little and motioned me to the desk. I walked over to see what he was working on. "We're just going over what happened over the last couple of months with James. Trying to figure out what we missed."

"What's that?" I asked, and leaned over the desk, pointing to a plastic bag with several pieces of jewelry on it.

I felt Edward's body press against mine from behind, his hands reaching around me for the bag. "James left these on your door awhile back. Alice and I got to it before you did." I could hear the anger in his voice. He pulled out a long chain with a dangling cross, "This belonged to Bree. She was wearing it in the missing posters."

I reached out and allowed him to let the chain pool in my hand. "Oh." I said, remembering Bree's angry, red eyes just before Edward destroyed her. I stifled a shudder at the memory. I tapped my finger to the other piece of jewelry in the bag. "Who does that belong to?"

Edward cocked his head questioningly, and glanced at Emmett across the desk. "Bella," Emmett said softly, "We thought it belonged to you. It has a 'B' inscribed on it."

I shook my head and took the object, a brooch out of Edward's still hand. "No. It isn't mine. It's beautiful though."

"It isn't yours? Are you sure? I didn't want to concern you and had planned on putting it back in your room before you noticed. It slipped my mind with everything going on." Edward confessed.

Across the room I heard Rosalie sigh, "Of course she's sure. The question is-if it isn't hers, who does it belong to then?"

Edward walked around the desk and began pressing keys on the computer. He trailed his finger down the monitor, and Emmett's eyes rapidly followed his movements. "No one reported a piece of missing jewelry like this. It's so unusual I'm sure someone would have noticed and informed the police."

I turned the piece over in my hand, looking at the intricate craftsmanship. "Look here, under the pin, there's a mark." It was dulled, age having worn it down, and the pin was somewhat tarnished. I handed it over to Edward, hoping he could see it better with his superior eyesight.

"It looks like an H, etched into the silver." He sighed, and tossed the brooch to Emmett who flipped it over to look at the back.

"It's a needle in a haystack but," he paused, running his thumbnail over the marking, "at least we have a needle. It's better than nothing."

We all agreed and discussed how best find the jeweler who created the brooch. Rosalie said she had some experience tracing antiques, since she and Esme had researched some of their personal belongings in the past. "Edward, let me take the brooch downstairs to Bella's desk. I may be able to find something." She informed him, snatching the pin out of his hands and giving Emmett a fast glance which clearly was an invitation to join her.

"Later," Emmett declared and he was at the door in a second, lifting Rosalie by the waist as he pushed her into the hallway.

Edward followed Emmett's example and moved quickly around the desk, picking me up and laying us down on the couch. He moved us so fast my head felt dizzy. I pushed my back against the side of the seat and spread my legs, inviting Edward to rest his head on my stomach. He settled in easily, reaching back for my hand, which I gave to him, while my other buried itself in his messy hair.

"Are you worried?" I asked him, trying to pull him away from his brooding. Although his hands had been connected to me every time we were near one another, his eyes had been distant, brooding. Focused on Alice and James.

He sighed and closed his eyes, as though he was afraid to admit it. I continued to stroke his hair, and eventually he confessed, "Yes. Terrified."

My heart broke a little for this strong, powerful, incredible man lying across my body. He loved his sister so. I felt his thumb move slowly across my wrist as he took another deep breath. "Tell me about her. Alice. Tell me something I don't know."

"Hmmm..." he murmured, obviously thinking. "She's smart. And caring. More human than the rest of us put together."

I laughed and tugged his hair, "Something I *don't* know."

He looked up at me and said, "When Alice woke up from her transformation she had a vision of Jasper. She traveled on instinct and found him, on her own. She's very strong."

I nodded, understanding his meaning. Alice wouldn't give up easily. "Where was she before that?"

Edward's voice was thick, filled with sorrow for his missing sister. "We're not sure, she doesn't remember, not really. Apparently after she was changed she woke up alone, but her visions gave her some insight. She saw us, the family, and she saw Jasper. It was all she needed."

He twisted and pushed his ear to my chest, resting it directly above my heart. His long arms wrapped around my body, hugging me tightly. "So she woke up from her transformation, which you said takes around three days. Had a vision and found Jasper?"

He nodded into my chest. "Yes."

I was confused. Something about this didn't make sense. "I don't understand. Where did she wake up?"

"It's murky in her mind, although she met Jasper in Philadelphia, she was traveling north. And all those years ago, she had the hint of a southern accent." He said, shrugging, nuzzling his nose in my shirt. "She was disoriented for some reason. Carlisle thinks it was the visions."

We sat quietly for a while. I was consumed by Alice, her history and her current whereabouts. Edward was trying to distract himself with me because there was little he could do at the moment. He stroked my skin, in a comfortable, non-sexual way. The way two people act once they surpass a level of intimacy.

I absently pulled and twisted Edward's thick hair in my fingers. I looked across his room, still fascinated by his history, the objects he chose to carry with him towards the future. I wondered if it was me what would I choose take to remember my past life. Diplomas? Video tape of my third grade dance recital? Journals and pictures? Nothing seemed important enough but at the same time everything held meaning. I had no idea how I would choose. I scanned the room, and my eyes landed on his shelves. I lingered over the baseball we'd discussed and then I saw the photo of Edward and his father. His hair was similar, thick and a little unruly but not as long. Otherwise he looked exactly the same. "Why is your hair so long?" I asked him, breaking the quiet.

"What?" he asked, cracking his right eye, the other still firmly placed on my chest.

I sighed and pointed across the room. "In that picture with your father, your hair is shorter. Why is it so much longer now? I thought hair didn't continue to grow once you transformed."

He rolled over, his back to my stomach, "Oh. Before Carlisle changed me I was sick for quite a while. It grew out in the hospital and when I woke up it was like this. I can't get it to do anything else." He explained, swiping a hand through it, anxiously, trying to make it conform.

I considered this for a moment, my eyes shifting from the photograph to the man in front of me. "So it's the same for everyone else? Their hair is similar to the style they had when they changed?"

"Yes, this is why Jasper's is so long, men used to tie it back. Rosalie and Esme have long hair, which they used to wear up, but trends have changed, and it's more acceptable for them to wear it down." Again he nervously ran his fingers in his hair, adjusting it.



"Stop." I commanded, pushing his hand out of his hair and rubbing it with my own to make it wild. "I like it this way. It suits you."

Growling, he flipped us so I was straddling his hips. I raised an eyebrow and smiled, proud I'd managed to distract him for a minute. He pulled my face to his and softly plucked at my lips. "Why are you talking about hair?" he asked curiously, brushing several stray pieces of my own behind my ear.

I thought of Alice and her short, spiky hair. "Was Alice a flapper?" I mused.

Edward gave me the strangest look. "I doubt it. It wasn't really that common. Why?"

"Why is her hair so short? It wasn't fashionable really, to have it cut so short, at the time, right?" I wondered aloud, thinking of Rosalie's long hair.

"I never really thought about it. Alice was always so different, unique, it just fit her personality." He said thoughtfully, rubbing his thumb under his lip in concentration.

"True." I agreed.

Edward pulled away from me and sat up, pulling my legs into his lap. Surprisingly, he continued to talk about Alice's hair. "Her hair never really fit with the styles of that time period, anyway. Even women with short hair had it cut longer than hers and usually wore it curly or very straight. Even when we first met her hair was spiky and wild."

"They're not 'curls', they were called 'finger waves'," Rosalie shouted from down the stairs.

"She can hear us?" I whispered. He nodded a grimace on his face. "Can you hear her?"

Edward smirked, "Yes, plus, I can read her mind. She thinks I'm an idiot because I don't know the difference between a 'curl' and a 'finger wave' or a 'bob' or something."

The next thing I knew Rosalie was in the doorway, shooting daggers at Edward. She dropped her body back in the chair she'd occupied earlier. "If Edward had ever paid *any* attention to me or Alice over the years he would have known she was very jealous of my hair."

Rolling his eyes at his sister, he said, "No one is talking about you."

I tilted my head in his direction and made a face for him to stop, "She never wanted short hair?" I asked, intrigued by the information.

"No. Never. Not since I've known her." Rosalie confirmed, tossing her thick, shiny hair over her shoulder to punctuate how glorious her hair was.

I swung my legs over the edge of the couch and leaned closer to Rosalie, "Did your preferences change when you transformed? Like your favorite color...?" I rambled, completely intrigued.

She shook her head and I glanced over at Edward who answered, "No, they stay the same. Blue."

"Red." She said at the same moment.

"So why would Alice have short hair like that if it wasn't fashionable or something she liked?" I prodded, refusing to let it go.

"She had to." Edward said, finally, joining me in my theorizing. "She could have been forced to."

"Maybe she was sick like you?" I offered, feeling a tiny bit of hope in this conversation. If anything it was something new, something to research. *That* we could do.

He shook his head, "They didn't cut mine. Regular sickness wasn't a reason to cut a person's hair. And the other reasons, like lice, infection, or injury weren't enough to kill you."

I watched as he and Rosalie carried on some kind of silent conversation. It was a series of quick nods, and eye rolls, but she must have said something that impressed Edward because he finally spoke aloud. "Do you think?" he asked.

"It's possible Edward. In this life she's psychic. In that one..." she trailed off.

I jumped in, not understanding, "In that life what? What was she?"

Edward looked at me with cautious eyes, "Insane."

Rosalie chimed in, "Disturbed."

"Unacceptable." He retorted, using air quotes as he spoke.

"Certifiable." She added, pain crossing her face.

"She would have been institutionalized." Edward claimed and Rosalie nodded in agreement.

And like that, Edward was gone, off the couch and out the door. I never even saw him leave, although Rosalie seemed to know what was going on. "He's in the library," she explained, after seeing my bewildered expression. She cocked her ear upwards and continued, "Getting a book."

"Okay," I said, having no idea how to respond, but before I could Edward was back in the room, a large, leather bound book in his hands. Emmett was trailing behind with a totally confused look on his face.

"What's he doing?" he asked looking between me and Rosalie.

"I have no idea." I answered truthfully.

Edward sat on the couch with the book open on his lap, flipping through pages until he abruptly stopped. His long, artistic fingers, scrolled down the page, pausing for a moment here or there when he saw something interesting. It was a medical journal, old, it appeared, since there were no photographs just illustrations and even I could smell the years of dust rolling off the pages. I leaned closer to see what was on the page and I found it was full of medical jargon and beautiful illustrations. In the middle of the page was a graphic design of a person, with shorn hair. There were intricate diagrams of the body, brain and tools used. It looked archaic. Barbaric and terrifying.

Edward stopped and handed the book to Rosalie. Emmett moved closer to read the information on the page and he looked over at Edward and blinked twice before saying, cryptically, "The beds."

Edward reached for my hand across the space in the couch, and wove his hard, cool fingers through mine. The room was silent other than the beating of my human heart, and I waited to hear exactly what was going on. Beds? Madness? I was three steps behind the mental speed of the vampires in the room.

Brushing his thumb across my hand, Edward looked at Emmett and Rosalie and announced, "We have to call Carlisle."



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

EPOV

I glanced down at our hands, fingers entwined and resting on her thigh. My other hand was on the steering wheel, pointing the Volvo west, as we headed to Forks. We were headed towards my family and home.

Bella squeezed our hands and caught my eye, giving me a sympathetic smile. I didn't want her sympathy. I didn't want the sadness that hinted in the lines near her eyes. I wanted happiness and all the feelings of first love I'd seen in movies and read in books. Instead she picked me and the baggage that came from a century of existence.

"You really think Alice was in a mental hospital?" she asked, her soft voice filling the space in the car.

I nodded. "Yes, it makes sense. I told you how in life we may have certain attributes. Like, I always had a good read on people, very intuitive of their thoughts and ideas. When I changed this trait manifested into mind reading. Same with Jasper and his ability to manipulate people's emotions."

"And Alice? You think she had visions before?" she reasoned. I watched her twist in her seat, turning towards me in interest. Bella never as much as flinched during these conversations. She acted as though mindreading and psychic abilities were common.

"This is what I spoke to Carlisle about. He seems to think that it is very likely that pre-transformation, Alice experienced visions or even hallucinations. If this is true, then depending on her family's status economically she very well may have been institutionalized for treatment." I tightened my grip on her hand and continued, "There were few options back then for people suffering. Medications were limited and people tended to hide their problems."

"Wow. I guess it does kind of fit. I can't imagine her level of energy or focus on a normal human." She replied, and pulled her phone out of her pocket, checking messages. I looked at my Bella sitting next to me in the car, absorbing all this information. She weathered it well, but I could only imagine how hard it would be to swallow this information.

I moved my hand from hers and smoothed it over her hair. I knew she was tired. I could see the faint purplish tint under her eyes, and she occasionally stifled a yawn. "We have about an hour before we get to the house, why don't you take a nap?" I suggested lightly.

She smiled lazily in my direction, a light pink tint covering her face. "I think I will. Once we get to the house I have some work to do," she said. Her eyes were deep and brown, liquid pools I wanted to dive into head first.

Bella settled into her seat, taking my jacket out of the back and folding it into a pillow to rest her head on. Gracing me with one more smile, she closed her eyes and leaned into the window, leaving me with the familiar beat of her heart and her slow steady breaths.

These were the sounds of her humanity. Her life. Sounds she was willing to give away in an instant for me. The idea frightened me, but it also filled me with euphoria. There was no way she was ready to make a decision about something like this. Something in me felt compelled to keep her safe; I wasn't sure I could ever be responsible for her death, transformation or not. But then again, I wanted her with me, forever, and even though I didn't care if it was in human form or not, the events that led us to this moment were forcing me to realize once again how unsafe it was for her to be around me and my family.

Bella mumbled in her sleep, the words, 'crazy' whispering off her lips. Her nose crinkled at the word and she pushed her face farther into the jacket. I grimaced towards the dark road ahead and reaffirmed to myself that I wouldn't allow this decision to be made in haste or under pressure. Bella would be able to make the choice none of us were offered. I would get us through this storm. Alice would come home. Bella would remain unscathed, and I would work towards being content. All possible, I scoffed, my thoughts laced with reservation, when you lived the last twenty years as a superhero.

I placed a hand on the knob between the seats and shifted. I heard the almost silent clink of the levers as the car switched gears and I pushed my foot against the gas, speeding away from Seattle towards the coast.

Xxx

Carlisle and I sat across from one another in his office as we had done many times before. Also, like before, we were at an impasse. And like those other times, Esme would have to sand down the floors from the impression my boots were making in the hardwoods due to my refusal to change my opinion.

"No." I said curtly, while internally berating myself for being an ass to Carlisle, who was trying to do what he thought was right.

*Edward, be reasonable*, he thought.

"It's not acceptable. I'm not going to back off so you can stop trying." I told him, prepared to leave the house if he continued to push. I saw a similar spark of indignation flare in his eyes as he mentally prepared his argument.

"We need you out there, working with us. You are the one he has contacted and has a vendetta against. You've fought him and Victoria before. Plus you can read his thoughts. You're our best chance in finding her and you know it." He begged. I looked at the man across the desk, who was the closest thing I would ever have for a father, and tried to muster the nerve to go against his wishes. We'd argued in the past over many things. Politics, religion, history. Never had he begged me before to acquiesce to his wishes, even when I moved out.

I pushed back in my seat and groaned, running my hands through my hair, feeling sick and out of control. "Fine. But how will we protect her?" I asked, meeting his eye. It was compassionate but resolved. This argument would have to be resolved before I took one step out of the house. "Jasper can't do it and neither can Emmett or you and if I'm gone also how do we keep her safe?"

He didn't speak but showed me an image that was neither appropriate nor possible. I jumped from my seat and slammed my hands on his desk, causing it to tremble underneath the force. "Absolutely not." I declared, feeling foolish for even trusting anyone else with Bella's safety. Even Carlisle.

"Honestly Edward, he is a better choice than even you are." He said calmly, his eyebrow lifted as his warm gold eyes flicked towards my hands damaging the top of his desk. He was always calm and normally it was a gauge for me, a way to measure my own emotions but not tonight. I was boiling and temperamental, close to irrational at this point about the entire subject, but this was not an option.

"The alpha. You want me to leave her here with the dog?" I spat. He had lost his mind.

"Just hear me out. Jacob is very in control of his transformations. He communicates mentally with the pack, he will be able to monitor the whole group while here, guarding Bella. Plus, James and Victoria don't have a vendetta against him. If they happen to show they won't be prepared to play games with him." He said all this slowly, as though I wouldn't understand the words if he spoke them faster. "Plus, it's kind of his duty to protect humans from vampires. It's in his nature." Making the point that even if I wanted it to be, the fact I hunted my own kind was positively *against* our nature, which seems to be exactly what brought us to James' attention in the first place.

"No. Go on your own." I argued, "You don't need me-she does."

*This is about Alice and your family. She needs you. Jasper needs you...*

Carlisle's voice rang out, agitated like I hadn't heard before. "Stop being self absorbed. You've spent too much time working alone and this situation is not about you. In fact, you focused so much on how this was about you that you missed the clues he was giving you all along! James has assaulted our entire family, not just you. We're going to do this together and part of that is trusting the wolf pack and understanding Bella will be fine."

I stared at his golden eyes, stubbornly honest and compassionate at all times. He'd just called me self absorbed and in many ways it was true. I knew he was trying to do what was best. And I also knew he

would never endanger Bella, but it was impossible for me to let her go. She was my mate; she owned a piece of my soul. I wasn't sure if I could do it.

Sighing heavily, I eyed Carlisle's eternally optimistic face warily. "I'll consider it when it's time to go." I said, refusing to concede completely.

*Edward...*

Still leaning over the desk I shook my head furiously. "You're asking too much Carlisle." I opened my mouth to argue further but instead I confessed, "She's all I have."

*She's not...but she is important and I assure you I would never jeopardize her in any way...*

Realizing my aggressive position, I removed my hands from his desk and took a step before sitting in my chair. I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose with my fingers. "Where are the dogs now?"

*On their way, Jacob can stay here with one other and the rest can travel with us to canvas the area.*

"When do we expect Jasper and Emmett back?" I asked, distracting myself with the details of the moment.

"Soon. They've been gone since Emmett returned from your place," he replied. They were hunting, building strength for the night, and hopefully allowing Jasper an outlet for some of his anxiety.

I pushed my hair back and leaned my elbows on the arms of the chair, trying to relax and push the thoughts of Bella being protected by the wolf out of my mind for the moment. "How is he holding up?" I asked, referring to Jasper.

"Not great. He's an emotional wreck, as you can imagine, and he is having a hard time understanding how James was targeting Alice all along." He confessed.

I felt a stab of guilt at these words. "We all do. But the concept that Alice was institutionalized is intriguing at the least. It explains her memory loss and lack of knowledge of her prior life. And the beds...lined up in a row, the dark room. He was there, he knew her." I thought of James' cryptic admissions, his leering smile- he knew Alice before and somehow had tracked her down after all these years. I knew he was defined by his ability to hunt and pursue his targets, but trailing someone for half a century or more was beyond insane. "If we could find records for her treatment then we could possibly find information on James and where he may have taken her."

Carlisle nodded, and we discussed this further, thinking of ways to locate files and sixty-year old paperwork from an unknown hospital. Frustrated, Carlisle sighed and ran his hands over his face wearily and changed the subject, "Tell me about the brooch."

"It's antique, early turn of the century, inscribed with a 'B'. We thought it was Bella's but it's not. Obviously it holds enough meaning to James to use it as a clue, but we have no idea why." I explained. "Esme and Rosalie are researching the mark etched in the back right now. Hopefully if we can find the jeweler it will help us find Alice." I rolled my eyes, knowing this was a long shot, but it was all we had at the moment.

I stood up and walked behind my chair, resting my palms on the smooth leather and grimaced. "Let me go find Bella and tell her about Jacob."

"She's working upstairs?" he asked, again his expression sympathetic.

"Yes, keeping up the PNT façade. Her life is in danger yet she wants to make sure I look like I'm fulfilling my executive duties." I shook my head and thought about how ridiculous she was and how much I loved her.

Carlisle stood also, but remained behind his desk. "She's a gift Edward. I truly hope everything works out."

My fingers clenched around the back of the leather chair I'd just been sitting in, and I told him with absolute certainty, "It has to."

Xxx

Thump, thump, thump....went the soles of my feet, bounding up the stairs, skipping three steps at once.

*Thump, thump, thump*...went the sound of her heart, calling me from every room in the house, like a beacon, telling me the way home.

Pushing the door open quietly, I found Bella upstairs, in my old room, hunched over the laptop, clicking the keys with her fingers. She was aided only by a small desk lamp on the top of the wide, sleek desk facing the huge window that overlooked the river behind the house. The room was angled oddly, since it was the former attic, but the tall windows and high ceilings made it feel bigger than one would expect.

The laptop hummed with life, casting a bluish glow that tinted and haloed her hair, giving her an ethereal feeling. She was a goddess before me, a heart thumping, blood pumping, breathtaking goddess.

I sucked in the familiar smell of the room, faint traces of the past, books, and fabric, mingling now with my favorite scent: Bella. She smelled like soap and strawberries, warmth and blood. I darted my tongue in the air and tasted my own traces on her, some deeper than others, and I felt a compulsion to be with her urgently and completely. Time was slipping and I needed her before... before they tried to separate us, before the dog came and left his own stink on her, before things changed between us. I needed to make her *mine*.

I closed the door with a click, causing her to tilt her head my way, glancing over her shoulder, and I moved across the room, in my own time, rushing my fingers under her hair, twisting it into a bunch and inhaled her, deep and delicious.

"Edward!" she gasped, surprised by my touch, causing her to struggle for air while her heart threatened to burst out of her chest. I used my speed to my advantage, whirling her desk chair around with my foot and never letting my hands leave her face. I planted my lips on hers, pushing my own air into her mouth. I wanted to sustain her, as she sustained me.

Animals marked their territory in a variety of ways. Dogs and cats sprayed urine, bears flaunted their size by scarring trees with their claws, deer and antelope rubbed their fur on trees and leaves, leaving their scent and odor for other animals to find. Vampires do the same. I wanted the dog to know she was mine. I wanted James to understand who he was challenging when he dared to threaten her. I wanted Bella's connection to me to be undeniable and known immediately to anyone who crossed her path.

Dropping to my knees I pulled her down off the chair and onto her own. "I need you," I muttered between kisses, my hands groping her body. I was afraid for a moment she would run, overwhelmed by my aggression, but instead she came at me with vigor, pulling my shirt at the collar, straining the buttons as they pushed the boundary of the fabric. I reached for her wrists and yanked, pulling my shirt at the seams, causing the plastic circles to shower to the ground, and my shirt to rip with finality.

Pulling her shirt over her head and tearing the straps of her bra off one string at a time, I nudged her to the floor, where her elbows met with the soft cotton loops of the carpet. Tugging her pants past her knees, I hovered as she kicked them off with her feet, chafing my legs with her toes as she wiggled free. Her pale skin glowed in the dim light and I ran my hands over every, single, inch of her, diving into her arching body and lifted hips.

She was making sounds like an animal, a small cat perhaps, purring under my touch, mewling as I teased. My inner beast came forward, hard and strained, wanting to be in her, on her, all over her.

*"Mine."*

I choked, the words splitting the air in two, deep and guttural, like a growl. Bella responded with her teeth and nails, clamping the former on my chest, moaning as she attempted to bury them hard and sharp into

my flesh. Her nails scraped down my back, digging at my indestructible skin-I heard a nail snap as she tried to wring blood from a stone.

Splayed on the floor below me, Bella tilted her hips in the air, bending her knees and spreading her thighs wide across the plush carpet. Her breaths were quick and fragrant, coating the air with a heady perfume that made me dizzy. Poison filled my mouth, and she reached for my buckle, tugging frantically with shaking hands. Taking her hands in mine, I licked her palms, covering her with my venom before thumbing my button and removing the barrier between us.

"Now," she demanded, running her hands over my thighs, dipping them under my erection, and stroking the sensitive skin. Faster than she would notice, I tore into the condom package with my teeth, careful not to slice the latex, and prepared myself for her.

My cock had a life of its own, looking for its territory, its home and Bella reached for it- guiding me with confidence. With one solid push I was in: ice covered in warmth, hard wrapped in soft, dead swallowed by life, and I paused, eyes closed, struggling for composure. The need to push my way through her body was overwhelming. I was strong, I could tear her in two with one thrust. My body wanted it, my dick, raging with venom, begged for it, the animal deep inside taunted and baited and dared me to *make her mine*.

I cracked an eye and saw her under me, red faced and intent, eyes wide and filled with love and trust, and before I could tell her to stop, to let me breath, control my urges, she tilted her hips, allowing me in further, daring me to meet the challenge her body, her humanness. *Bella* lay beneath me. My lover, friend and mate.

Focusing on her eyes, I realized my fingers were clenched in the threads of the carpet and I shook them loose, coils of thread dropping to the ground. I forced myself to relax, concentrating on the woman below me, her love and presence. I needed balance, a place between the monster and the man, and I placed my hands over her hips, my thumbs gently covering her prior bruises and met her thrust, forming the words, "I love you," as I began to pound into her rhythmically, but with a sense of measured control.

She nodded, her eyelids closing, her tiny nose scrunching with concentration. I leaned over to lick her puffy red lips and felt the slap of her breasts as they met my chest. As her warmth clenched around me, my body reacted with force to each thrust, followed by a grunt buried in the top of her head, until the venom jerked out of my body into hers, trying futilely against the thin barrier to truly claim her as my victim.

I pulled away from Bella, who was breathing heavily, her body still pulsating beneath me. She astonished me by opening her eyes and giving me a lazy grin before she ran the back of her hand over her forehead, and breathed, "What was that?"

I rolled to my side, reaching my hand out and resting my palm over her thundering heart. I didn't want to tell her about Jacob. I didn't want to leave her. I wanted us to hole up here or at my house or in the mountains or across the world in a tiny hut in the middle of the jungle. But I couldn't and Carlisle was right. I had to help my family and I had to make hard choices.

I kissed her lips softy, making up for the harshness from before, and rubbed the side of her stomach with my finger. "That was me desperate. And afraid. That was me wanting you so badly and not knowing the right way to show it."

She tilted her head in confusion, her eyes narrowing, and propped up on her elbows. "Why are you desperate, and afraid? And Edward that was perfect. Just unexpected, that's all." she said, and kissed me solidly on the lips, once again assuring me with nothing more than her words and her touch.

Xxx

BPOV

I lay on my side, pushing my elbow into the soft carpet, and watched the angel next to me struggle with his demons. Resting my hand on the emptiness of my stomach, I missed him already, even though he was

across from me. I'd never felt closer yet farther from someone before. Now that he'd been in me there was no comparison.

"Promise we'll do that again." I asked, tracing the contours of his chest. There was something about our lovemaking that was thrilling. It wasn't quite the display of love from our first time, yet it was more than just sex. There was more of Edward this time, raw and instinctive, and I craved it.

He glanced to the side and I watched as his mouth smiled but his eyes remained tight. "I promise." I held onto his words like a contract, binding and unbreakable.

We dressed quickly, Edward helping me with my clothing, his speedy fingers buttoning and tugging and zipping faster than mine. He smoothed my hair and rubbed my cheek and kissed my lips every time he had the chance. I watched him disappear into the closet across the room and come back out smoothing his hands over a clean shirt. Just as I fastened the top button on his pants his phone rang and he quickly pulled it from his pocket.

"Emmett." He answered, his fingers wandering over my shirt.

I watched as his jaw clenched and tightened. I couldn't hear the words on the other end, but Emmett was speaking quickly and excitedly about something. I tugged on his belt, hoping he'd give me some kind of sign.

"Stay there. We'll meet you as soon as we can get there." he said, and listened once more, his fingers rested on my collarbone and he began rubbing the smooth skin over the bone.

"No, don't go after him. Once we reach you we can all fan out and follow his trail. I don't want to risk losing you also." Edward ordered, his voice full of authority. "Call Carlisle and tell him." He snapped the phone shut and put it away, wrapping his steel arms solidly around my shoulders. All the tension we'd worked to remove was back, taking over his body.

"What happened?" I asked, almost afraid to know.

"Emmett and Jasper were in the woods, hunting," he explained, his chin resting on the top of my head, "Emmett was tracking a herd of antelope when Jasper took off, in the opposite direction. Emmett thought he had a line on other prey but when he couldn't locate him he caught the trail himself and realized it wasn't food Jasper was after."

I pulled my head back to see Edward's face, hoping seeing him would make his words clearer, but instead all I found was his beautiful face twisted in distress. "What was it? What did he smell?" I ran my fingers down his cheek.

He uttered the one name I never would have guessed, "Alice."

"Alice?" I questioned, shocked by this news.

"I don't know what it means. It could be her or just a trap. James has proven he loves to play games." he explained, his eyes flashing with anger.

I watched as he turned from me and walked to the window, his hand running through his hair with agitation. He paused, and I could see his reflection in the black glass. His eyes were closed in thought.

"I'm going to help look for him," he told me from across the room, his back facing me.

"Oh." I said, fear automatically twisting in my stomach.

He walked back over to me and I watched his jaw clench, making the definition sharper. "Carlisle and I talked about it earlier. They need me to use my mind reading to help track James and Victoria, or Alice as the case may be."



The feeling in my stomach tightened, but I kept my face composed and said, "If he thinks it's best, I guess you should." It was a lie. The thought of Edward leaving my side completely freaked me out. Edward saw through my façade immediately, my traitorous voice having quivered enough to give me away.

Edward ran his thumb up my arm and nestled it in the crease of my elbow, and rubbed, gently, before kissing the same spot. "You won't be here alone." A look of unease slid across his face before he continued, "One of the La Push boys will stay here."

"A wolf?" I asked, intrigued by this situation, but noticed Edward stiffen at the word. From what Edward told me about them I knew I would be safe and the tangle of fear unwound a little. "Are you sure?" He didn't seem sure.

"I think it has to be this way. But I promise you'll be safe. They're born to fight vampires, even more than I am. Plus, I doubt James and Victoria would come here anyway. It's probably the safest place you can be, and as much as I hate to say it, being away from me is probably better anyway." Edward said, stretching his fingers over mine, enclosing my small hands with his larger ones.

I shook my head, and found his troubled eyes, "No, being away from you is never okay." I sighed and rested my head on his chest. I felt his long arms wrap around me and pull me into his body. I inhaled the soapy clean of his shirt. "But if you and Carlisle agree, then I'm okay with it"

We held one another for a minute, our bodies tight with tension, neither wanting to let go. I wanted to weld my body to his, fuse our arms and legs, and hips and cheeks. I wanted the moments before back when was Edward on me, in me and all around me. I looked up to see him studying me intently and I was struck with realization.

"You came up here because you knew you were leaving. That's where *that* came from." I accused, motioning to the floor, now understanding his desperation and fervor.

He met my words with a look of defiant guilt. "I don't want to leave you." He mumbled, sheepishly. "I'm not sure when I'll be back."

I crawled off his lap and reached for his arms, pretending to lug him off the floor. "You have to. But the sooner you go the faster you'll be back. I have faith in you all. You will find Alice and destroy James and you and I will live happily ever after." I said, forcing myself to push through the pain and the absurdity of it all. Edward needed to focus, for his family and for his safety. "I would never want your concern for me to outweigh your family commitment."

Edward's hand grazed my arm, ghosting down until he settled his fingers over my wrist, over my pulse. His eyes held mine lovingly, but I saw his eyebrow twitch and his head shift slightly upward.

"What?" I whispered, now able to read Edward's movements.

He walked across the room, dragging me behind him, "It's Rose," he said, and he opened the door and came face to face with Rosalie.

Without a glance in my direction she began talking, again so fast I had a hard time understanding her. "I found the jeweler. The letter H is for Haile, a designer from Mississippi."

"Mississippi?" Edward asked, "Where?"

"Biloxi, apparently." she replied, thrusting some paperwork at Edward. "They're closed now but had quite a thriving business in the early nineteen hundreds, through the depression."

Edward's forehead creased, "Anything else?"

"Since they are closed the paperwork is non-existent, but I found a description in an antique jeweler's guide. Apparently this type of brooch with an initial was popular for debutantes. It was common to use the initial from a girl's surname."

"You mean girls in big white dresses and gloves?" I asked, envisioning movies I'd seen.

They both nodded, deep in thought, communicating silently. Finally Edward spoke, "Rose, we have to go, Emmett called and needs our help." He turned towards me, "Do you think you could do some research on this while we're gone?"

"Of course," I replied, feeling the tightening in my stomach return at the thought of him leaving.

Edward packed up my laptop, and we traveled down to the main floor, where the others were waiting for us. Edward glanced towards the front door and scowled slightly, and I realized there were people on the porch.

"Who's out there?" I asked.

Edward ran his hands through his hair and shot Carlisle, who was walking towards the door, a look. "That's Jacob. The wolf."

At that Carlisle opened the door and a huge man came in view. Enormous was a better word. He towered over Carlisle and Edward, dwarfing them in size, although the two vampires held their own with intimidation and confidence. He hesitantly stepped in the house, and as he moved I noticed a shorter but equally muscular guy behind him on the porch.

"Bella," Carlisle called and motioned me towards him. I walked across the room and he continued, "This is Jacob Black and Seth Clearwater. They are going to stay with you while we meet Emmett."

I nodded and greeted the two men. Jacob reached his hand for mine, and I almost flinched on contact. His hand was boiling with heat.

He noticed my reaction and lifted an eyebrow. "Nice to meet you Bella. Seth is going to patrol the house and grounds. I'll stay inside with you."

"Fine. I'll be taking care of some work, so whatever you want to do is fine." I said, feeling Edward's eyes boring into the side of my head. Jacob shrugged and walked into the living room, plopping himself down on the couch, and reached for a magazine on the coffee table.

Carlisle, Esme, and Rosalie came over and gave me a quick hug and trooped out the door, leaving me and Edward alone. "Good luck," I called after them, wishing I could do more to help. Sometimes it sucked being a human.

Edward circled his arms around my waist and pulled me to his body. "Look, I'll be back as soon as I can. Keep your phone on and call me if you need anything. Please don't hesitate." He glanced over my shoulder towards Jacob and leaned into my ear. "Down the main hall, third door from the left, under the stairs is a door that goes to the basement. At the bottom of the stairs there is a hidden door to the right, behind the camping gear. If anything happens you go directly there and wait for me. There are rations and supplies in there."

"Edward, I don't think-" I started, and he pressed his fingers to my lips.

"Promise me." was all he said, looking at me with concerned eyes.

I nodded and kissed his fingertips. "I promise."

He rested his forehead on mine and hugged me tightly before kissing me softly on the lips and whispering, "I love you."

"I love you too," I returned, looping my fingers around his back.

He kissed me again under my ear and he was gone, the only sound I heard was the soft click of the front door.

Xxx

"So Bella," Jacob began from across the room, "How did you end up with a blood sucking creature of the night?"

I was on the couch, legs crossed, letting the computer burn a hole in my thigh as I searched for southern debutantes from the beginning of the century, with a focus on the Biloxi area. I'd just found an archive by the Daughters of the Revolutionary War, a civic group, that had been collecting photos and information and recording it on their website. Currently I was looking for any participants who had the letter 'B' as a first or last name.

I rolled my eyes at the dark skinned man who had been attempting to lure me into conversation for over an hour. He had already told me how bad it smelled in the house, how the Cullens were evil, and how my relationship with Edward was a sin against nature. I'd ignored him for the most part, treating him like the four year old he was acting, and continued with my work. Unfortunately, like a four year old, he wanted constant attention.

Without looking up I said, "He's hot. And rich. And he's a little like Batman-what's not to like?"

"Ha. Ha. Bella Swan. Even I can tell there's more to you than a gold digging skank, but tell me, why would you want *that*?" I could hear the hatred in his voice. I tried not to be offended. They were natural enemies, like a zebra to a lion, but still he needed to shut his mouth.

I kept my fingers on the keys, trying to control the rage boiling under my skin. I found a photo from nineteen-sixteen, and pulled it up, dragging the mouse to enlarge it. Sighing, I looked up from the computer and looked at Jacob. "I don't have to explain myself to you. Shut. Up. I'm trying to work over here."

Focusing back on the screen I heard him get up off the couch and shuffle his gigantic feet towards me. With horror I felt his weight hit the couch, bouncing me and the computer off the cushion as he landed heavily. Suddenly I missed the grace and quiet of the vampires.

"I'm bored. Show me what you're looking for." He said and tilted the screen so he could see it, invading my personal space. My temper flared and I knocked his hand off, shifting the monitor back in my direction. I wondered momentarily if his mother had taught him any manners at all.

I lifted my body up and scooted over, creating space between us. He was hot, his whole body was burning up, and I was beginning to sweat. "Are you always so hot?" I asked, fanning my face dramatically.

"Yep." He replied and I immediately grimaced at the smug look on his face, clearly inferring something different from my comment than I intended. He had stupid dark, smiling eyes. I missed the gold, brooding ones I woke up to in the morning. Jerk. This guy was making me miss Edward in ways I wouldn't have considered when I agreed to this arrangement.

"Dude, look at that dress. Some of these girls are smokin''," he declared and pulled the laptop off my legs, and placed it on his own tree like appendages that took up the whole couch and half the floor. I listened as Jacob mocked the girls and boys in the photograph, laughing at their hair and outfits. He began reading the information out loud in a phony, sophisticated voice, "'The Daughters of the Revolutionary War are honored to announce the following young women and their escorts who will be debuting this season in Biloxi.'" I grabbed the computer back, placing it on my lap but leaving it so he could continue to see it. I ran my finger over it, matching the names with the faces, looking for any 'B' names to add to my list.

"Lucia Atkinson," he announced as my finger touched over a blonde woman with curly, shoulder length hair. I shifted my finger to the next girl on the row, "Mary Alice Brandon." I paused and looked at the photo closer. It was grainy and faded, but I could make out a small girl with long dark hair; she barely looked fifteen. I felt my stomach tighten at the image.

"Jacob, wait here." I said, and pushed the computer in his lap. I ran around the corner into the kitchen to the small room off the laundry room where Esme kept her office. I'd been in here earlier when she showed me the designs she was working on for the garden out back. There were family photos lining the walls over the desk. I snatched one off and ran back to the living room where Jacob was patiently waiting.

I held the frame out to him. "Does this girl look familiar?" I found my voice was too loud and my hand was shaking.

He took the photo in his massive hand and studied the photo. I watched as his eyes narrowed in concentration. "No."

I exhaled loudly, "Look again and compare her," I pointed to Alice's photograph, and then moved my finger to the computer screen, "to her."

His focus shifted from the frame to the computer on his lap. "Is that the same person?" he asked incredulously.

"I think so." I whispered, giddy over finding such an important clue.

"So the 'Alice' your vampire is looking for is this girl, Mary Alice Brandon from Biloxi Mississippi?" He confirmed.

"Yeah, I think it is."

"Is there some reason you guys didn't know this already?" He asked, nudging me lightly with his shoulder.

I explained Alice's history, or lack thereof, and the brooch, and what we were looking for. "Edward thinks that if we could locate the owner of the brooch and separately, where Alice came from, we could find out why James wanted her and possibly where he was keeping her."

"And you just found out both, right? The jewelry is Alice's and you now know she is from Biloxi. But what does that mean to the vampire?"

"It means James knew Alice when she was human and in Mississippi. He seems to take 'treasures' from his victims and keeps them as mementos, like Bree's cross." I said, reasoning out the information we had.

Jacob jumped in, "Does this mean Alice was his victim before? Did he turn her into a vampire?"

"I have no idea." I said, excited and frustrated all at once. "Let me enter her name into the search engine and see what I can find."

Jacob announced he was going to find Seth outside, and that he would need to transform to his wolfy-self in order to communicate with the tribe. I happily let him go, not wanting to see his transformation. I began entering in Alice's name when I heard my email chime. I'd still been keeping up with Edward's schedule and mail so I hurriedly clicked over to see if it was important. Three messages had come in, two from managers at the office that included budget attachments. I saved these for Edward to review later and then pulled up the next one. My eye twitched as I read who it was from-EMCullen.

Edward.

Why would Edward send me an email while tracking Jasper? Figuring he may have sent it from his phone, I opened it and was surprised to see it was a video of some kind. I hovered the cursor over the play button and clicked. The image was fuzzy, but immediately I heard voices incoherently mumbling as the person

holding the camera tried to focus it. Suddenly, the frame became clearer and to my shock I saw Alice sitting on the floor, glaring at the camera.

A deep voice rattled behind the scenes. "Say hello to your family, Mary Alice."

Alice scowled from her spot on the ground. Her eyes were dark, having clearly not fed, and but other than looking a little disheveled, her appearance was the same. "My family is looking for me right now, *James*, they won't see this video."

James turned the camera on himself and pouted, "Aww...Mary Alice isn't feeling like her perky self today. I guess I will have to explain what is going on instead."

He panned the camera over the room as he turned it back on Alice, who remained aloof and disengaged, refusing to acknowledge him. As the lens traveled I desperately tried to figure out where they were holding her. The only thing I could make out was a pattern of squares on the wall behind her and that the room seemed small and dark.

Turning the camera back on his haggard, ugly face, he began talking directly in the lens. His red eyes shocked me. "Here is the situation Edward. I found Mary Alice first, when she was frail and weak and riddled with dark visions. I loved her for what she was, not who she is now. I'd kept an eye on her as she withered away in the hospital, alone and afraid. And I had it all planned. I was going to change her and use her potential gift. Together, my tracking abilities and her psychic ones, we could dominate the vampire world." He smiled at the thought, showing his crooked and jagged teeth.

"I knew the old one worked there, he seemed to keep her safe, which pleased me, but at the same time I could feel his ownership over her becoming clearer. He loved her as a human. *Which is not acceptable!*" He hissed, anger marring his face. "Vampires do not protect humans or help them. They are food or companions. Nothing more. You, Edward Cullen, like the old one in the institution, have broken this cardinal rule of our kind and now must suffer the consequences."

In the back ground there was a loud noise as Alice must have moved. I watched in horror as James' head lurched out of view and the camera dropped to the ground and I could hear the sound of the two of them in a scuffle. "Shut the fuck up!" I heard Alice scream, rage filling her normally tiny voice. "Leave my family out of this!"

I heard a loud bang as though someone or something hit the wall. "Restrain her!" James shouted and there were more footsteps and the camera was picked up from the floor and focused again on his face. "This is your fault," he muttered angrily, "Always remember that." The computer on my lap began trembling as my body shook in fear. James panned once more around the room to Alice, now being held by three men with bloody red eyes.

"She was mine to begin with, and was taken away. Then, and then..." he emphasized with fury. "For her to end up with the likes of you, a human loving, vampire killing, egotistical vigilante...it's too much. Someone has to pay, and it can be you, or Mary Alice, or your precious human pet." He spat the words with such hatred I could feel it in my bones. "I already know which one you'll choose. I'm ready to stop playing games." James pushed the camera so far into Alice's face she hissed in reaction, freeing a hand and swiping at the camera again, and as it fell to the floor with a clank the image turned black.

I sat on the couch, my hands shaking furiously, as I tried to move the cursor back, to replay the video but was unable to make my fingers comply. As I jabbed at the keys a warm hand engulfed mine and pulled the computer away from me.

"What happened? What did you find?" Jacob asked, concerned.

I began sobbing, overwhelmed by the images of Alice at the mercy of that monster. I was completely disturbed at his hatred for Edward and his threats on my life. "The...the..." I stuttered, choking on my tears,

and Jacob surprisingly ran a hand over my back to calm me. He turned his attention to the computer and pressed the play button on the video. I covered my eyes and listened.

When it completed, Jacob growled in his chest, low and menacing. "What a prick," he muttered, "okay, what we're going to do is watch that video again and try to figure out where they are. Can you do that?"

I nodded and wiped the tears from my cheeks. I could do it. I had to for Alice and Edward. They were my family now and I had to do what I could. I moved closer to Jacob and told him to start the video. We watched it, pausing so could I take notes every time I noticed something.

"Do you see those small squares on the wall?" I asked Jacob the third time through.

"Yeah, I noticed those too. I should know what they are." He commented and I agreed, they looked familiar.

"They have markings, something written on each one." I said, pointing to a small blemish on the top of each box.

"Are they plaques or panels?" he mused.

"I don't think so." I answered, unable to put my finger on it.

We continued the film, commenting on the lack of sunlight, the smallness of the room. The final time James panned the space something caught my eye. "I think that's a door." I said and I gestured to a solid, windowless, block of metal.

Jacob studied the image and considered the door. "Well, they would have to be keeping her someone secure and locked. But she's strong, very strong and could get out of almost any type of restraint. The newborns can overpower her now, as their strength is superior. But in general they would have to literally have her imprisoned."

"It doesn't look like a jail cell," I replied, and he nodded in agreement.

Jacob pushed his long body back into the cushions, and stretched his legs out, I noticed for the first time his feet were bare and his shirt had a large tear in it. What did he do when he went outside?

"Hey, play that video again...back to where you can see the wall." He directed and I found he spot he wanted. He ran his thick finger over the screen again, muttering something under his breath.

"What?" I asked, feeling oddly nervous at his behavior.

Jacob turned to me and gave me an ultra white smile tinged with self-assuredness. "Call your blood sucker. I think I figured out where they're keeping his sister."



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*Chapter Song: [Placebo - Running Up That Hill](#)*

EPOV

I quickly surpassed my family as I traveled through the woods to the location Emmett had given me over the phone. Our destination was deep in Eastern Washington, away from most civilization, and something about it felt off. We'd met up with Emmett quickly, then spreading out into a wide line, covering as much space as possible. My brother knew Alice's scent of course, but I was afraid James may be luring him in the

wrong direction, intentionally away from my sister, furthering the distance between us. I inhaled deeply and was able to follow Jasper's more recent scent as well as the fainter trail of Alice that coated the leaves and branches throughout the forest.

Once I left the house, I was able to push Bella from my mind; I hated doing it, but it was a distraction I couldn't have at the moment. I loved her and she loved me in return, that was all I could hope for, and when this was all over, we could figure out the future. Right now was about my family, and I owed them my utmost concentration.

I considered the fact I'd lived so long but never had experienced war first hand. I was too young to enlist in the First World War. I'd watched it unfold around me as a teenager; friends and family leaving, fighting, and if they came home at all, they were never the same. After my transformation, I was able to see the images of war etched in people's brains. They were different. Living with Jasper, a survivor of a devastatingly bloody war while living and an even more horrific situation once he turned, was painful. No matter how much he separated himself from the battles and fights, he was covered with scars physically as well as mentally.

I quickly raced around a thick grove of trees, my feet pounding on the leaf covered forest floor; the only sound was my body as it made contact with nature, realizing with surprising clarity, that this was my war. In my mind James had threatened my family and loved ones. He trespassed against my property and terrorized my community. He made our kind vulnerable to the outside world by having no regard for life and society. I knew in my mind we were entering into the final battle between us. One or both of us wouldn't survive this encounter, and the stakes were so high. Three months ago I would have willingly sacrificed myself for Alice or Jasper but today...today things were different. I'd given myself over to another, a mate, and every fiber of my being told me to protect that if possible.

I shifted my focus to my speed and reveled in the sport of pushing my body to the extreme when Rosalie's voice entered my thoughts.

*Edward, wait up...*

Rosalie called from behind. She was actually the second fastest in the family. Her legs were long, and she had a natural athletic ability she must have carried over from her human life.

Frustrated, I slowed my pace slightly and let her catch up.

*What do you want to do when we find him...or them...*

"I'm not sure, Rose, we have to see what the situation is." I snapped, leaping over a tree trunk that had fallen across our path, and landing on a thick branch that disintegrated under the weight of my body.

We pushed through the thick underbrush, the others having fanned out a bit, making sure we covered the entire area. I was happy for the distance as all our thoughts were on Jasper and Alice and the unknown circumstances ahead of us. Rosalie and I climbed a steep cliff that lead to a small canyon over a stream.

*Edward...* Rosalie thought, and I smelled it. Vampires. They were close. Their scent was muddled in the night air; I catalogued several at the least, and I craned my neck in an attempt to hear their thoughts. The night air was heavy with the sound of crickets and the gurgling of the water running below us. I focused and realized I could hear the swish of fabric in the distance and muffled ramblings, presumably from newborns.

"Keep going," I told her quietly, "let's try to lead them away from the others."

We reached the top of the hill, and I encouraged her to go first, keeping my eyes peeled for predators. The canyon was wide enough that Rose needed a running start and traveled back down the hill to gain momentum before she jumped over the water. I moved back to gain my own speed, and just as I reached the crest of the hill, I heard a loud grunt and saw Rosalie fly through the air and land with a splash in the water. A small man was grasping at her ankles, thrashing and trying futilely to gain the upper hand.

"Rose," I shouted, as I leapt through the air, trying to reach the shore of the stream on the other side. I heard a loud growl tear through the cool night air, and I reached my arms out trying to make contact with the muddy ground, but before I was able too, I was hit from the side with extreme force, falling into the shallow water below. I fell with a loud splash, water filling my ears and mouth, my body pressed into the sandy bottom of the stream. My palms found a jagged rock, and I pushed myself out of the water, flinging the newborn backwards.

"Get. Off!" I heard Rose scream as I emerged out of the water. Shaking heavy droplets from my hair so I could look for my attacker, who had righted himself, I watched as his legs sliced through the knee deep water.

Grunting beside me, I heard Rosalie continue to fight off her own assailant, and was impressed as she kicked him squarely in the chest, propelling him into a large rock near the tree line. Realizing she had a handle on the situation, I wasn't surprised to find not only one, but two newborns approaching me. My clothes were heavy and wet, and as I assessed the situation, I pulled my thick, button down off and threw it on the ground.

The vampires in front of me were both young, average in height and weight. Their minds were purely focused on fighting me. They were thirsty and spoiling for a fight. The one that had attacked me in the water was the smaller of the two, and he was processing the information they had been given earlier by none other than Victoria, her red hair and eyes scorched into their memories. Victoria had given him instructions on how to kill us. Bite, tear, kick, burn...he chanted in his mind.

From the corner of my eye I watched Rosalie repeatedly kick her attacker on the ground before beginning to tear his body to shreds. Her long blonde hair was flying around her face as she exaggerated each blow to the vampire at her mercy. She was thoroughly pissed.

"She's going to be finished in a minute, boys, and you'll be next." I told the two newborns in front of me, in an attempt to buy time. "While we wait, why don't you tell me where Victoria is?"

They both hissed as I said her name, confusion settling in their thoughts. They were starving, and their loyalty wasn't as strong as it should have been. "We're here for you and the others." One of them said without enthusiasm. His thoughts were literally consumed by thirst.

"That's not going to happen." I explained slowly, making eye contact with both of them. I ignored their snarling and continued, "What will happen is you are going to tell me where Victoria is so I can find my brother and sister. Then you are going to die—for real this time."

I saw a flame kick up on the side of the beach, and Rose's vampire burst into fire as she hovered over it with a branch she had lit, patiently allowing the flames to consume the body entirely. The newborns in front of me watched with interest, neither seeming to understand what was going on. These two had little instruction from their makers, and the lack of training would certainly be in my favor.

Rosalie dropped the branch into the water to extinguish it. I heard it sizzle on contact and saw a light wisp of smoke twisting through the air. Rubbing her cheek with a soot covered hand, she rolled her eyes and muttered, "Thanks for helping."

I smirked, knowing she would have been furious if I had stepped in, and turned my attention back on the vampires. "That one," I said and pointed to one of the newborns, "has the information I need. The other is expendable."

She raised an eyebrow, and with that I lunged at the vampire I planned to destroy, catching him off guard and pushing his back into the cliff. The sand was soft under my feet and my shoes slipped from the water. The vampire struggled under my weight, but continued to fight erratically, kicking and lunging at my arms with his razor sharp teeth. I slipped, giving him an opportunity, and I felt his jaw connect with my arm.



Moving quickly, he sunk his teeth into my flesh, and I flinched from the stinging as the venom flowed into the wound.

"Fuck!" I groaned and wrenched my arm out of his mouth and kicked him off my body. Bending my knees slightly, I pounced while he was still regaining his balance, and I proceeded to tear his body, limb to limb, tossing the parts over my shoulder onto the burning embers near the shore. The other newborn under Rose's guard growled fiercely behind my back instinctively, and thoughts of anger waved through his mind. Annoyed with the situation, Rosalie reached back and swung, striking him hard across the face with her fist and telling him to shut up.

Finishing up I walked over to Rose, who was now standing behind the newborn, holding his arms to his back while he attempted to get loose. I brushed my hands off and looked down at the rapidly healing wound on my bicep, still red and oozing in the center. Moving closer I looked the boy in the eye. He was young, and clearly once well-groomed, his clothing expensive and his hair thick and curled. "Where's Victoria?" I asked calmly, acknowledging that he wasn't worth the rage I felt building under my skin.

He shook his head but glanced at the burning pile of flesh near the water. "She'll kill me..." he grumbled, clearly confused about who had the upper hand in this situation. But before I could respond, his weak mind flashed to an image of her, wild and demanding, in a small clearing, his photographic memory revealing the path he traveled on to find us.

"Does she have my sister?" I asked, worried that he couldn't seem to conjure her in his mind.

He didn't answer, and I watched as Rosalie leaned into his ear and whispered silently. His eyes flicked towards the bodies of his comrades, burning effortlessly to ash.

"I haven't seen her. The red head is insane." And again an image of wild crimson hair and pale skin flitted through his mind.

I nodded at Rose, and without hesitation, she twisted his neck with a loud tear while I quickly grabbed his writhing body and threw it in the pile of now smoldering bodies.

As Rosalie kicked sand over the remains, I searched for my phone to notify Carlisle of our whereabouts and where we should meet. "Damn it," I muttered, patting my pockets, "I dropped my phone." I began searching the area.

Rosalie flipped hers open, and I half listened as she proceeded to call Emmett and explained what happened. I caught a glimmer under the water and fished my phone out from the sandy bottom, realizing immediately it was ruined. I hurled it at the nearest tree and watched as it splinted into an explosion of small pieces and covered the forest floor.

"Let's go," I directed after Rosalie flipped her phone shut and pushed it into her back pocket. I dug my fingers into the soft, clay walls and hoisted myself over the edge of the cliff and reached a hand to Rosalie as she followed.

"Nice shirt," she said, laughing at my soaking wet undershirt, streaked with mud, but stopped to inspect the bite mark on my upper arm. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Yes. It hurts like hell. I now have a greater respect for what Jasper has been through. The venom stings."

Gesturing in the direction we needed to go, we took off through the forest once again in pursuit of our family. It didn't take long, and we easily found them waiting for us next to an outcropping of boulders deep in the forest. It was pitch black, the moon hiding behind clouds, but as soon as we approached, Emmett made a beeline for Rosalie, searching her body for injury.

"I'm fine," she murmured and gave him a quick kiss on the lips that brought a wave of jealousy through my body. I wanted to feel the hot lips of my lover on my mouth and not the harsh branches that snapped against my body as I barreled through the underbrush. "Edward took the brunt of the fight."

I guiltily shook off my feelings of envy and gestured to Carlisle to come to me. "Victoria is in a clearing not far from here. We were ambushed by three of their newborns. I didn't see any others in their minds, but we need to be prepared." I explained.

"Alice and Jasper?" he asked, reaching out to inspect my injury. I allowed him the distraction and stood still while he prodded the inflamed area.

"I doubt she has Alice, but Jasper is sure to be there by now. I only hope Victoria is still alive, so I can question her." Carlisle nodded in agreement, both of us knowing the probability of finding Victoria torn to shreds likely.

"Ready?" I asked the others, and with a quick nod of approval, we took off through the night, pushing past the leaves and branches, and climbing the rocks and hills that we soared over in an effort to get to Jasper quickly. As the brush thinned and the sky became lighter, I inhaled a strong waft of Victoria and Jasper's scents. I held my hand up, motioning for the others to stop at the edge of the clearing, just out of view. It would only be seconds before they would notice us, but in the meantime we took in the sight ahead of us.

"Oh!" Esme gasped, her mind focused on her son and the desperation unfolding in front of us.

We watched, equally horrified, as Jasper had Victoria by the throat, kneed to the ground. He was emitting murderous waves of anger and pain followed by a curious shock of jealousy that almost knocked me off my feet. His emotions alone were so extreme that it was almost impossible to function.

In an attempt to shut out his emotions and concentrate on his mind, I found he was chanting a mantra, trying to calm himself before he snapped her in half. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was aware enough not to kill her outright. He knew she was our only opportunity, and he was waiting for us to show. I turned my interest to Victoria who was lying beneath him, mumbling incoherently, as her mind flew to images of James and Alice.

I called the others closer and I began giving instructions. "Emmett and Carlisle, I want you to remove Jasper from Victoria. Get him as far away as possible—he's holding on but only by a thread." They nodded in agreement, and I turned to Esme and Rose, "I need you to cover the perimeter. There could be more newborns, and we also need to be prepared in case one of those two attempts an escape. No one leaves this area until I say so."

I pointed out the areas I was talking about and sighed heavily. I looked the two men in the eye. "After you remove Jasper from her, I will take Victoria. I need some information from her before she is destroyed."

Without further conversation, we split apart and were running across the field. Emmett and Carlisle hit Jasper with such force that the three of them rushed across the field, finally landing with a thunderous crash over twenty feet away. Dirt and grass scattered around them, flying like hail across the field. Before they had even moved an inch from Victoria's body, I was on top of her, pressing her bony shoulders into the ground while my wet boots cut into her ankles. Once she realized our position she began laughing hysterically, her voice bouncing across the field and echoing in the trees surrounding us.

"Shut up." I told her, annoyed already by her ridiculous behavior. Jasper hissed with rage from across the field, struggling against Emmett's enormous hands. His anger was palpable, coating my mind, and I had to fight the urge to eliminate her immediately. Ignoring him the best I could, I looked down at Victoria, her mouth opened wide with amusement, but her eyes were dead and hollow. "Where are they?" I asked and searched her vacant, blocked mind. She hissed viciously baring her teeth as I pushed harder into her granite flesh, grinding them into the grass and dirt underneath her.

"I see you met up with some of my men." She taunted, eyeing the sore on my arm. "Took a piece of you with him?"

"How many others are there?" I asked, wondering about the size of their remaining army.

She sighed bitterly, "The ones you killed tonight were the last at my disposal."

"How many are at James' disposal?"

She narrowed her eyes in consideration, giving me an image of four others, these appearing less feral and stronger. "Enough." She stated simply.

That image was enough though to cause a slip in her consciousness, and she unintentionally showed me a different view of James looking at Alice with want and possession. She caught herself, and her mind went blank. Her only reaction was to slap another grinning, maniacal smile across her face.

My temper flared at her callousness and I asked again, "Where. Are. They."

Finally she responded by wiping the smirk off her face and whispering, "He finally found her."

The words were eerie, hauntingly soft for the she-devil I knew her to be. Surprisingly she continued in the same little girl voice, "It took him half a century, trips across the globe and countless failed attempts, but he found her." She mumbled, and I tried to access her mind to unscramble her words. She looked at me with vacant eyes and continued, "I followed him, hunted with him, loved him, every step of the way, but he only wanted her. She has everything that I don't."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jasper attempt to break free at the mention of Alice, and watched as Carlisle pushed his whole body over his in an effort to restrain him. Stunned by her announcement, I finally formed the words I needed to ask, "She's his singer?"

Her eyes widened at my question, and she began to laugh again, succumbing to fits of giggles. *His singer? No, she is more than that. Alice is the key to his power, his domination over the others, people like you and even the Volturi.*

I cocked my head in confusion, and cringed when she laughed again. "Domination?" I asked, thoroughly confused by her ramblings.

"Her powers, you fool. James wanted her abilities, not her blood. With her gift as a seer, he can manipulate everything and everyone he wants. The armies in the south; the government in Italy. It's all about control, *Edward*, I would think you would understand this." She scoffed, rolling her eyes at my apparent naivety. "He never wanted me...only her."

Her words filled the night air; I knew everyone could hear her, and I pushed their speculations from my mind and looked at Victoria below me. Her pale face was truly beautiful, and her flaming red hair tangled in the weeds beneath her head. I focused on her eyes, wild and ruby red, void of any feelings and her thoughts were stuck on jealousy and pain; and; an leaned into her ear and whispered softly, "Betray him as he betrayed you. The only way to hurt him is to take away Alice. Tell me how to find him."

She stared at me for a moment, and I heard her mind as she considered my proposal. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead of words she once again giggled manically, sounding crazier with each passing moment, her thoughts erratic and bold. Finally she stilled under me and smiled lazily, giving me a perfect image of Alice and James in the room she had last seen them in. In seconds I counted the metal boxes on the walls, and read the letters on the small plaque near the door that was thick and glossy silver.

"Which one?" I asked, pushing my hands against her hardened flesh.

"Elm Street." She barked, her eyes widening at her admission. Her upper lip curved into the most evil smirk. "She's been in Forks all along."

I released my grip slightly, glancing at Carlisle to determine what to do next. Before I could move, Victoria laughed once again and said, "James will have a field day when you show up reeking with your human's scent all over your body. Bedding a human Edward...even I'm surprised at that. You'd better hope you get there before she does."

In a flash my hands were tight against her throat, and she looked at me devilishly. "Why would she get there before me?" I asked, my head cocked in question as terror filled my veins.

Victoria puffed her lips and blew her cool scent over my face. Apparently she was annoyed by my ignorance and with exasperation she explained, "He sent you a message, which I'm assuming you didn't receive or you wouldn't be here...but she possibly got it instead. She seems like the type to get into trouble, don't you think?"

"I have no idea what you are referring to," I sneered, placing my faith in Jacob to keep Bella safe. "What kind of message?"

"He's ready for this to end. He wants you to know where he is and how to find him. He would make you work for it, of course, but that's of no consequence now is it?" She muttered the last part under her breath, aware there were no secrets left in this crazy game.

I shifted infinitesimally, squelching the horror that consumed my mind and dipped my chin at Emmett who nodded in return. He released his grip on Jasper as I slowly removed my weight off of Victoria's body. Jasper flew from under Carlisle's grasp, and the only thing I felt was the breeze of his speed as he rushed past me, careening full force into Victoria's body. Her expression turned from insane amusement to understanding before shifting to acceptance quicker than I could've expected. I turned my back as my brother pounced on the passive, laughing demon behind me.

I attempted to ignore the sounds as I walked away—the shouts to calm Jasper, the collection of wood, and the familiar noises of starting a fire. There was the distinct thump of still moving body parts landing on the soft grass covered field. Jasper's pain was deafening, filling my soul with heartache and grief. The only sound that over shadowed it was the ripping of flesh and squealing laughter from the demented.

Questions came from my family, cutting through the emotion filled haze of my mind. They asked for Alice's location and what exactly did Victoria meant by her comments of domination. They worried about Bella, but most of all they watched me out of the corner of their eyes, my image reflected back through their minds. My face was constricted. Hair standing on end: disheveled almost beyond recognition. My pale arms were exposed, having lost my shirt earlier, and I was now covered with dirt and scars from my previous fight. All of these things shocked me, including the way my fists balled by my side and the obvious tension in my shoulders.

I looked as crazy as Victoria felt.

Running a hand in my tangled hair, I found I couldn't respond to their questions verbally. I was too blinded by rage and fury, too distracted by the aching pain of loss, as I thought of Alice imprisoned by that monster, the same one who threatened my Bella, the keeper of my soul.

Stopping at the edge of the forest, I said into the smoky night air, "She's in town—held in the Washington First National Bank."

Without another thought, I slipped away from my family and into the absolute darkness of the forest. Positioning myself in the direction towards Forks, I began reviewing the information I had. Victoria was gone. I knew where Alice was being held. I had to trust that Bella was safe with the wolf. This situation was coming to an end, cumulating between James and I as it should have been all along. Picking up my pace, I thrust myself through the woods, determined to finish this once and for all.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Song: [Muse – Time Is Running Out](#)

BPOV

"He won't pick up," I said, throwing the phone onto the couch. It bounced off the cushion and hit Jacob on the leg. "Why doesn't he pick up?"

Jacob sighed in annoyance, rubbing his hand through his cropped hair. "I don't know Bella, because he's fighting vampires and maybe doesn't have time to take a call from his girlfriend?"

I shot him a dirty look and began pacing across the glossy hardwood floors that spanned the Cullen's foyer. I'd finally gotten myself together and stopped crying over the terrifying video, becoming almost numb after watching it countless times. Jacob explained that Alice was being held in an old bank in the center of town, in the vault. The safety deposit boxes on the wall and a small plaque by the door tipped him off to the location. Unfortunately my frustration at not being able to reach Edward by phone was making me nervous again.

I looked at Jacob, who appeared unfazed by the whole thing, and asked, "What should we do? You know how to find James, I can't reach Edward, and Alice needs our help."

"I know one thing," he said glancing up from the computer screen where he was watching the video James had sent again, "there is nothing *you* can do to help in this situation so you may as well relax for a while."

I plopped into the cushy arm chair across from him and sighed. He was completely right. There was nothing I *could* do. Edward would kill me if I stuck one toe outside this door with out him. Plus, I had no interest in coming face to face with James in real life after my earlier evil vampire encounters. Twice was enough. Plus, Victoria was scary, but the video had shown me that James was *terrifying*.

Picking up one of the magazines from the end table, I began flipping through it, restlessly skimming the pages of kitchens, expanded attics, and period style bathrooms. Not interested in *This Old House* I tossed it back, scattering the organized pile of similar magazines across the table.

"You better put those back." Jacob warned, his deep voice bouncing off the vaulted ceiling. "Things in this house are very 'in place.' I wouldn't want to be the one who messed it up."

I scowled but began methodically arranging the magazines as they were before I knocked them askew. My heart almost broke when I realized they were in chronological order by month and it reminded me of Edward and his ridiculous obsessive compulsive tendencies. "Well, at least he's not the only one," I muttered under my breath.

"Not the only one what?" Jacob asked from the couch. *Didn't he need to use the bathroom or something?*

I raised an eyebrow in his direction as I moved across the room and began looking though the row of books lining the shelves near the fireplace to distract myself. "Great. You have super hearing too." Irritated suddenly at my apparent lack of super powers, and feeling increasingly stressed at the fact my phone hadn't rung, I decided to change the subject. "What are your wolves doing now?"

Jacob stretched his legs out in front of him and placed his hands behind his head. "They're out there running the woods. Your blood suckers were following a specific trail. My pack is patrolling between Forks

and the reservation, because our job is to keep our people safe." He explained, and then gave me a slow, gleaming smile, "We only expanded our territory to include you."

Feeling ungrateful, I offered him an appreciative smile in return and quietly said, "Thanks. You would have heard from them if something-"

I never finished my sentence Jacob sprang out of the seat, the couch itself slamming back against the wall with force. My hand flew to my mouth in surprise as I gasped in shock. In mere seconds Jacob was no longer Jacob, but had transformed-mid-air-into a hairy, reddish, mass of animal, leaping across the room and crashing through the solid glass front door. My hands moved to my ears as the sound of cascading glass showered over the hard floors. After the glass settled it was-for a moment-eerily quiet, the only sound in the room was heavy breathing and the gentle breeze in the trees that fluttered through the now open doorway.

I stood up slowly and edged around the sharp pieces of glass that littered the floor, walking towards the window. I occasionally felt the hard crunch under my shoes as the glass ground into Esme's pristine floors. When I reached the window I tentatively lifted the curtain, pushing it to the side to gain a better view of the yard. There was nothing there but dark and silence. I dropped the gauzy white fabric and touched my pocket.

"Shit," I whispered to myself, and tried to calm my shaking hands as I quickly walked back to the living room to gather my phone and call Edward once again. My stomach was twisted with unease-I only hoped Jacob reached his target fast.

Just before I reached the couch a haunting, "Bella..." echoed through the empty house.

My feet froze mid-step.

"Bella..." I heard again, this time louder and closer. I looked around discretely and saw nothing, so I lunged toward the couch for my phone. In a blink, someone was there, swiping the slim metal object out from under my hand. I began backing away before I even looked up and when I did, I forced the bile that was rising in my throat back. I was staring down the devil himself.

James stood before me, dirty and raw. His yellow-streaked hair was messily tied at his neck, his clothes the same tattered and worn ones from the video. I realized now that he only had one arm. The jacket he was wearing was tied at the top where it should have been. He was akin to my Edward, I could see it in his pale, smooth skin, and the lean, taut and strong muscles, but the similarities ended there. His eyes were blood red-like Victoria's-and the smirk on this face was pure evil.

"Wha-what do you want?" I sputtered lamely, his intent clear on his face.

He wanted me.

He only sneered in response and in that moment, I remembered Edward's final instructions to me about the hiding spot in the basement. I glanced in that direction, the hallway seeming miles away and the door at the end even further, but I had to try.

I swallowed heavily, taking a step backwards, and began to speak, "What use am I to you? You have Alice-she's the one with the gift."

He cocked his head slightly and smiled, "You underestimate yourself, dear Bella. You're precious to me and a very integral part of my game. I admit I began all those years ago looking for Mary Alice and there were times when it seemed so futile. Then I stumbled upon the myth of your Edward. So noble, so brave. Helping the common man, sacrificing his own needs for that of humans." He stopped and sighed mockingly, resting a hand on his chest. "It was so heartwarming. I found him and then he found you and it was like all the pieces of my little game showed up on the board, waiting to be manipulated." He smiled wickedly, confident he would be the winner in his insane activities.

I only listened partially to the ramblings of this maniac as I took another half step backwards. "How am I part of your game?" I stalled.

He shrugged, as though I was questioning the obvious. "You're important to him, as is she. I want him to choose. Which one survives and which one doesn't?" The human or the sister? Or does he play the martyr and sacrifice himself? It can be any of you three, or frankly none. I don't really care. I'm curious who he'll pick." I watched as he inhaled deeply and flared his nostrils, "Although from the smell of you, I now have a better knowledge of his possible choice. He has made his loyalties abundantly clear."

I suppressed the urge to smell my skin, looking for the odor Jacob and James continuously spoke about. James shook his head in disgust before he turned and walked over to the window, disregarding the glass under his bare feet. I peeked over my shoulder at the hallway and took another step back when he turned his face towards me and frowned, "I wouldn't do that Bella-" but the words halted in his throat and he was thrown across the room by a shaggy dog like creature that had burst into the room. This one was gray, smaller than the animal Jacob had transformed into and he pounced on James before he had the opportunity to regain his footing. The animal looked in my direction, with soulful, begging brown eyes and I knew he was giving me the opportunity to run.

I twisted my body, running around the arched wall separating the living room hallway-while listening to the sound of James' rage and the wolf's howls. Crashes and bangs littered the air behind me as my feet slapped on the wood and I almost tripped as I came to a stop in front of the door. I heard a loud yelp and a groan of anger from the living room as I turned the knob, revealing a short stairway that lead beneath the house. With a final glance behind me, I was shocked to see the wolf-flying through the air, across the span of the hallway and crashing into unseen objects in the adjoining room. James rounded the corner and I bolted, taking one step after the other in the dark stairwell, frantically feeling along the wall for the camping gear Edward had described.

With fumbling fingers, I felt the straps of a back pack and pulled it off the wall, my nails digging into the wood, searching for any kind of latch. I almost cried in relief when my finger connected with a cold metal knob but instead it slipped, forced from the latch as I felt a iron hard fist ram into my head slamming into the wall beside me. I looked up and the last thing I remembered was James' red eyes as I drifted into darkness.

Xxx

My mind began working before my eyes opened. I heard the rushing sound of noise, voices and music and movements speeding through my ears. My body felt the cool, hard floor beneath me, and I remembered the moments before I blacked out.

Clamping my eyes tightly, I inwardly begged for the comfort of unconsciousness to overtake me again. I sat this way for a while, listening to the absolute silence of the room, whose stillness caused me to flinch when I felt a hand cover my own.

"Hey," a kind, musical voice whispered and I cracked an eye in recognition.

"Alice?" I rasped. My voice was dry and cracked from lack of use. Alice was kneeling next to me. Her hair was in its typical spikes but her eyes were worried and tense, all traces of her normal, happy self gone.

She sighed with relief and said quickly, "Bella, thank goodness you're okay. I was so worried when they brought you in here." I felt her hand rub over my hair and I winced when she hit a tender spot. "You have a large bruise over your ear. Did he hit you?" She asked angrily.

"No...well, I don't really know. I was trying to get to the basement safe room and he got to me first. I just remember hitting the wall before passing out." I explained, now touching the soft spot with my fingers.

Alice brushed back my hair and put an arm around my shoulder, the two of us leaning against the hard wall. "I knew he was going for you, I saw that much before he left the building but once he got to you things were unclear. I haven't been able to see you or your future at all for the last day or so."

"Can you see Edward?" I asked, frantic for any news.

Alice nodded and my heart soared. Quickly she told me what she knew. "There was a fight. I think Victoria is gone-dead. Edward is coming for us. Right now in fact. He was able to get our location from her before she was destroyed. But Bella...this is where things get complicated."

"What do you mean 'complicated'?" I asked-with a mixture of happiness over Edward coming here and confusion over Alice's hesitation.

Alice sighed and looked at me warily. "I mean, Edward is coming here and James is going to make him-"

"Choose between the two of us." I said knowingly. "He told me."

"Bella, one of the three of us will not make it out of here." She said with certainty. "Right now, it's unclear which one of us it will be."

I sat, stunned by the information. Nothing made you see more clearly than being told you had anywhere from minutes to hours to live. The one thing that came to my mind was how much I loved Edward and never wanted to lose him.

"Alice. It has to be me." I declared.

She shook her head slowly, "I know its one option but Edward won't let this happen. There is no way he will let you sacrifice yourself for him. And frankly, neither will I. Bella, we've lived our lives and then some. This is your chance."

I looked in her deep, amber eyes, rimmed now with a dark black from hunger. "Make me like you." I whispered, pleading for her to understand, "For him. I want to be with him forever."

She stared at me in return before her eyes glazed a bit, taking her to a different place. Her eyes snapped back quickly, wide and renewed- as though she had seen something. But before I could ask, the heavy metal door flung open, banging loudly into the wall behind it. I tensed on impact but Alice was calm and collected, never removing her arm from around me.

James strode in the room, flanked by two red eyed vampires. He stood over us and eyed the two of us. "Isn't this cute? You're protective of the human too." He rolled his eyes and looked at Alice's, "What's going on? What have you seen?"

She hissed in return, tightening her grip on my arm to the point it was almost painful. James stood over us glaring, now at Alice and finally she said, "I already told you. You end up dead time and time again. I don't know why you keep pushing this."

I listened to her lie, obviously trying to convince James to let us go for his own benefit. It was a good idea but I could tell by the look on his face that he didn't believe it. "I know what you keep telling me." He scoffed, turning his back to us and running the fingers of his one remaining hand across the long wall of safety deposit boxes, his nail catching on the line separating the two and making a "clinking" sound. "But you're lying, so I will keep asking until you tell me the truth. And now that I have Bella here, I may have to use her as motivation."

James turned and smiled at us, a fake grin wide across his face, revealing his perfect teeth. He shifted his eyes towards Alice, but asked me in a saccharine, sweet voice, "Tell me Bella, what would you prefer I remove first? Your finger or toe nails? I'll let you choose."



I looked between the two of them, their eyes locked, engaged in a battle of sorts. Alice's eyes moved first but only because they rolled upwards, her eyelids fluttering lightly. After a moment she shook it off and spoke stonily, "You want an update? Sure. Victoria's dead. My *husband* ripped her to shreds while the rest of my family burned her body. You seem to think you have picked this fight with the three of us but you've forgotten the others. Jasper will hunt you down til the end of days in my honor."

James wasn't fazed by the information and he only glared at Alice a moment longer before leaving the room, waving a hand at his vampire goons that stood behind him the entire time to follow.

Once he left the room I felt a huge gush of air leave my lungs. I hadn't realized I was holding it in so tightly. I looked at Edward's sister and asked, "What do we do?"

"We wait." She replied with a shrug. "We aren't getting out of this alone. He's too strong and too desperate. I couldn't get away by myself and I definitely couldn't do it while protecting you."

"Don't protect me," I begged, "Let me go, save yourself." I knew it was stupid and sounded dumb, but I felt responsible for this situation. I felt lucky to have had the time with Edward that I did. I wasn't sure if I could bear the thought of life without him if James won. "Use me as a distraction."

She gave me an unhappy smile and shook her head. "I'm sorry Bella but I can't. Edward would never forgive me and I would never forgive myself. My job now is to keep you safe...and the safest thing to do now is wait."

We sat quietly for a while. I was tired and a little dizzy, the side of my head pounding from the blow. Alice had pulled my head in her lap and had begun stroking my hair. I would occasionally begin dozing and she would shake me lightly, reminding me not to fall asleep, that I had a head injury and needed to stay alert. In and effort to do so, I began telling her what I knew of her history, how we tracked her and her past. How the brooch was from before her transformation and how I even found a photograph of her in the paper. Alice was quiet for once, only asking questions when necessary.

Once I finished we slipped into an easy silence. I was terrified, but she had lulled me into a sense of calm, and after I had been quiet for a while, I felt her small, firm, hands grip my shoulders and adjust me to a sitting position. She pulled my face close to hers and whispered, "Do you really want it?"

Confused by her suddenness and question, I narrowed my eyes.

She looked over my shoulder and back at me and said, "I need to know, do you want it. Forever?"

I understood this time, and nodded my head and whispered back, "Yes. I love him with all my heart and if it's necessary, I do. I want it and him. Forever."

She threw her arms around me tightly, pulling my head tightly into her shoulder. I thought we were hugging in celebration but instead I heard a noise behind me shake the room like a cannon, causing the boxes on the wall to jar out of their slots, and tiles from the ceiling to fall around us like snow. Alice gripped me tightly but I was able to twist my head towards the door.

I gasped at the scene before me.

The heavy metal door had been flung against the wall with such force that it almost ripped from its hinges, powering into the wall behind it. The wall was now horribly damaged. Spider web cracks traveled up and down the wall as a result. I looked up and saw Edward, disheveled and furious, standing in the mangled doorway. His hair was a tangled nest, his eyes wild and pained. My eyes widened at his appearance-he'd lost his shirt and was now only wearing an undershirt, sleeveless. The fabric and his skin coated in thick streaks of mud. His chest was jutting forward, tense, and his hands were firmly at his side, balled into tight fists.

His eyes connected with mine, relief mixed with the pain, while they narrowed slightly as he assessed the damage on my head. I wondered why he wasn't moving, and why he wasn't coming to me, wrapping his arms around me but instead was standing motionless in the door. I realized then he wasn't alone when I forced my eyes from his to see the disgusting, smirking face of James standing behind his back.

Xxx

EPOV

I stood in the doorway looking at Bella. She was too far away to touch, but close enough to smell, taste, or desire more than anything else. All I wanted was to go to her, but James was behind me and all of my remaining senses were focused on him and getting us out of this situation.

I found the bank easily. It was old, not as old as I was, but enough so that the owners moved it to a more modern facility on the outskirts of town. When I reached the two story brick building, I could hear James and two others. James knew Victoria was dead and although he wasn't exactly mourning her, he was furious at the loss of his best soldier and companion. He also knew I would be coming and was waiting for my arrival. Prepared to end this standoff now, I scaled the back wall, and slipped quietly in a smashed upper window clearly used by his group to enter and exit the building.

It only took a moment to find him downstairs, sitting behind a large wooden desk, feet propped up and leaning back in a worn leather chair left behind in the move. His eyes narrowed before he saw me, the two soldiers that flanked his sides growled as I made myself visible.

"We've been waiting for you." He greeted. His eyes roamed my body, and he quickly appraised the damage on my arm, fully healed now, the only remaining sign was it reflecting in the light. A flare lit behind his red eyes, "I see one of my men took a piece with him."

"It was a parting gift. He would have been wiser to run." I said dryly. "Can we stop talking now and just get this over with? I'm sure Alice is ready to go home."

James laughed at my impatience, and some sort of actual amusement crossed his mind. He was very adept at blocking me, only projecting what he wanted, when he wanted it, and the source of his entertainment was unrecognizable. He stopped laughing and sighed dramatically. "We could, but there's a problem. I have two more of my men in the vault waiting with Mary Alice and if I don't return, they are under the instruction to destroy her."

I paused for a moment and listened, trying to confirm their whereabouts but I was unable to hear them or Alice. "Okay, then how do we do this? You want me to kill them now," and I nodded towards the newborns over his shoulders, "and then you take me to her? It really doesn't matter if I kill you now or later."

We stood across from one another in a form of impasse. For once, I could read his mind as he considered his options. He realized his newborns were no match for me but he also wasn't interested in watching me fight them. He wanted this 'game' to be between the two of us. Without taking his eyes off mine he spoke, "Go to the entrances and keep a lookout for the others, I'm sure they'll be coming soon."

His men left without argument and he gestured to the left, behind the abandoned teller counters. "The vault is back there."

I moved quickly, and found myself in front of a huge, old, solid metal door. There was a new electronic keypad attached to the front and I turned and said, "Give me the code."

Numbers floated to the top of his mind and just as I pressed the last one in he allowed one more to sift forward. Alice *and* Bella sitting on the floor behind the door I was about to open. Emotions erupted as I realized that Bella was behind that door and wasn't safely at home. I growled as I grasped the large handle on the door and pushed it forward with all my strength. The door crashed into the wall and I fisted my hands preparing for the guards I expected when I entered. Instead I saw Alice huddled over Bella, her tiny

arms protecting her body and head from my entrance. My eyes glanced over Alice and shifted quickly to Bella, who also had looked up, and was looking at me with wide eyes.

I was relieved to see her alive, unharmed other than the pulsating of blood from a wound. I searched her body for it and could hear the oozing blood coming from above her ear. She looked so small, even next to Alice and her eyes were overwhelmed with fear. I wanted to run to her and soothe her distress although it was not possible at the moment. Alice was screaming inside my head and James was a mere two feet behind me, but all I could see was my *mate*, injured on the floor before me.

I'd found my girls but this was far from over.

*Edward he wants you to choose....me or Bella. Don't make a choice. He's a liar and in the end will take us all if he gets a chance. You'd think he was more upset about Victoria but he doesn't appear so. This is all about the three of us. Edward, someone is going to die and not make it out of here....I've seen it over and over. Bella and I discussed it and she-*

I shut her out. She had given me enough to know where she was headed with this and there was no way she could convince me to sacrifice any of us-especially Bella. I turned now and faced James, ignoring the gleeful look on his face.

"Was that a surprise? I figured downstairs you hadn't found out yet." He looked over my shoulder. "Those wolves were spectacular. They took down the remainder of my men, but not before I got my hands on your pet." He dared to smile at her over his shoulder and I heard Alice wrap her arms tighter around Bella's body in reaction.

"She's not my pet." I answered, fury gripping my body. I assessed the room. If Alice protected Bella I would be able to take him. Not to mention he was lacking an arm and that would give me some kind of advantage.

"So I smell," he said dryly, wrinkling his nose. "Most vampires wouldn't want to announce their deviant behavior."

I ignored his taunts and waited for him to make the first move, to give me a signal of what he was doing. I heard Alice shift up on her toes, prepared to pounce or defend as necessary. But he was aware of my methods and waited instead, forcing me to commit first. I took the bait and moved quickly to the side, in an attempt to lure him away from the girls. My hope was to get him out of the room. He didn't respond, other than to shift slightly-although he grinned eagerly at my decision to 'play'. I lunged towards him and he deftly ducked, causing the opposite reaction. He was now closer to the two. Realizing the change, Alice hopped up on her feet and pressed Bella, shaking with fear, behind her into the wall.

James began to laugh quietly, "For someone so adept in fighting, you tend to make the wrong choices Edward, because you insist on protecting those around you instead of fighting for yourself, you leave holes and gaps in your defense."

Again, I ignored his taunts, frantically trying to figure out a way to get him away from Bella. I glanced at Alice. *Push him into the wall, I'll take Bella and run....*

Flicking my eyes back to James I did as she suggested, rushing forward and pinning him to the wall. His eyes widened as he saw Alice stand, pulling Bella with her towards the door. "No!" he screamed and with renewed force he planted a foot into my stomach and pushed, sending me across the narrow room and into the metal faced wall. I landed with a loud crash, falling to the ground in a heap, unable to regain my footing. I watched as James jumped high, over the girls heads, landing on the other side. He reached into Bella's hair with his one hand, and he tugged her down on her knees. Bella yelped in pain as he jerked her head backwards while Alice sneered. He shook her loose and said slowly, "On your knees Mary Alice, or I rip her head off right now."

With a glance in my direction, Alice dropped to her knees obediently, where James braced her legs with his feet. Keeping his hand twisted in Bella's hair, he looked up at me with amusement. "It's your choice. Your sister or your mate."

"Take me." I declared, pulling myself back into play.

James rolled his eyes in annoyance, "I've considered it, but frankly this way is more fun. Things are much more interesting when you are desperate. Now, pick."

I looked at the two across the room. Alice's eyes were wild with anger while Bella's face was twisted in pain from James gripping her hair so tightly. She looked exhausted, the whites of her eyes red from tears, and her expression was defeated, having been dragged into this battle between vampires. I still couldn't read her mind but I could see vestiges of love buried beneath the obvious fear in her dark brown eyes. Her eyes were the only human ones in the room. Realization took hold as I considered that Bella was human and how all this began when I determined it was my duty to protect her. That had been my primary mission. I'd promised her all those months ago that I would keep her safe-no matter what.

Her life came first.

Love came second.

Alice must have seen the decision as I made it and she nodded in agreement from the corner of my eye. *Pick her. The others are coming and even if they don't make it now, I can escape later...Tell Jasper I love him...tell him it was the only way, that we had no choice...lie, Edward, if you have to...*

I nodded curtly, pretending to agree. There was no way we would let James get away or that I would lie to Jasper. Bitterly I realized there was no way any of us would remain whole after this. If I saved Bella and James took Alice it would be impossible for me to have my mate and for Jasper to have lost his. And Bella would never forgive me or herself for sacrificing Alice. I had to make this decision and it was going to ruin each of our lives. James knew this and I could see it written all over his smug face.

Finally I spoke, gesturing to Alice. "Take my sister. I want my mate." The words rung hollow in the room, dead and flat. James smiled in surprise, apparently pleased by my words.

"No!" Bella gasped, jerking her head to look at me. She shook it furiously, and clasped a hand to Alice's.

Alice looked me in the eye, ignoring Bella's hand. *They're coming...stall...any minute...it's me he wants...let him think he's winning...*

"You're letting Mary Alice go for the human?" He repeated my decision, ignoring Bella's outburst. The words cut like a blade as I nodded in agreement, refusing to look either woman in the eye.

"Excellent choice. The one I would have made myself." He smiled in Alice's direction.

My hands balled, forcing down my rage. His hand was still too tight in Bella's hair. Her nose flinched in pain every second or two and I could see tears brimming in her eyes.

"Hand her over." I demanded, wanting his filthy hands off her, but controlling myself from moving too quickly. I didn't trust him and the images in Alice's mind were murky and inconsistent.

He nodded and released his grip, where she hovered in the air for a moment, her small hands reaching to soften her landing on the hard ground. I dove for her, trying to catch her before she hit the floor. My mind raced, moments ahead of my body, already feeling her soft, warm skin in my own, calculating how to get Alice out of this situation but before her skin met mine I watched with horror as Alice screamed, "Edward, no!".

Before either of us could react physically, James kicked Alice from behind, thrusting her into my chest and hurling us both across the room where we hit the wall with a resounding thud. Pieces of plaster fell from the impact, showering over our heads, coating our faces in a fine layer of dust.

And then, he lunged for Bella-my perfect, fragile Bella-clamping his fingers around her frail neck. James' eyes danced deviously-a satisfied grin placed on his face-and with nothing more than a quick flick of his wrist, I heard the sickening crack of her spine echo through the room. In an instant the life slipped from her eyes, the fear and shock turning hollow and weak, while her head slumped limply to the side.

"Bella!" Alice gasped from behind me.

I was already up, lunging towards her where I caught her this time, cradling her neck before she tumbled to the ground. Focused on the lifeless body in my arms, I was barely able to comprehend the sound of Alice battling with James or Jasper's voice as he and the others entered the room, swooping down on James in a violent rage. Instead I sat by Bella, resting her head gently on the floor, as I whispered her name furiously in her ear, chanting it like a prayer.

Frantically, I ran my fingers down her neck, searching for her heartbeat, in a feeble attempt to comfort her and myself but only found a soft, waning pulse under her skin. Fisting my hands in my hair, I stifled a wail, and I rested my head on her chest, so I could listen to the final beats of her heart instead of the skirmish around me.

"Take her." I heard in my ear. It was Alice. "It was what she wanted. Take her. Make her your mate-forever."

I shook my head, "I don't want to condemn her to this life. I promised to protect her and failed."

"Edward," Alice said, brushing the hair out of my face, which caused me to flinch because the action was too similar to Bella's touch. "This life is worth having when you have someone to share it with. Take her before it's too late. If you think you failed once don't do it again."

I looked at the sincerity of Alice's face and the truth in her mind. She showed me her final conversation with Bella and how this was what she wanted. I shifted my gaze to Bella below me, unconscious and lifeless, peace on her face. She looked like Snow White. Dark hair and ivory skin, lying in wait.

I listened again for her heart beat. It was my compass, my humanity. It connected us. It was now ticking away so slowly, each one further away from the last.

....thump.....

...thump.....

.....thump...

.....thump....

I smoothed the hair away from her face and neck and kissed her warm, soft lips one final time, and then inhaled the scent that lingered beneath her ear that was pure Bella. I wanted her. I needed her and she'd shown me countless times that she wanted the same. She'd given me her body, mind, and soul unconditionally-only requiring that I give her the same. Rubbing my hands nervously on my thighs, I made the only decision I could.

Carefully twisting her head in my direction and running my fingers across the warm, flesh I whispered "I love you" in her ear. I felt the familiar rush of venom coat my teeth and throat, but didn't attempt to swallow it back as I had a million times before. Ignoring the euphoric sensation taking over my body, not allowing the pleasure to cover the pain, I placed my lips on the smooth skin lining her throat and plunged my teeth deep into her flesh.



## Chapter Thirty

EPOV

I sat by the bed and waited. There was honestly nothing else to do. Time was all I had. It was all I ever had, but currently it was excruciating. The minutes ticked by slowly, almost painfully, and eventually I did the only thing I had left to do before she woke. I mourned for Bella's human life during my vigil at her side. Saying goodbye to the fragile, awkward, precious human I loved. The only person I'd ever fallen *in* love with.

During this time my eyes never left her body. Not once since we came to this place. My body was still streaked in the mud from days before, my clothes dry and brittle. The sun would filter into the window from the east each morning and glimmer across the exposed skin of her feet. When it reached the patterned quilt draped over the end of the bed, it would become night where I sat in total darkness. My body formed an imprint into the soft leather of my chair, molding to my weight. I was frozen, lifeless until she came back to me.

This is where I was now, transfixed in my chair while she laid before me, largely unmoving, across the bed. Her body was rigid-tense with transformation. I observed as her hair darkened, each strand thickening under my watchful eye. Her skin paled, the blood dissipating from her veins, leaving a purplish hue I was more than familiar with. It would seem impossible but her cheekbones rose and her shoulders rounded, muscles replacing the soft tissue from before. Leaning forward in my chair, and brushing my fingers over her newly formed cheek, I remembered just days ago when I thought of her as Snow White, lying in my arms, peaceful, almost resting. This was no longer an appropriate description.

Bella was beautiful of course, more so than I ever could have imagined. But as she lay in transition over the last two days, the screams trembled from her paled lips, bouncing off the wooden beams over our heads. I winced when her sharpened nails dug into the mattress, slicing the fabric, clinging as she writhed in discomfort and distress. It pained me in return to do nothing but sit lamely at her side and wait.

I'd seen this before. It was similar to the reactions the others had, when they were brought home by Carlisle. I remembered going through it myself and shuddered at the memory of the tremors rippling through my body. The violent quakes signaling my muscles tightening and my skin hardening into an impenetrable stone. It was a total metamorphosis from human to vampire. It was the moment my body froze in time, venom replacing fluids, the function of my organs useless and each of my senses heightened. I knew what she was going through and there was nothing I could do now to placate her, to ease her suffering.

I wrapped my hand around hers now-she had begun whimpering-the screams less frequent, as the pain began to subside. Bella was in there somewhere. Under the changes, beneath the long eyelashes, under the pallid yet perfect skin, and soon to be graceful movements, despite the eerie silence of her heart, the Bella I fell in love with still existed.

I hoped.

It wouldn't be long now, I considered, shifting for the first time in days in my chair, eager and expectant. Three days had passed since I took what remained of her life. I reached my fingers out to touch her face but

instead I ran them through my hair, becoming restless as the time was coming closer to when she should awake.

I saw the crescent shaped scar from when I'd plunged my teeth into her soft flesh and pushed the idea of murder out of my brain. I knew I had to do it...I *wanted* to do it...but my reasoning was conflicted. I wanted to save her, to live with Bella for eternity. I wanted my *mate* and everything that could come from her death. But the second her blood touched my tongue, the instant it gushed down my throat, coating the sides with warm, slippery, relief, the rush I felt was beyond euphoric. It was exhilarating and intoxicating, even erotic-which was everything I had expected. What was unexpected was the level to which I wanted to consume her. Literally. My mouth was suctioned to her neck in an attempt to gorge myself on her life. I moved my hands down to her arms, gripping tightly and I abruptly stopped once I felt the faint strains of her pulse buried beneath her skin. It beckoned like always, and I remembered what I was doing, *who* I was drinking from. I wasn't feeding, I reminded myself. For her to survive I had to stop.

I extracted my teeth and reluctantly wiped the blood from the wound on her neck before daring to lick the remaining evidence from my finger greedily as I took in the scene around me. James was gone, the images of his destruction clear in the minds of each member of my family. I felt the heat from the fire that had been started in the outer room, destroying the unexplainable evidence we couldn't risk leaving behind. I wasn't focused on revenge-I left that to Alice and Jasper. My only thoughts were on Bella and removing her as quickly as possible for her safety during the change.

Carlisle wanted her in the family home where he could monitor her, but I shook my head uneasily. This wasn't a family affair. It was about me and Bella.

We had to do this on our own.

Esme ran to the house and returned with a car. I quickly carried Bella out under the protective eye of Emmett and Rosalie and folded us inside. I cradled her in the back seat while Esme drove us through the night, over several state lines to a secluded cabin. It was buried deep in the forest and while I attempted to stifle the tremors that were building in her body, Esme parked at the end of the long winding driveway. I looked out the window at what would become our new home for the near future. As a family we owned many homes across the country, thousands of acres of property, and this was one that was safe and secure for our purposes.

By safe I meant miles away from civilization.

I'd carried Bella in to the cabin, squinting from the prisms of light that bounced off my bare arms, and smiled slightly at the faint shimmers coming from hers. I held her bridal style, using her body to block the door and bid Esme goodnight. She waived-wanting to stay-her motherly instincts kicking in, but I gave her a hard look, which she returned un-phased. I then begged silently for her to allow me the opportunity to do this my way and she conceded, her mind still unsure but her heart respecting my wishes.

With a kiss on the cheek and a stroke of Bella's hair she left the way she came and from that moment on it was me, Bella, a small cabin tucked in the woods, and the screams of pain as her body died a slow, tortuous death.

That was how we got here, her transformation near complete. I hovered slightly, waiting for her to wake, desperate to see the woman I loved after her rebirth. I inhaled, silently, as her body shifted infinitesimally, not in pain, and my fingers wove through hers squeezing in anticipation.

"Bella?" I whispered. It was a question. I'd never known someone before and after a change. I had no idea who would be waiting for me on the other end. Again I murmured, "Isabella..."

Her eyes opened wide, startled. Mine widened in return, my lips tugging at the corners, ignoring her blood red pupils, reveling in the way her fingers dug into my flesh. She was awake.

Bella's mouth opened slightly, and I watched her nostrils flare, taking in my scent. I waited again, letting her smell me, feel me before I acted, before I stroked her skin and pressed my lips to her own.

She shifted her head, but instead of recognition, her now smooth skin creased by the edge of her eye and she snarled...viciously.

Before I could comprehend the situation, because she was now faster than I was, her hand grasped mine tighter, and in a moment her other one was on my arm and tossing me over her shoulder, across the room, and crashing into the desk. Mid-air I heard the bed topple over and I regained my footing quickly moving to cover the door, blocking her escape. I noted Bella was crouching, her hair a tangle of knots at the back of her head and her hands balled into tight fists nervously flexing and un-flexing as she weighed her options.

I could still hear the low, fearful, growl building in her chest and it dawned on me at this moment that my Bella was no longer with me-not exactly. *This* Bella was wild and untamed. Short, gasping breaths quaked from her open mouth. She didn't need to breathe and her body was adjusting to this fact. She was primal and raw. Small and lean, I could see the muscles tense in her arms. I looked at her face, and realized she was almost feral and completely terrified.

She was all of these things and she was beautiful but most of all she was *mine*.

She shifted her body, moving backwards so her back was to the wall, and I focused on her eyes, blackish-red, the rich brown completely gone. I could see the hunger in her eyes but it wasn't what I searched for-I was seeking my mate, the woman I loved under the bloody haze that clouded her vision. All I saw was fear, and I knew I had to draw her to me, to remind her of our love.

I held my hands out innocently, "Isabella." I said, and watched her eyes dart to the door and window, plotting her escape. I had no idea what to say, but I knew I needed to reason with her before she took off out of the house. "Bella, I need you to look at me."

Her eyes snapped towards mine, locking into my gaze while her lip curled and she revealed a glimpse of her now perfect teeth. I took a step forward and she flinched, because she was on edge, so afraid. "Bella," I repeated, "I need you to stay still."

She wasn't listening. I watched her press her body into the wall, her eyes wandering to the side, still looking for an out. "Look at me" I demanded, harsher this time but instead of complying she hissed loudly-offensively, clapping her hands over her ears.

I ran my fingers through my hair, horrified, as I realized I was scaring her. My voice was too loud, my actions too quick. I wondered fleetingly if I should call Carlisle-he could be here in hours if I needed him. I sighed and looked towards the window and narrowed my eyes in thought over my possible defeat. She was so angry and afraid-neither reactions I had seen before, but this was Bella, not Esme or Rose. She always processed things her own way. I glanced at her again, my heart breaking, seeing her cower now in the corner of the room, ears covered and crouched near the floor. She looked like a cat, timid and scared, who puffed its hair up to make it look larger.

I had to remember who was in control here. *Who* had the power to make this better, to lure her from her state of shock? There was only me.

Slowly I dropped to my knees from my position across the room. Her eyes cautiously followed my movements but I only sat, completely still, letting us get used to the change. I could hear her deep inhalations and fought a bitter smile as I considered her situation.

Glancing over at Bella I began speaking in a measured voice, low as to not hurt her ears. "I remember waking up all those years ago under Carlisle's watch. I was overwhelmed by the strong smells that assaulted me when I took my first breaths. I was struck by the odors coming from Carlisle himself, lifeless, decaying smells. No matter how much he tried he couldn't rid himself of the taint of the epidemic. His



clothing was covered in sweat and disease. Traces of blood, my blood possibly, had been wiped across his pants. The venom began pooling immediately and I was unaccustomed to it, gagging unnecessarily when it traveled down my throat."

She was watching me intently and I could tell she was listening to every word that came from my mouth.

I continued my murmured speech, "And the sounds...it was like cannons in my ears. The birds, Carlisle's footsteps across the wooden floors..." I thought back to that day, the intensity of it all, "There was a board in the floor that creaked when he stepped on it. Over and over he passed it and I wondered if I would possibly go mad from the amplification alone."

I was barely whispering now, and she had removed her hands from her ears and to my relief her muscles relaxed a bit. I took the opportunity to move forward on my knees slowly, closing the gap between us.

"Of course I had other distractions-the voices I heard were battling in my mind. I thought for a moment I already was insane." Bella's face turned empathetic under its stony resolve and I knew my girl was under there-not so far from the surface. "Are you hearing anything?" I asked simply praying that she wasn't.

She didn't respond at first but I waited, we had time, again, nothing but time. As the minutes passed I reveled in her beauty once more, wanting to touch her so badly, to soothe her shaking hands. The silence of the house pressed down upon us...no breaths, no thoughts, utter, pure quiet. I realized for the first time how life with Bella would be more magnificent than I could ever have imagined.

"No," she squeaked from across the room, causing me to cock my head in her direction. I forced my lips not to curve in happiness at the sound of her voice but gave her my full attention. She shook her head and repeated, "No. No voices."

I'd slid off my knees and was now sitting cross legged, and I used the shift to move forward a bit more. We were now only several feet away. The floor around us was littered with pieces of the broken bed, linens and splintered wood but the air between us had calmed, Bella's eyes were softer under their crimson glaze.

Before I could decide what to do next she whispered so softly that I almost didn't hear. "Edward," she said and her hand lifted and stroked her throat, signaling I knew, the fire that raged from her thirst, "It hurts."

My heart crumbled at that moment because she was so strong now but still so fragile, like before, and she needed me as much as I still needed her. Nodding to acknowledge her pain, I tentatively scooted towards her, my hand out in an offering of peace. Inches before her, I paused, allowing her to make the choice to take it or not. Euphoria surged through my body when she grasped it with her own, so tight it almost hurt.

"I know," I assured because I did. I knew what it felt like to have the flames of hunger lick the back of your throat. To make you almost mad with thirst. I stared my red eyed mate in the eye. "I can make it better," I promised, and sealed it by pressing my lips into the cold, hard flesh of her hand for the first time in our new lifetime.

Xxx

BPOV

*October 14*

*I just broke the twenty-second pencil out of a pack of twenty four.*

*I hate pencils.*

*I hate journals.*

*I hate the fact I destroyed three Mac books, one laptop, and one PC before Edward decided the police would think we were an underground gambling organization by the number of electronic devices we were bringing out here to the middle of nowhere.*

*I'm hungry and hate deer. Yes. I said it. I hate de-*

"Damn," I muttered as pencil number twenty-three broke under my too-strong fingers.

I closed the soft, butter-yellow leather journal sitting on the desk before me with a huff. To the right was a pile of pencils, each snapped in half, points demolished, and I tossed the new one into the pile, causing the others to scatter messily to the floor.

I was alone. Well, as alone as Edward would leave me. I could hear him puttering around the other room, organizing the latest package we'd received from Alice. I think he was almost giddy to arrange everything all over again in this house. The day his beloved t-shirt collection arrived you would have thought it was a truckload of humans for dinner.

Twisting my neck slightly, I listened and could make out the gentle sound of fabric, followed by the scraping of metal, and sighed heavily. More clothes I assumed, the metal being Edward hanging them in the closet-meticulously of course-by color, type and material.

I picked up the final pencil and gently gripped it in my fingers like a five year old being taught at school. Being a vampire was almost like learning everything all over again. There was a myth about waking up graceful and poised.

Or maybe it was just me.

In the first month, I had almost destroyed the Cullen's cabin piece by piece. Edward spent most of his day (the hours he was not cataloging his socks) repairing the destruction that I left in my wake. Every touch was too hard or too fast or...just wrong. Hinges snapped from the wall, chairs scraped gashes into the floor. Once I'd even miscalculated the distance from the bottom of the porch stairs to the top and my toe caught on the second step, causing it to rip loudly from its spot.

Each time this happened, I would shout and get angry, frustration boiling under my skin as Edward watched me with his annoyingly handsome, but amused eyes. Days after my transformation, Edward brought me a deer and handed it to me like a gift. It smelled terrible, like nothing I'd ever want to eat and I begged him on the spot to find me something 'good.' We both knew what 'good' meant and he ignored my pleading, pushing the small reddish-brown deer towards me, instructing me with the faintest glint of delight in his eye how to bite and drain the animal in front of me.

His pleasure in my discomfort caused me to have an epic tantrum where I flew across the yard, uprooting as many trees as possible before he tackled me to the ground, pinning me under his weight. It's more than likely the words, "Go find me a fucking human," crossed my lips during the struggle, but my ever-disciplined and patient boyfriend disregarded my words until I agreed to calm down.

Now, sitting at the desk, in front of the journal Edward gave me to document my life as he had done his, I glared at the little mound of pencils on the table, and now, the floor. I knew he was right of course, I needed to gain control over my body and my senses. I didn't want to be like those newborns leering over James' shoulder at the bank. I wanted to be like Alice or Rose or Esme. Strong and controlled. This journal was the first step to getting there.

I heard his footsteps before he reached the door and I leaped to my feet, banging the chair over in reaction.

Edward was at the chair before I even thought of picking it up. He was still faster than I was, even with my newborn abilities. He doted on me more than I ever could have imagined, even when I didn't want him to.

"Are you ready? It's almost dusk." He asked, repositioning the chair after giving it a once over to make sure I hadn't broken it. He looked down at the pencils and the journal, bending on his knee to collect and deposit it in the trash.

The obsessive compulsive vampire returns.

"Successful?" He asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Yes, a little. I only broke twenty-three pencils." I laughed bitterly.

"Well," he smiled encouragingly, rubbing his forehead with the eraser end of a pencil, "that leaves two to work with right?"

I stuck my tongue out, but he didn't take the bait (he never did), and I instead found myself pulled forward in a tight hug. I tried to relax into his body. I loved him so much, but everything was so confusing. Touching him was like setting my entire body on fire-it was too much, too hot. I now realized why it had been so difficult for him to make these transitions in our relationship. It felt so good it was almost painful. The lines between love and lust blurred and it freaked me out.

Edward felt my tension and released me, and I pretended not to see the look of desire that filled his eyes.

Always appropriate, he took my hand and simply grinned, "It's all progress."

I smiled back hesitantly and allowed him to lead me toward the door out into another night of sunset.

Xxx

*October 16*

*I hate deer.*

Xxx

*October 23*

*I can't sleep. Not at all. I knew this going in. I knew Edward never slept but I didn't really notice as I was asleep while he wasn't.*

*Edward reads during the down time. The house is filled with books and Esme sends in boxes almost weekly. Novels, history books, medical journals. He reads things in French and Portuguese. I sit next to him on the couch, watching the flames in the fireplace lick the stone walls while holding an opened book in my lap. I tried to read but the words seemed too big, boggling my mind and making my eyes cross in reaction. Edward promised this would pass, and that everything seems overwhelming at first, but eventually I will grow accustomed to the changes.*

*Now when he reads, he chooses a book I like and reads it for me aloud, his velvety voice bringing the characters to life. This pleases me and fills my time while I lean back on the soft, cushioned couch and watch spiders build webs while dust gathers on the window's ledge.*

Xxx

*November 1*

*I want to go to town.*

*That's all. Just to town. I want to walk down the street and see people. I want to look in the windows of the shops. I don't even have to go in the shops. I'd be happy with the drive-thru of the local Taco Bell, even if I can't eat it. I simply want to lean my head out the window and shout into the drive through box, "bean burrito no onions" just to hear the scratchy voice on the other end. I'm tired everything being delivered by Alice or Jasper, or being left at the end of the long, winding drive way so I can't accidentally attack and eat a UPS guy.*

*Today I nicely asked Edward if we could go somewhere. It's been weeks. Per usual, he said no. He gave me a condescending smile that didn't dampen his ridiculously good looks, as he glanced up from his stack of grant proposals from work. Yes, Edward still works, and talks on the phone, and occasionally leaves to make appearances, while Jasper and Emmett come in to stand guard over me in case I try 'something.'*

*I decided to play hardball.*

*I went to the bedroom and changed out of the Queen t-shirt and jeans I had been wearing for a week straight. I don't change clothes often since I accidentally broke the knob off the washer, and one of the perks of being a vampire is not sweating or having any body oils. I dug through my drawer and found what I was looking for. Slipping on a black, lacy, too-revealing tank top and some boy shorts Alice had delivered, I fluffed my hair once in the mirror.*

*I did feel a little guilty as I walked out of the bedroom, shorts riding up my ass because Alice is convinced I'm a size four when I'm really a size six. My guilt was over the fact I knew this was what was called a "low blow" since I refused to let Edward see me naked, touch me, or put his parts anywhere near my parts since I woke up.*

*But I did it anyway. I did. I tried to seduce my vampire boyfriend so I could go out in public and possibly get a bag of nachos I could never eat.*

*He pretended not to notice when I walked in, but he did, I see things like that now. The quick flick of his eye, the tightening of his jaw, even how he sucked in a breath so he wouldn't have to smell me. I was onto him-he totally wanted me-and I planned to use my new abilities against him.*

*Pacing myself, I focused on putting one foot in front of the other without breaking something and positioned myself directly in front of him, jutting my chest out suggestively. I saw his fingers clench over the edge of the couch and his lower body shift discretely, but he still managed to ignore me, so I removed the papers from his hands and calmly placed them on the end table before straddling his lap.*

*He responded of course. Some parts responded appropriately and precisely as I wanted him to. Other parts, like his mouth, didn't. This is exactly what he said:*

*"Isabella, as much as I want you right now-seeing as how it has been six weeks since your change and, we haven't had sex at all, and I'm really, really looking forward to the day you're ready-there is no way in hell I am letting you do this to get your way. Forget it."*

*THAT is what he said to me.*

*Of course he also said it with his eyes glued to my chest but I shimmed off his lap, lingering just enough to make him wince, and stormed off to my room. I slammed the door hard enough to tear the hinges from the wall and to crack the molding on one side.*

*I spent the rest of the afternoon in the closet rearranging Edward's shoes, while he repaired the bedroom door. I took the laces out of each one and replaced it with a different, opposing one from another shoe. The perfect rows of shoes were mixed and matched, just enough to send his obsessive compulsive tendencies in overdrive. The amazing thing about having no concept of time is that getting back at my cock-blocking boyfriend could go on as long as I felt like doing it.*

*Tomorrow I plan to focus on his CD collection.*

*Xxx*

*December 20*

*I saw the calendar today and realized what day it was. Christmas is only a few days away. I've never been away from my family for the holiday and the awareness hit me like a ton of bricks.*

*When I saw the little number glaring at me from Edward's large, silver watch I froze. He watched me carefully for a minute, wondering what was bothering me. Poor Edward, never knew or understood what made my moods flip. He was so used to reading minds and the other day he confessed that he had begun to rely so much on my heartbeat and breathing to discern my emotions and now he had nothing. He explained that more than ever he needed me to talk to him and to trust him with my thoughts.*

*I love him so much.*

*In fact my love for him makes missing my family so much more bittersweet. I want to be here with Edward. I want to make this my home and for him to be my family along with the others. I hate the fact I've had to say goodbye and let them go. But I will.*

*Right now, we are in the middle of a charade. I call my parents and speak to them about my wonderful job and the exciting travel I was getting to do. It hurts to lie to them but it is better than telling them I was horribly murdered by a serial killer in Forks, Washington. Edward says we may be able to visit them once I gain control of my urges but I suspect he is just humoring me.*

*Eventually, I do tell Edward how I noticed the date and I miss my mom and my dad and Angela and my car and turkey and stuffing and egg nog and he asks me to tell him about it all, everything, so I don't forget. After I finish crying on the couch, but not really crying because vampires have no fucking tears, he encourages me to come here and write it all down.*

*Which I plan to do.*

*Xxx*

*January 4*

*I miss having sex.*

*I'd thought, being a vampire, the sex part would come easily. The two of us, strong and passionate. No longer worried about venom or injury. Not to mention my boyfriend is pretty much the hottest vampire lover a girl vampire could get. You would think it would all just be a piece of cake.*

*This is not the case.*

*It's my fault really. Edward definitely wants to have sex with me. I can see it in his eyes. Smell it on his skin. I think he spends half his day stifling his perpetual arousal from me. Trust me, there is no hiding that thing when it's in a state of excitement.*

*The problem is, I can't focus on anything for more than about three seconds at once. For example, the other day Edward took a shower after hunting. The bear he had been tracking tossed him into the stream, soaking him to the bone. I sat on the bed when he emerged from the bathroom, hair wild from being rubbed with a towel, clear droplets of water eased down his back.*

*I noted for the millionth time that Edward had the perfect back. It was smooth and broad. His shoulders perfectly proportional to his waist. There were dips and valleys that outlined the muscles, and for the first time recently, I was struck by the desire to run my hands over the curves and let them wander aimlessly over his body.*

*This was my plan, or where my mind was at least, when I became distracted by an intense buzzing sound in the room. I tried to push it away and focus on how the angled definition of Edward's hips were like an arrow pointing me towards his...but then that irritating sound came back, echoing through my ears, making it impossible to think.*

*I looked around the room and spotted it. It was fly trapped in the room. I was consumed with tracking and catching it. I forgot Edward. I forgot his hair and his back and the V over his hips. I forgot everything but the blasted insect that was taunting me, screaming at me from across the room.*

*Long story short-I caught the fly in my bare hands and gleefully ran to show it to Edward, planning on shoving it in his face like an excited two year old. I looked around the room and realized Edward was long gone. He was now dressed and sitting at his desk typing an email to his office. Sadly he was no longer half naked or wet.*

*I realized as I opened the door and let the insect go, I had a serious problem.*

*I want it noted for the record that, even though I am currently incapable of focusing longer than an excited puppy, I really do want to have sex with my boyfriend.*

Xxx

*January 8*

*I tracked and caught a mountain lion today. Edward's favorite. He spotted it first but let me have it. The chase was thrilling, the hunt engrossing and it tasted better than I ever would have imagined.*

*I'm never eating deer again.*

Xxx

*January 15*

*Alice and Jasper came to visit. She looked though my clothes and noticed I'd never removed the tags off most of them. I explained carefully that if Edward ever lets me leave the house I will put on something new. Unless she can get him to back off on that rule, then we had little to discuss.*

*I turned my back when she rummaged though my well stocked lingerie drawer. Each one unworn and tagged. If I could blush, I would have, but she said nothing, keeping her thoughts to herself for once.*

*Later, we all went hunting together and played tag and chase like a bunch of kids. Jasper and Edward challenged one another to see who could leap the farthest, throw snowballs the hardest, and track animals the fastest. We raced and I thought I may be winning, but Edward caught me just before the end, tossing my body over his shoulder and running us both over the 'finish line.' We were way ahead of the others, and to my surprise, he pushed me against a tree and kissed me hard and fast, and if I had a beating heart, it would have exploded in my chest. His lips were perfect, no longer hard but equal to my own. Soft, supple and wonderful. It was the first kiss we had shared, real and passionate, since my change, and it was amazing.*

*Alice and Jasper came running through the woods, interrupting us and causing Edward to groan in frustration, but he laughed when Alice expertly threw snow on his back.*

*Edward and I clasped hands, and as a group we laughed and chased our way back home.*

EPOV

If I thought Bella was going to kill me when she was human, I had no idea of what was coming once she transformed. Before, she was feisty and tough-independent and strong. I thought of her wearing my Rolling Stones shirt to clean the patio furniture or her telling me off in the hallway of my townhouse, letting me know I wasn't going to treat her less than human.

Presently, I was watching Bella from the top of a snow dusted hill, as she struggled with a large elk. Her long hair was pulled back on top of her head messily, with strands flowing down her long, perfectly smooth neck that was simply begging to be touched.

I wanted to touch her.

Bella grimaced-she hated the taste of animal blood, as we all did, but time tempers our palates and she would get used to it eventually. Her expression made me laugh and I made no effort to hide it from her.

"Stop watching me," she demanded from below, tossing the carcass aside and wiping her hands on her pants.

I couldn't help the wide grin that tugged at the corners of my mouth. "Not a chance. I like to watch you when you eat." I declared truthfully, noticing how the sun glimmered off her face when she looked up at me.

She shook her head in disapproval and scaled the hill quickly, her arms and legs finally working together with the speed and strength she'd inherited. "That's disgusting," she muttered under her breath.

I reached for her hands as she got closer and yanked her towards me-forcefully depositing her in my lap. I loved the fact I could use my full strength with her. Not only that, she liked it. I could tell by the way she tugged on my pants when she wanted my attention or pushed me when we crossed in the hall. Bella eased her back into my chest, allowing me to wrap my arms around her comfortably.

All of this was new for us. She had been so fearful at first, so completely overwhelmed. It had taken months for her to become relaxed with her body and the changes she had undergone. I once thought my years of practiced discipline had helped me with my control with Bella as a human, but I now realized it was truly beneficial in our current situation. She required patience and tolerance. I had to study her and focus on how to manage her moods. She threw temper tantrums like a child. She provoked and taunted me to no end. But everyday she grew calmer and more aware of herself, and everyday I fell in love with her more.

I nuzzled my nose in her hair, inhaling deeply before placing my lips to her neck. Pleased that she didn't pull away or flinch I took a hand and pushed her hair to the side so I could have access to more of her skin. When we kissed the other day, after racing with Alice and Jasper, I knew we were turning a corner. The situation was odd and a bit awkward. I'd seen this woman naked. I'd penetrated her with my own flesh. I'd heard her whisper dirty words in my ear, begging me to mark her and make her my own. But it was as if we had to start over-to discover one another fresh. It had to be on her time, in her own way. I'd waited decades for her to come into my life and I could wait as long as she needed. But at the same time I desired her so much.

"Edward," she said, and I halted my mouth, letting it hover just over the skin.

"Yes?"

"I think I'm ready to go back to the house." She replied, twisting her neck enough for me to see her eye, narrowed and glinting.

"You're ready?" I asked, implying more than what was said.

She nodded slowly, twisting more so I could see her whole, beautiful, face this time, "Yes. I think I am."

Xxx

BPOV

"I knew you could run fast Edward, but that had to be some kind of record." I teased as we made it back to the house. Edward dropped me off his back and onto the bed, causing it to bang into the wall.

He shrugged innocently, "I've just never had the right motivation before."

I pushed back on my elbows, kicking my boots off and allowing them to drop noisily to the floor. I bent my knees before me and said, "Like what?"

Edward crawled on his knees and placed his hands onto the top of mine and said emphatically, "You."

I looked at him kneeling over me, gorgeous and happy. His wild hair bringing out urges that shouldn't exist. And his jaw. God I loved his jaw. Angular perfection. I had fantasies about that jaw and the unmentionable things it made me want to do.

Today, I'd felt whole for the first time in months. Like I woke up and ate an elk and everything clicked.

I was happy.

And in love.

And immortal.

And my mate was the most beautiful vampire in the world.

And I could screw his brains out and no one would get hurt or scared or bitten or damaged in anyway.

But I was scared. My body wanted him too much. His touch alone made me shudder and squirm. It was strange and new and I didn't know how to control it.

The conflict was overwhelming.

Edward must have seen the struggle in my eyes because he cupped my face with his hand and said, "We only have to do what you're comfortable with."

I sighed under his touch, wanting more, but feeling already like it was more than I could handle. "That's the problem. I have no idea what I am comfortable with. My skin is so hard I feel almost nothing but everything at the same time."

He then ran his fingers down my neck to the collar of my shirt. I fought the urge to flee from his contact. Edward never removed his eyes from mine. They were cautious but clear-focused intently on mine, asking permission with every move that he made. His movements were gentle and soft. My reaction was to shudder and flinch away.

Confused, Edward furrowed his brow and said, "I'm sorry." before removing his hand from my neck. I felt horrible because Edward wanted to make love to me.

I reached for his hand and clamped down tightly. Surprisingly, the pressure was almost comforting. Instantly, I realized I didn't need the fluttery kisses of before or the tender touches he'd bestowed on me when I was fragile.

"The soft touches make it harder." I whispered, ashamed for some reason.

Edward looked thoughtful and then understanding flashed in his eyes, "I'm so stupid. I didn't think..." he muttered under his breath.

"What? What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Of course it's too much. Your skin is so sensitive. Mine is as well, but I'm older and well used to the sensations. Being near you, inside you, took so much focus. I didn't realize how it would be amplified for you."

"What can we do? I want you Edward. My mind is ready even if my body won't comply," I confessed.

He smiled conspiratorially and pressed his finger, harder this time, back down my neck. "I think we need to just take a different approach."

The pressure from his touch felt better. It was harder and I wanted more: the desire spread like wildfire from the pit of my stomach, lower, igniting a fury that had been building for months.

"I love you," I said, because it was true, and gripped his shoulders harshly, pulling him over me as I forced my nails into his rock hard flesh. "Don't ask Edward-take." I demanded.

The smile I received was worth its weight in gold and his hands pushed my knees to the side as he crept up the center of my body. "God, I love you so much," he said in return before latching his lips to my own, parting them easily and allowing my tongue inside.

Edward's lips on mine were like tasting the best candy in the world. Sweet and slippery. His breath was intoxicating, more so than before, and his hands, God, his hands...they worked quickly and feverishly. They would have been rough and harsh on my human skin, but now, in this body they were perfect.

"Guh...uh...ummmm...." I choked, trying to form words, "you've been holding out on me haven't you..."



I felt Edward's breath on my stomach as he laughed, "Maybe," he said, using his teeth to remove the button clean off my pants before sucking and clawing at my stomach. I lifted my hips, allowing him to push them down before using his feet to slide them off my body.

I marveled at the speed of my own hands as I unfastened his buttons and tried not to get distracted by the way his buckle reflected the light off the lamp by the bed. It was shiny and silver with red in the middle. Edward must have noticed my eyes glaze over and he yanked the belt from my hands and tossed it over his shoulder. He gripped my neck and dipped his forehead to mine so my eyes were focused on his. "Right here, Bella. Stay with me... here...," and his lips crushed mine again before he pushed me back, with a groan, towards the headboard, slamming it against the wall hard enough to make a picture clatter to the ground.

"I'm here," I promised, nodding into his chest, and almost melted on the spot when I felt the iron hardness of his body pushing into me. It was uncovered, his venom already having done its damage. I felt his fingers lightly grasp my hips, his thumbs taking hold as they had before. I put my hands on his and pushed down, forcing his thumbs to dig deep in my skin. I couldn't bruise and I wouldn't break.

"More...," I begged into his mouth, craving more of the pressure and weight. I wanted him to claim me in this life as he had in the past.

Edward obliged, wasting no time, pushing himself in firmly, burying himself in my body. I reveled in my new found strength, my heightened senses, feeling every tiny movement in my body, every single whisper from his mouth as it rumbled over my skin.

"More, Edward..." I said again, unable to get enough of him after waiting so long. I saw his eyebrow quirk and a smirk appear on his lips and before I could respond the bed was gone and he had me pinned against the wall, my legs wrapped around his waist. He used the leverage of the hard surface to grind into me with abandon, pushing and thrusting, my chest slapping into his, until my hypersensitive nerves began to explode around him furiously.

My head lolled to the side, relishing the sensations coursing through my body and I caught Edward's eye, darkened and lustful, his solid flesh still moving inside of my own. Stretching my neck, I ran my tongue down his jaw until I found his lips and greedily began tugging on them with my teeth harshly. Encouraged by my roughness, Edward hissed, pounding me forcefully into the wall, before he jerked violently, expelling every last drop of venom into my willing body.

For the first time since my change, my body felt whole.

Frozen in place, he held me up with the weight of his body and we stared at one another's faces-quite astonished at the frenzied pace of our lovemaking. I cried out bitterly when he removed himself but he cradled me to the floor where we folded into a heaping mass of flesh and stone. My lips found his neck, the spot right under his ear that drove me wild, and I said, "That was ummm...."

"Dirty?" He said with one of those glorious locks of hair dipping into his eyes.

I laughed into the crook of his neck and nodded in agreement. "I felt like an animal."

Edward pushed my hair back over my shoulders and ghosted his hand over my even tempered skin, "Well, yeah. I think that's about right." He kissed my lips, sucking gently on the bottom one, and said, "Welcome to vampire sex."

I considered this, only getting lost in the reflective sparkles on his skin for a moment, "Is it always like that?"

He grinned, "Only if you want it. But Bella, we have an eternity to do *that* anyway you want to."

We sat for awhile, two pieces of marble nestled into one another, easing our bodies into familiarity. The sun passed over us from the window on its way to twilight while I rested peacefully for the first time in months.

Prisms of light scattered across the room and I turned and ran my finger over the crescent shaped mark on his bicep, sparkling furiously.

"We both left that battle with scars," he said and tipping my chin so my neck was in the sun, causing a rainbow of colors to splatter over his face.

"It was worth it." I responded, meaning it. Every sacrifice, every scar was worth a lifetime with Edward. The sun inched down our chests, and I held my hand up, still mesmerized by the shimmering skin.

I pushed my back into his chest and closed my eyes, resting my head on his shoulder. Edward's fingers grazed down the side of my body and settled low on my stomach.

"Bella?" Edward whispered, speaking quiet, and soft in my ear.

"Hmmm..." Was all I could bring myself to say in response.

"Now that you're a vampire, I'm curious about something," His tone was innocent, but the way his hands spread out across my belly wasn't.

I turned a little to the side so I could see him and wondered what I could tell him that he didn't already know. "What do you want to know?" I asked, lifting my hand up to brush the stray wisps of hair out of his face.

He stared down at me for a moment, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and planted a deep, passionate, kiss on my lips. His mouth was divine, better than before, and I found myself lost in his scent and taste and texture. We parted slowly and I stole one last lick of his lips, which caused him smirk cockily. "Do they?"

I narrowed my brow in confusion, "Do *they* what?"

"Sparkle, silly." And to my astonishment his hand ran up my sides, brushing the part of my body he was speaking about.

I laughed at his boldness and jumped from the ground, pulling him with me. "I haven't checked, but I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours..." I teased, yanking him effortlessly towards the door into the last rays of daylight.

Xxx

*June 4th*

*It's been almost a year since I stumbled into the job as Edward's assistant. It's hard to imagine life before I met him. It's almost hard to imagine that life at all. Although I will forever remain that twenty-two year old, college graduate in body, my mind has grown and expanded beyond my wildest dreams.*

*Before my transformation I thought crossing over to this life would be easy. I would develop muscles and speed. Beauty and grace. I could make love with abandon. I gained all of these things, but it was a struggle and took work and patience. During this time I truly became his mate.*

*It took Edward and his unconditional love, guiding me through the broken mirrors and homesickness. It took his family and their ability to make me laugh, and say the right thing, and to remain my contact with the outside world during my time of seclusion.*

*Edward thinks I'm ready to venture into public on a semi-regular basis. The redness of my eyes has almost faded, nothing that wouldn't be covered by a pair of dark glasses, and I no longer break the handle off the car door off when I try to open it. He's spent the last six months planning and plotting and thinking of the most exotic, out of the way places for us to spend the next two years as I gain control over my urges.*

*Yes, I still have urges.*

*Two months ago, after begging Edward relentlessly, Emmett, Jasper, and Carlisle stood by me while the UPS man came to the door and Edward received a package. I've never smelled something so delicious in my life. Not even Edward himself smelled so appealing. I stood quietly in the kitchen, resisting the wafting smell as he drove his truck down the drive, and walked up the front steps.*

*Emmett smiled encouragingly—giving me two thumbs up.*

*Jasper eyed me skeptically, while focused intently on my emotions, having promised not to interfere by altering our feelings.*

*Carlisle patted my arm and spoke reassuringly to me, telling me it was hard for them all the first time, but that I would do fine.*

*I agreed whole-heartedly until the front door opened and I received a burst of UPS man that was heavenly, the equivalent of a just baked apple pie coming from the oven. Before my feet even left the ground, the three of them had me smashed to the floor, Emmett's hulking knee shoved into my back while Edward hurriedly escorted the poor man from the property, never having been the wiser to his possible death.*

*I realized then, that maybe I should take this going into public thing a little slower.*

*So we took baby steps. Edward patiently waited while I window shopped in the tiny town near our cabin, and humored me when I ordered humongous meals from the Taco Bell, only insisting that we drop the food off at the homeless shelter on the way home. He sat with me during countless films, distracting me from the overwhelming odor of humans by groping me inappropriately in the darkened room. It was silly and fun and sometimes scary, but I never failed and now I am able to be in the presence of humans and not want to sink my teeth into their soft, lovely flesh and gorge myself on their blood.*

*So today we are leaving the cabin, on to greater adventures. He wouldn't tell me where we were going, only to pack my bags for anything that was possible.*

*Yesterday, I sat on the bed and watched as Edward rolled his socks into tiny little balls and formed neat little stacks of shirts and pants. I saw that he'd purchased a double frame-one side for the photograph of his parents and, in the other side, he'd slipped in one of my own parents from their wedding day. My eyes followed his graceful hands as he packed it inside his suitcase, wrapping it with care. I suppressed a grin when I saw the yellowed flash of cow-hide as he tucked his treasured baseball safely inside his worn brown leather boots.*

*He is my creature of habit, after all.*

*We had passports with fake names and ages and addresses and piles of money. We had an environmentally responsible SUV waiting in the driveway for our luggage and our bodies. We said our goodbyes to the family for the time-being—knowing we would see them sooner than later. We eagerly blessed the house one final time by making love, and now we stood on the worn slated porch, locking the door behind us as our new journey began. My fingers wound through a lock of erratic bronze hair that was pushed forward by a gentle summer breeze, and Edward gave me one of those gloriously wicked grins I realized happily that I had the only thing that truly ever matters when living a life for eternity: having someone to live it with.*



# Epilogue

## *Chapter Song: [Angels And Airwaves – The Adventure](#)*

BPOV

We'd spent the last two years traveling around the world. Stopping where we pleased, the more remote, of course, the better. I'd now been to every continent, with the most knowledgeable tour guide one could find. There was no need for maps and money was no object. He led me through castles and museums and jungles and temples. Every day was surreal and extraordinary.

My eyes had lightened, but my cravings were still occasionally strong, forcing us to be ever vigilant. Once in South America I slipped away from Edward, following the most delicious aroma I'd ever encountered. If he had been a minute later, things would have turned out differently.

But he didn't. He was my savior and protector. He never failed me.

In our travels, there were stops along the way where we settled briefly in the many secluded homes owned by the Cullens. These always felt the most comforting, the smells and belongings of my extended family surrounding us. It made us both wistful and longing, and when it became too much we would pack up and leave for the next destination.

Six days ago, we called our family and had an impromptu wedding in a small village in the Italian Alps where they owned a chateau. Days before, while hunting in the snowcapped mountains, Edward stopped me harshly and dropped to his knees. In his fingers glinted his mother's ring, diamonds and gold, and before I even had the words out of my mouth, the ring was on my finger and his lips were covering mine.

I smiled under his sweet breath. This man already possessed me. He'd marked me inside and out. On my flesh and in my soul. A ring was just icing on the cake.

In front of a roaring fire, with the Cullens standing witness, Edward and I stood before one another. We spoke our vows with tearless eyes and sharp smiles, and bound ourselves to one another in the traditional way of man and wife. I'd never been happier and Edward never more at peace.

Tradition suited us.

We had decided that night, after the family left, climbing the woods to quench their thirst, to begin planning our future. We both were ready to go back, to place roots for as long as we could, settle into a sense of normalcy for a while. He wanted to work, and I wanted to build us a home. Our options were vast, but at the same time limited, and Edward surprised me by confessing his deepest desire that night, as my legs wrapped around his hips and we commenced this relationship to the truest meaning of the word.

He leaned over me, gorgeous and perfect, his lips trailing over any piece of exposed flesh he could find. "Bella, this may be asking a lot," he said, pausing to suck the skin beneath my ear. He was hard and inside me, my hips tilted to receive as much of him as possible. I could never get enough. "How would you feel about moving to my family home in Chicago?"

"Really?" I asked, only half concentrating due to the distraction of Edward's hands as they fisted the sheets around my head, wondering if they would survive this encounter. "I think I feel wonderful about that." As if to emphasize this point, my body reacted instinctively, arching and I groaned heavily in his ear before using my hands to pull him tighter into my body.

"About my home or what we're doing right now?" he asked. His eyes were mischievous and he was grinning wickedly from under his ridiculously thick, untamed hair.

"Both..." I sighed, placing a hand in his hair and pulling his face towards mine, eagerly kissing him as our bodies claimed one another for the first time as man and wife. "I'll go anywhere you want..."

My climax was near, I could feel it building, my muscles tense, my nerves climbing over the flesh inside of me. I didn't need a breath but I panted anyway, sucking in as much of his mouthwatering scent as I could.

Edward leaned towards my ear and whispered, "I want to take you home. I want to show you my city, my customs. I want to make love to you where I was human, before all of this. I want, after close to a century, to merge the past with the present."

I shattered at his words- physically and emotionally. My orgasm was fierce, rippling through my body and setting off his own. Edward lived in the past, with his collections and ideas. His memories and journals. He carried it every day with love and a slight wistfulness. The idea that he wanted to share it with me, to combine the two, made my lifeless heart falsely beat in happiness. He punctuated his desire by thrusting harshly into my body, emptying his venom into me, claiming my body and soul once more.

Deliriously happy and satisfactorily post coital, I wrapped my arms around him and agreed, "I want all of that too," and sealed my thought the only way I knew how, with a kiss.

Xxx

"Mr. Masen did you need these files double sided or single..." Amanda's voice broke into the room loudly, but her question fizzled and hung limply in the air.

Edward and I were at a stand off of sorts. I could only imagine what we looked like from her point of view. My arms were crossed and my shoulders were back, while my hair swung defiantly towards my waist.

My nostrils flared at the flush of her normally pale cheeks and her quickened heartbeat. I narrowed my eyes at Edward, who caught my minimal slip.

"Single," Edward replied, never taking his eyes off of mine, and with a low whisper the young blonde assistant excused herself and scurried from the room.

It was probably the right move. I wouldn't suggest anyone getting between a married couple in the middle of a fight. Especially when said couple was immortal and the room held the snap and pop chemistry that Edward and I have with one another.

He was leaning against his desk, arms mirroring mine with his long legs crossed at the ankles. He looked amazing, of course, and frankly I would have jumped him right there if I wasn't so angry with him.

"I'm going," I said, restraining my foot from stomping immaturely on the ground. I'd come a long way in controlling my temper tantrums and refused to let him see me lose it.

He didn't even offer me a verbal response instead shaking his head slowly, his jaw set with conviction.

"I am. And you can't stop me." This was rewarded with one of his eyebrows, perfectly arched and raised, clearly challenging my statement.

After a long moment, he finally groaned and ran his fingers through his eternally messy hair, burying his face in his hands. "Bella, no. It's too dangerous."

"Of course it's not," I argued. He worried too much. Especially about me.

"You know it is. You know more than anyone." Pain flickered across his face at this thought, remembering everything that had happened before. I sighed in annoyance. Stupid over protective husband.

"No, what I know is that we agreed to do 'this' together," I said, taking a step closer, feeling the current between us spark and flare. "And 'this' is included."

Edward reached his hand out towards me, holding it in the air until I put my hand in his and allowed him to pull me forward into his chest, wrapping his arms around me.

I felt his nose on the top of my head and heard him inhale deeply. He placed a gentle kiss against my temple and said, "I know we agreed. And so far everything has worked out better than expected. The office and the house and being so close to family after all this time...I just think maybe I should keep this separate."

My arms were woven around his back, running over the soft cotton of his dress shirt, counting the familiar muscles under the fabric. I lifted my head to see his eyes and asked, "What would have happened to me if you weren't patrolling that night when Victoria lured me into the back alley?"

His eyes darkened at her name, and he twisted his face away in anguish. "It's not the same thing."

Placing my hand on his jaw, I captured his eyes again. "To me it is. Helping you do this is something that's very important to me."

He nodded this time in agreement, the argument over, hopefully for the final time. We were back in the city, working, and living amongst humans, and we needed to do what we could to keep everyone safe.

Xxx

EPOV

"What is that?" I asked, eyeing the package Alice had just brought in the room.

She placed it on my desk, and began unpacking it excitedly. I was immediately assaulted with the strong scent of cow hide and an image from Alice's mind.

"Absolutely not," I barked, not caring if everyone else in the house heard. I suspected everyone already knew what Alice was up to anyway, and it was just me, as usual who was clueless.

*Come on! It's your first time together and these are totally awesome!*

"No. This is the first time people in my office haven't speculated on my sexual orientation. What if I see someone from work?" I argued. It was a silly argument but it was the only one I could come up with.

Bella chose that moment to flash into the room. There was no way she would agree with this and she was the only one who could stand up to Alice. I loved my wife.

"Bella, please tell Alice we do not need her fashion assistance for tonight," I said. I held my arms out in an attempt to reach her body for support.

Shockingly, she rolled her eyes at me and laughed. "Alice, these are perfect-just like I described." I watched in horror as she plucked the black leather pants out of the box and held them at her waist. My wife turned her eyes on me and declared, "You're wearing those."

I opened my mouth to speak but wasn't sure what to even attempt to say. Finally I blurted out, "This was your idea?"

Bella laughed happily at my discomfort and playfully hit my arm. "Of course. Well, I just wanted to have fun. You know...we're like the dynamic duo or something."

This made Alice smile like a fool and I stood helplessly as Bella gave me a quick kiss and Alice pulled Bella out of the room towards the dressing room. I was left with a box of leather and a feeling of dread in my stomach. I picked them up, confused as to why this was even being discussed.

They both, apparently, thought I should wear *leather* pants? I was considering the fact these women had lost their minds when I heard a knock on the door and sighed. "Come in, Jasper."

The smirk on his face caused me to growl and I flung the offending item at his face. He caught it and inhaled deeply. "Smells like home," he mused, in a full attempt to piss me off.

It was working.

He dropped into the chair across from my desk in his typical laid back nature. In my typical fashion, I ignored his feet as he propped them on the edge of my desk.

"So," he began, blonde hair dipping in his eyes, "you let her in your house, brought her to your job, and now, you are taking her on patrol." He laughed long and loud, clearly enjoying himself.

*Whipped...*

I was not laughing. I wanted Bella in my house. I loved her in my house. I had made love to her over every inch of the house in the last two months. And I needed her at work. She balanced me. And she was smart-keeping me on track. Plus, I liked to look at her and be near her every second of the day.

But the patrolling was a different matter. It was dirty and harsh. Humans and vampires alike. I didn't want Bella to encounter rapists or murderers. I didn't want her to come across spilled blood or crying women. She was physically strong enough to work by my side, but I wasn't convinced she was ready emotionally.

"She's stronger than you think," he told me, knowing where I was dwelling.

I walked to my own dressing room, selecting a t-shirt off the rack and pulled it on with some jeans. I carried my boots back in and sat on the couch behind Jasper and wondered aloud, "Is it so wrong to want to keep her innocent from this?"

Jasper turned in his seat, leaning over the back and said, "No, of course not. But it's too late for that." He flashed me a memory of the bank and James and Victoria before swiveling around and picked up the pants. "Can I have these?"

I rolled my eyes and grimaced. "Yes, but never wear those in my presence okay?"

He nodded in agreement and stood, bumping me on the shoulder as he walked towards the door. "Call us if you need anything."

I listened as he called for Alice and they left out the front door. I wandered the hall until I found her, my mate and wife, preening in front of the dressing mirror. "I think you're more excited about this than our first date," I commented, noting how amazing she looked in the leather that was wrapped around her curves.

She turned and ran her hands over my chest. "I love you in this shirt, although I still can't believe that's Bono. His hair is so...just weird."

Placing my hands on her hips I laughed. "Leave Bono alone. You weren't even born when I bought this shirt."

She eyed the rest of my outfit, her eyes leveling below my waist and asked bitterly, "Where are your pants?"

I gave her a quick kiss and pulled on her ponytail. "I gave them to Jasper." Her eyebrow quirked in question and I continued, "I think it was some kind of cowboy thing."

"I wanted to see you in leather pants-you would've looked hot." She fake-pouted, poking out her irresistible bottom lip. Possessively, she moved her hands on the waist of my jeans.

I grimaced at the thought but then looked down and assessed her outfit dramatically. She looked really, really good in her own leather. "I see your point. Now I'm going to spend half my time looking for bad guys and keeping frat boys from coming on to you."

"You can use me for bait," she suggested and I recognized a glint of evil in her eye.

I didn't even respond to that one-talk about baiting.

She clasped my hand in hers, tugging me down the stairs and we walked towards the door. Bella beat me, snatching the keys off the hook.

"Can I drive?" she asked, giggling again, too excited about the adventure in front of us.

"No," I said forcefully, using my height and weight as an advantage to get the keys back. Plus, I kissed her senseless, knowing it made her weak in the knees and fingers.

"Please?" she begged, batting her eyelashes and shifting her hips.

"Not. Going. To. Happen," I replied again, picking her up and playfully throwing her over my shoulder and walking to the car where I deposited her on the passenger side. I walked to the other side and slid in behind the wheel, while Bella covered my hand with hers and smiled happily, excited about our night. Pulling her hand to my mouth, I kissed the tips of her fingers.

I hated to be a downer or a buzz kill or whatever it was called, but before I left the driveway, I turned and said, "I'd tell you to buckle up, but you're invincible. But remember, out there... you have to be careful. I know you think I'm being stupid and over protective but you're the only one I have. The only one I will ever get and I can't risk it."

Bella's eyes dimmed a little but her smile stayed the same. She shook her head gently and said, "I love you, Edward Cullen, and it would take more than an army of newborn vampires to take me away from you."

Xxx

The anger that boiled under my skin was familiar although it had been sometime since I had experienced it due to my absence in this side of my life. The idiot in front of me was swaying with intoxication and his eyes kept sliding out of focus.

"See that girl over there?" I pointed to the small redhead on the ground, crying and dirt streaked. Bella crouched next to her, speaking softly in her ear. The girl's mind was a jumble and her heart pumped with fear and adrenaline but it was slowing from whatever it was my wife was telling her.

"You came *this* close," and made a gesture of size with my fingers, "to ruining both your lives."

"Dude, I don't know who you are or what you think was happening but that girl was totally into me," he said defensively, waving his arms around as though that helped his case.

Bella and I had a quiet night. The bars weren't busy and the thieves must have been turned off by the threat of rain. That was until we heard a muffled squeak and I followed this moron's aggressive thoughts across the parking lot to a dark corner behind the cars.

He'd had his hands tight around her upper arms and his tongue down her throat. Both reeked of alcohol but she was whimpering under his assault and their thoughts were clear enough to me to signal the conflict in their minds. We broke up the activity and the girl's eyes grew wide and thankful before she burst into tears. I looked helplessly at her, trying to form the words to make her better, while refraining from ripping the neck off the guy who did this to her. This was the worst part of the night. Not dealing with the predators but the victims. Before I even had the chance to react, Bella swooped in and took control. I almost stopped her, worried she couldn't handle the proximity to the girl or the rapid pulsation of the blood under her skin. But she shot me a look of compassion and understanding and I realized once again how Bella was truly my better half.

I watched Bella, her small frame no longer awkward, but confident and assured, whispering words of comfort to into the girl's ear. The girl's hands were no longer shaking and I mused over the reality that Bella was strong and her skills were the opposite of my own. I never thought about that before. That the goals of a happy marriage and life together are to bring out the best in one another and to bring strength to cover the others weakness.



I walked the idiot next to me over to the street and waved down a cab, shoving him inside with a final threatening look. After the car turned the corner, the two women walked over and Bella deposited her in the next cab that traveled down the street.

Once she was gone, my hands found Bella's hips and pulled her close. I kissed the top of her head and said, "Thanks for that. I had no idea what to say."

She laughed lightly, pressing her weight into my chest and agreed, "No, I'm sure you didn't."

I wove my fingers through hers and noticed how late it was, or early, the darkness already fading from the sky. "I apologize for worrying so much. Of course you exceeded my expectations. You always do."

Bella pulled my hand to her mouth and kissed the top. "I know you can't help it. It's how you show you care. It's unnecessary but it's also why I ignore you." She smiled devilishly and tugged me towards the car.

The Plymouth was parked alone, down a side street waiting under a street lamp. I stopped and leaned my back against the passenger side, spreading my legs so Bella could stand inside. She traced her fingers over the design on my shirt. "You know, that was kind of hot-watching you get all 'Batman' on that guy."

I pushed one of her wayward hairs that never stayed in her ponytail over her ear and smiled at her reference because she was so incredibly silly and so thoroughly mine. Plus, I never realized the extra bonus of patrolling with a woman—it was very arousing and I seriously needed to get her back home—now.

I eyed her a little and quirked an eyebrow, "So, if I'm Batman does this make you Robin?"

She reacted like a vampire, pushing my chest with her hands, making the metal behind me creak under the force. Bella placed her hands on her hips and huffed, "No. I'm not Robin. I'm not your sidekick."

"Alfred?" I asked, trying to get a rise out of her, but moving away from the car all the same. I couldn't have her destroying my baby.

She was back out in the street with her arms crossed over her chest. "I'm totally Batgirl," she declared, her honeyed eyes flashing. Vampire Bella was still easier to taunt than human Bella, even after three years, and it made every day of my life better.

Bella was irresistible when she was angry.

In less than a heartbeat, I was on her, picking her up so I could kiss her mouth evenly, and gripping her by the back her soft leather pants. "Batgirl works for me," I said into her mouth, carrying her back to the car.

Before I opened the door she nuzzled into my neck and asked in a super soft, seductive voice, "Now that I'm officially part of the team, can I drive?"

I groaned but laughed and said, "You never give up do you?"

Bella shook her head. "Never. That's how we got here today."

I stared at this woman—my woman—perfect and pale in the yellow light of the street lamp. I considered everything we'd gone through in the last three and a half years with amazement. I never knew life could be so full and rewarding. I never knew I could have peace and contentment. I definitely never realized that having a mate that fought back and drove me to the edge of my sanity every day would make me the most gloriously happy man in the world.

I sighed and held up the keys, letting them sway in her face for a moment before she realized what I was doing and snatched them out of my hand. Bella scrambled to the drivers side and jumped in happily.

Resigned, I slid in the passenger seat and leaned back, smiling when Bella squealed in delight over the roar of the engine and braced myself as she shifted into gear.

Tonight proved that together we were ready for anything. Family, work by day, vigilantism by night—it was all one more day, of one more beginning in my eternal life with Bella Swan.



## The End



# Creature Of Habit Outtake

"Exactly what did Carlisle tell you when you spoke to him last?"

Edward was driving through the narrow streets of Italy in a sleek, shiny sports car. He was almost giddy as he wove around the curves and ancient stone lined roads. My husband loved nothing more than speed.

Well, except me.

"He said, 'The Volturi never invite you to their home for social reasons only.' He thinks it's either related to our vigilante work or to my gift—the mind reading." Edward gave me a long look, removing his eyes from the road but never veering off course. "Aro, one of the leaders, apparently has an affinity for collecting vampires who have specialized gifts. Carlisle fears he wants me to work for him. Or perhaps he is upset about our work...we'll have to wait and see."

I studied my husband as he shifted gears, and a city rose into view—lights dotting the dark night. Edward's hair was erratic as usual, wild and impossible. I used the back of my hand to push it back and smiled when he caught it in his own and placed a soft kiss on top.

"You look stunning, you know," he said seductively, pulling my arm forward and placing another kiss on the inside of my elbow. "Blue is my favorite color on you, but tonight, red may have taken its place."

I rolled my eyes and if I had still been human I would have blushed. "Thank you, and as usual, you definitely know how to work a suit. I suspect I will have to keep the fangs of the other women out of you tonight."

With a jerk Edward pulled the car to the side of the road, into a narrow crevice between two buildings. He was out of his seat in an instant, around the car and pulling me into the cool night air. "Bella, I reek of your scent. It's in my clothing and on my hair, and on every inch of my skin. A woman—a vampire—would have to be a fool to come within ten feet of me tonight."

I narrowed an eye and tried to pretend I was a little upset. "Are you telling me the reason we did *that* before we came here was so you smelled like me or are you saying we did *that* before we came here so I would smell like you?"

With wide, overly innocent eyes but a hint of a smirk he replied, "Both?"

I shoved him back, hard but playfully and gripped my hand in his as we walked toward the imposing castle-like structure. Before we reached the heavily guarded door, my phone chirped and I laughed at the name on the screen. "Hello Alice," I answered ignoring the grimace on Edward's face.

"Bella! I've been trying to call you for hours!" she shouted. "I don't think you should go to the party."

"Calm down, Alice, we're already here, it's too late," I argued and forced back a grin as I felt Edward's lips on my exposed neck.

I heard a huff from the other side of the phone before she said, "Just be careful."

I was concerned: Alice could be intrusive but she rarely over dramatized serious situations. "Why? Are we in danger? Is it Edward? Do they want him? Or us?"

"Tell her we're going regardless," Edward said.

"Bella!" Alice shouted in my ear, having, of course, heard him.

"But..." I started, shooting daggers at Edward. If there was a threat we had to consider her warning.

"We're going," he repeated, threading his fingers in mine, "We have to. We were invited. It's an invitation you don't refuse."

The implication behind his words were clear. The Volturi were royalty. Edward was right, you didn't deny the king.

Or three.

Alice must have heard this as well because her tone changed, "Fine. But listen, do not separate, and no matter what, remember you love one another; do not make rash decisions."

Edward and I glanced at one another. "What..." I began to say when I heard a definitive click on the other end.

I groaned and rested my head on the back of my seat. Edward began rubbing his hand over his face. It was going to be a long night.

Xxx

We walked through the narrow passageways of the ancient building. I was overwhelmed by the beauty and architecture. I'd been to Europe before but I was young, a newborn, and so much of it was a blur. I stole a glance at Edward who I caught checking his reflection in the leaded glass windows surrounding the entryway.

"It looks fine," I reassured him because I knew he was assessing his hair. This man had hair issues like no one could even imagine.

"It just..." he muttered but stopped running his hands through it, in an attempt to make it lie flat.

He moved closer to me and tightened his grip on my waist as we walked under the massive arched entryway and I could tell even he was impressed by the grandeur of the building.

"You've never been here before?" I asked, unsure for some reason. He'd told me all about it, so descriptive that I felt like he'd seen it all before. I inhaled and smelled incense and candle wax over the slight dampness that comes with age.

"Only in Carlisle's mind," he replied and swept me into a large open room filled with gorgeously dressed vampires.

He gestured to a odd imposing looking man in the middle of the room who appeared to be entertaining those around him.

"That's Aro," he whispered, his eyes flicking expectantly to the man.

Aro, of course, was the enigmatic leader of the group. From everything I had been told he was charming and forceful. He possessed an ability to read minds similar to Edward's although it happened through touch, not from a distance. Again, I felt hard fingers pressing into the skin on the side of my hip.

"We've been spotted—smile," he directed and led us in the direction of the freakishy pale man draped in elaborate robes.

Aro stopped mid-sentence and floated over in our direction. "Oh! It's the Cullen's—Edward and his lovely bride Isabella." I wanted to shudder in his presence; even Edward, always confident and secure, had lowered his head. I now understood what he meant by "Vampire Royalty." He dove for my hand, and paused, letting it linger for a moment near his mouth before kissing it properly. As his hard, almost translucent skin touched mine, he narrowed his eyes minimally.

Edward stepped forward with his hand out stretched, offering himself to the quirky vampire. "Nice to meet you, Aro. Carlisle sends his regards."

The ancient vampire grasped his hand eagerly, and a wave of relief washed over his face. His head tilted and he grinned deviously. "Edward, I had heard of your gifts...impressive, but your wife, tell me? What is this? I get nothing..."

Edward chuckled graciously, as he was on his best behavior. The gruff, grumpy, obsessive compulsive man I'd married was masked under this well behaved party go-er. "Yes, it is a bit of a mystery. She blocks me also—quite frustrating as you can imagine."

The men stood facing one another, being polite yet their stances firm. Some form of power play was being held and I didn't understand it. I cleared my throat and smiled at the two men and spoke dramatically, "Yes, it pains Edward not to read my every thought. He has to work at it like an average man—imagine that! It's a pleasure to meet you, Aro, we've heard so many wonderful things about you over the years." I worked my arm though the crook of Edward's and smiled. "We've taken up enough of his time, let's go mingle?"

Aro waved us off graciously, promising to catch up with us later and directing us to the side rooms for 'refreshments' and the ballroom behind us for dancing.

It was all very strange.

As we made our escape, I asked, "What did he mean by refreshments?"

Edward made a face and said, "In those rooms to the side," he pointed to two large wooden doors pushed into the stone walls, "humans await for feeding."

My jaw dropped. "They're feeding on humans! I knew I felt them here—their heartbeats are noticeable, but feeding?"

Edward rubbed my back and brought me closer. "Yes, all the vampires here feed on humans; we are alone in our beliefs, I would assume. There are other humans here too though, not just for snacking." I looked at the other guests and noted how the vampires kept their voices low, trying to maintain some privacy in their conversations.

I responded to his crude remark by making a face and continued to look around the room. I noticed, in the torch lit space—amongst the pale faces and lifeless bodies—women, dozens of women, all beautiful and alive, wandering though the crowd.

"What are they doing here?" I asked, incredulous—they had to know something was off.

Edward followed my gaze, his eyes settling on several human females fawning over a large vampire—bigger even than Emmett. "From what I can gather, from listening in, they are here because they want to be—they hope one day to be like us," he explained, his distaste evident.

"I need to go freshen up, Edward. I know I'm not human but I still have female needs, you know?"

He looked concerned and I knew Alice's warning was bothering him, so I offered, "It will only be for a moment, to the ladies room over there...I will be right back."

"Careful?" he begged, and ran a hand down my cheek, to the side of my neck and over my bare shoulder. Marking me once again.

"Always," I whispered against his lips, leaving my scent on him as well.

Xxx

EPOV

I watched her walk away from me and immediately felt the loss. It was sappy and melodramatic but I never liked to be away from her. She possessed me—constantly. Since the first day she stepped foot in my home I was doomed to do her bidding—and it was my job to make sure she knew this everyday.

Aimless without her, I wandered to the closest balcony and leaned over the railing to appreciate the view. Italy was beautiful, I'd been many times before but Volterra was rich with a history even I couldn't deny.

When we'd walked through the main hall I felt the eyes on us. Everyone was watching us enter, but their minds, they were on us as a couple. Scrutinizing our moves and interactions. I couldn't understand the fascination.

When I read Aro's thoughts, he was blocking me enough to see his true motives, but he was definitely intrigued by my marriage and our duel gifts. It concerned me to a degree...this was a powerful environment we were in and Alice's warning was a bit disconcerting.

I heard a stuttering heartbeat drawing near, but kept my eyes forward. Heartbeats held no interest to me any longer. Unfortunately, my balcony companion seemed to want something.

"You are the vampire from America, right?" she asked, her accent thick.

I gave her a polite nod, looking behind me, hoping for Bella to emerge from the other room.

"I've heard of you, you are legendary around here."

This piqued my interest, and I felt my eyebrow raise despite myself. "Really? Legendary?"

She leaned in a bit closer, and her scent was overwhelming. Perfume and oils, hair products and lacquers, her actual human scent masked. I held my breath to survive. "Absolutely. You are the vampire who works the streets, saving defenseless humans from one another and from creatures of the night. You are the one who fought the tracker, and finished him and his army," she whispered as she moved impossibly closer, her face too near to mine. *Where was her fear?* "You, Mr. Cullen, are the one who found a human and changed her to be your mate."

I shook my head and declared, "No, I didn't change her to be my mate. She died at the hands of a mad man. I only selfishly transformed her because I couldn't let her go."

Anger was boiling beneath my skin—how dare she presume to understand my life and my actions. I was oddly surprised that this human knew all of this about me, but her mind gave parts of it away. Her name was Gianna, and she worked here in the castle having full access to the lives of the Volturi.

I pushed away, my fingers pressing off the stone railing that surrounded the balcony. I searched for Bella, who had to be done by now, and walked into the main room. When I reached the doorway, I found her but was shocked to see her pushed against the far wall by the same, large, intimidating man I'd seen earlier. The difference now was his gaggle of women had disappeared and he was alone with Bella. I began to step

forward when I stopped—stunned and surprised to see him laugh loudly and her to respond with a welcoming smile tugging at her lips.

I strained to hear his thoughts. What could this man say to make my wife smile so generously? Bella's voice lifted over the crowd but she only offered pleasantries that gave me nothing to go on.

"That's your human?" I heard Gianna ask from behind me. I almost jumped when her fingers grazed my shoulder.

"She's a vampire now," I replied, shrugging my shoulder to remove the contact.

*She needed to back off.*

"She is, but you remember her as your human. Like me. You like the heartbeat, and the air in my lungs. You miss this about her." She smirked at her own weakness even though in her mind I could tell she wanted nothing more than to be a vampire too.

"You are nothing like my wife then or now," I muttered, my temper flaring, forcing me to swallow deeply and say, "Excuse me."

I attempted to move away from her and toward Bella but I was frozen, watching her talk with this man—this vampire, her eyes lit up when he spoke and she seemed to be truly enjoying herself.

I ran a hand through my hair and groaned. I was being ridiculous. Immature.

I was jealous.

"You're jealous," Gianna pointed out. "You should be," she declared, which surprised me and made my jealousy flare, "He is quite the warrior—like yourself. Your mate has superior taste."

Gianna was getting on my nerves. Talking about things she didn't understand. Bella could talk to other men, she always had...but in the end she was *my* mate.

"So when you changed her...she still wanted to be your mate?" Gianna asked.

I searched her mind for her own gifts—it was almost as though she could read my mind and was tapping into my insecurities.

"Yes," I replied softly, but it wasn't necessarily true. Her transition had been difficult. It took months for her to even allow me to touch her. I rationalized that it was the changes—the overwhelming feelings and sensations but sometimes there was doubt in my mind although I had never felt them as strongly as I did now.

*What was my issue?* I'd no reason to distrust her and I didn't even know him...but I had this feeling something was amiss.

I stared at the massive back and broad shoulders that were partially blocking her from my view and narrowed my eyes. "Who is he?"

Gianna moved around me, placing herself between me and my target. "That's Felix. He is part of the Royal guard. He is very strong and passionate." Her mind told me more. Her thoughts showed me that they had a relationship—that they had touched and been friendly—they were more than people who worked for the same master.

I focused on the vampire across the room and tried to pick up his thoughts again, but the room was too crowded and I didn't know his voice from any of the others. Instead I read his body language and was not pleased with what I saw.

"Why is he talking to her?" I asked, the words slipping out before I could catch them. I shifted quickly, "Do you love him?"

"He's talking to her because she intrigues him. And wonders what woman would be such a prize for a vampire such as yourself—although he would never admit it." Sadness crept over her face. "I love him. But he doesn't return it. He uses me and promises me eternity, but it never happens. I am not to him what your wife is to you."

A dramatic peal of laughter echoed off the walls, I looked to the sound and found Aro clasp a vampire's hand. "What does your boss think?"

"He has given us his blessing. He says Felix can change me if he wants. But he won't," she explained with aggravation, her eyes flashing in his direction.

Gianna then reached out and ran her fingers across my shoulder, and her mind hummed with thought.

I balked at her touch and my jaw dropped at her ideas.

"Absolutely not!" I declared, looking around to see if anyone had heard me—if Bella had heard me. No one glanced our way, but Aro's mouth was twisted in a strange smile. And Bella? She was too involved with Mr. Tall Broad and Strong to be distracted. Her gold eyes were focused on his—intent. She stood tall next to him, yet her stature was small, so she dwarfed in comparison. My eyes took in her strapless red dress and her exquisite legs that now carried her gracefully. I wanted my hands on her. I wanted his hands *off* her immediately.

"Edward, help me out. You know what it's like to be in love? To want someone you shouldn't? Help me make him want it." She was close to begging and I felt some compassion for her plight yet...

"Why me?" I snapped, confused by this entire situation. I was being pursued by a human to make her vampire lover jealous and he was showering attention on my wife for no apparent reason.

Gianna flashed me a knowing, stunning smile. "Because the vampires here fear you. You hail from the largest coven outside Volturi. You're educated and peaceful, you have money and power. Yet you do everything outside of their system. You do know why you were invited here tonight, don't you?"

"I have my theories," I replied simply, none of which I would be sharing with this ruthless woman.

"They wanted to assess you on their own ground. An offer will most likely be made but you will not be expected to answer any time soon. But they will be watching you from here on out—closer than before," she confided. "But it's not just about you. They are just as intrigued by her."

We both looked across the room at the two of them, still involved in some kind of deep conversation. I bristled at her comment. "Why Bella?"

"You don't understand—on your own Edward you are powerful. Bella on her own? Indestructible—together? You are the strongest vampire couple in the world. They want to control you."

My fingers pinched the bridge of my nose. I didn't want to hear any of this but none of it explained why the Neanderthal across the room was leaning into my wife and whispering into her neck. "Why are you telling me this? Aro will know."

She gave me an image of Felix.

"Why do you want me to help you play these games? It doesn't seem as though this would help you any? Consorting with the enemy." I scoffed, trying to wrap my mind around her position.

She rolled her eyes and flipped her long hair over the shoulder. "Because as the Volturi's biggest threat, Felix will not accept you taking an interest in me. Quite simply? Competitiveness—he wouldn't allow you to win."

"No, Gianna, he has to want this. Trust me, I know." My eyes were still on him—them—and I felt my fingers clench when I noticed him reach out to touch her hand.

No.

I expected her to be offended, to be upset, to want knock his hand off and leave in a huff. I was severely disappointed. The smile stayed on her face and I was shocked to see him lean closer to her and whisper something into his ear.

"Like I asked before—you are sure she wanted to be your mate?" Her tone was suspicious and it ruffled my nerves more than it should. "Are you sure it wasn't out of lack of options?"

"Yes!" I replied too loudly. She was pushing me, wanting me to get upset to help her with her cause. "Look, I'm not getting between you and him...but I will be going back to my wife, and leaving with her soon."

I was confused and overwhelmed by the emotions swirling inside. Bella continued to laugh and banter with Felix, and Gianna...just wouldn't leave me alone. I'd never really considered that Bella wanted anyone other myself. Our love had been destined—fated to an extent. Her transformation had been unintentional but Alice promised it was going to happen anyway and it was what Bella wanted. I'd known the first night we'd made love that she and I were bonded. There was no separation.

I looked around the grand ballroom I'd entered. The tall ceilings, filled with glass and decorations. The marble stairways and benches throughout the room. The vampires, strong and talented, dozens of them together in one place. Bella loved me in our bubble but did she love me the same here? Like Gianna asked, would she choose me if she had other options?

For once I wasn't sure.

Xxx

BPOV

I was growing tired of the smile I had plastered on my face. This man—vampire—Felix was his name, was annoying the crap out of me. He'd cornered me the moment I'd emerged from the ladies room and had been stuck like glue ever since.

*Where the hell was Edward?*

Next time we were planning a secret signal before we came to something like this. I needed a way out of here now but Felix was having none of it.

"Have you considered moving here? To Italy?" he asked. His body was inching closer to mine by the second.

I laughed. An overly loud, party laugh. "Oh no, we are very happy in America. Our family is there."

"Family?" he questioned, tilting his head.

Felix was handsome in his own way. He was large, maybe bigger than Emmett but he was cold and calculating. He wanted something from me although I couldn't figure out what.

"Yes, our family—the Cullens," I replied although I wasn't sure how much I was allowed to discuss about them. Again, I discretely searched for Edward and located him in the doorway to the ballroom with a beautiful human following close behind. He looked a bit panicked.

Felix moved in closer, pushing his arm against the wall, cornering me between his body and the stones. "We are like a family here? You can join ours. We are very powerful and you...you would make a wonderful addition."

"Hmmm..." I mused not committing.

"Your abilities are...they are quite amazing. Aro thinks so too. He wants you here also. With or without him."



Felix said this too close to my face, his hand grazed the skin on my shoulder and I wanted to shudder in repulsion. Who was this man and what did he think he was doing? Everyone here knew I was married...that I was mated. Why did they think I would leave him so easily?

I flicked my eyes toward Edward who was now standing in the middle of the room, elegant in his suit and tie, hair askew and boring holes in the back of Felix's head. I saw the perfect lines of his jaw flex and tense, his Adam's apple bobbing deliciously as he swallowed his anger. My stomach twisted with desire.

God, he was so beautiful.

I reluctantly pulled my eyes away from him and focused back on Felix. "Thank you for the offer but really, no thanks."

I offered a weak smile and turned to walk away but felt his huge hand wrap around my wrist, "Don't let this offer pass you by Isabella; yes, we mate for life but we also have an overriding need for power. You could be so powerful."

I narrowed my eyes and looked at his hand, snatching it out of his grasp. I moved to the side but he was in front of me. "You think he is the best but you are mistaken. Others like myself are stronger and faster; we have political connections. You could have this too. No more animal blood or hiding your differences." His voice was enthusiastic and his red eyes danced with excitement, "You could have everything you want—if you leave him behind and join us."

At that moment I realized the entire room had stopped buzzing. Edward was in the middle, watching—waiting. Aro was on the other end, a look of intrigue and delight filling his expression as he studied our positions. This was what Alice had warned us about...we were being wooed by the Volturi, together or separate. I thought of her words...*'But listen, do not separate, and no matter what, remember you love one another...'*

I stepped away from Felix and walked confidently toward Edward who was waiting—seething—but waiting for me with an open hand. I slid mine into his and tilted my head, offering myself to him. He leaned in and placed his lips on my skin, sucking dangerously—igniting a fire—and together we walked through the stunned crowd and out of the castle.

Xxx

"Please don't ever make me do that again," I whispered into Edward's mouth. We were in one of the long alleyways running through Volterra. The castle was hovering above us, stained glass windows lit and music echoing through the grounds.

Edward had me pushed greedily against the edge of an ancient building while his hands and mouth roamed...everywhere.

"Never," he agreed and ran his fingers up my legs, pushing the fabric of my red dress upward.

"I'd never leave you..." I promised, surrendering to the kisses he placed on my shoulders and neck. "I only want you..."

Things became frantic the moment we left the building. Edward had been concerned—jealous even—although he would never admit it. We'd barely made it outside the doors before he pounced on me.

He freed himself and in moments was inside, hard and furious. I had no idea if human men were like this, but Edward...he wasn't human. He was part animal and his need to claim me was part of his nature.

And part of mine.

My fingers clenched his jaw, gripping it and pulling him to me. "I love you," I assured because for some reason Edward needed assurance and I was more than happy to give it to him.

I chanted his name in ecstasy, shuddering against the wall, and over him and around him until I felt him as he emptied himself with a solid grunt.

He kissed me solidly on the lips and went about his methods of straightening my clothing and hair and his shirt and pants. And as he wound his fingers into mine and ushered me back to his car, never saying a word, I asked, "Why did it take you so long to come over? I was desperate for you to save me."

Edward gave me a quick glance from the side and said, "You know it's always about your choice. I always want you to have a choice."

I nodded, understanding this was who my husband was and this is how he wanted us to be, and I replied, as I had so many times before, "There never was any choice, Edward. There was only us."

